

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01422-9 - The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication,  
Volume 1

Charles Darwin

Excerpt

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THE  
VARIATION OF ANIMALS AND PLANTS  
UNDER DOMESTICATION.

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## INTRODUCTION.

THE object of this work is not to describe all the many races of animals which have been domesticated by man, and of the plants which have been cultivated by him; even if I possessed the requisite knowledge, so gigantic an undertaking would be here superfluous. It is my intention to give under the head of each species only such facts as I have been able to collect or observe, showing the amount and nature of the changes which animals and plants have undergone whilst under man's dominion, or which bear on the general principles of variation. In one case alone, namely in that of the domestic pigeon, I will describe fully all the chief races, their history, the amount and nature of their differences, and the probable steps by which they have been formed. I have selected this case, because, as we shall hereafter see, the materials are better than in any other; and one case fully described will in fact illustrate all others. But I shall also describe domesticated rabbits, fowls, and ducks, with considerable fullness.

The subjects discussed in this volume are so connected that it is not a little difficult to decide how they can be best arranged. I have determined in the first part to give, under the heads of the various animals and plants, a large body of facts, some of which may at first appear but little related to our subject, and to devote the latter part to general discussions. Whenever I have found it necessary to give numerous details, in support of any proposition or conclusion, small type has been used. The reader

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will, I think, find this plan a convenience, for, if he does not doubt the conclusion or care about the details, he can easily pass them over; yet I may be permitted to say that some of the discussions thus printed deserve attention, at least from the professed naturalist.

It may be useful to those who have read nothing about Natural Selection, if I here give a brief sketch of the whole subject and of its bearing on the origin of species.<sup>1</sup> This is the more desirable, as it is impossible in the present work to avoid many allusions to questions which will be fully discussed in future volumes.

From a remote period, in all parts of the world, man has subjected many animals and plants to domestication or culture. Man has no power of altering the absolute conditions of life; he cannot change the climate of any country; he adds no new element to the soil; but he can remove an animal or plant from one climate or soil to another, and give it food on which it did not subsist in its natural state. It is an error to speak of man "tampering with nature" and causing variability. If organic beings had not possessed an inherent tendency to vary, man could have done nothing.<sup>2</sup> He unintentionally exposes his animals and plants to various conditions of life, and variability supervenes, which he cannot even prevent or check. Consider the simple case of a plant which has been cultivated during a long time in its native country, and which consequently has not been subjected to any change of climate. It has been protected to a certain extent from the competing roots of plants of other kinds; it has generally been grown in manured soil, but probably not richer than that of many an alluvial flat; and lastly, it has been exposed to changes in its conditions, being grown sometimes in one district and sometimes in another, in different soils. Under such circumstances,

<sup>1</sup> To any one who has attentively read my 'Origin of Species' this Introduction will be superfluous. As I stated in that work that I should soon publish the facts on which the conclusions given in it were founded, I here beg permission to remark that the great delay in publishing this first work has been caused by continued ill-health.

<sup>2</sup> M. Pouchet has recently ('Plurality of Races,' Eng. Translat., 1864, p. 83, &c.) insisted that variation under domestication throws no light on the natural modification of species. I cannot perceive the force of his arguments, or, to speak more accurately, of his assertions to this effect.

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scarcely a plant can be named, though cultivated in the rudest manner, which has not given birth to several varieties. It can hardly be maintained that during the many changes which this earth has undergone, and during the natural migrations of plants from one land or island to another, tenanted by different species, that such plants will not often have been subjected to changes in their conditions analogous to those which almost inevitably cause cultivated plants to vary. No doubt man selects varying individuals, sows their seeds, and again selects their varying offspring. But the initial variation on which man works, and without which he can do nothing, is caused by slight changes in the conditions of life, which must often have occurred under nature. Man, therefore, may be said to have been trying an experiment on a gigantic scale; and it is an experiment which nature during the long lapse of time has incessantly tried. Hence it follows that the principles of domestication are important for us. The main result is that organic beings thus treated have varied largely, and the variations have been inherited. This has apparently been one chief cause of the belief long held by some few naturalists that species in a state of nature undergo change.

I shall in this volume treat, as fully as my materials permit, the whole subject of variation under domestication. We may thus hope to obtain some light, little though it be, on the causes of variability,—on the laws which govern it, such as the direct action of climate and food, the effects of use and disuse, and of correlation of growth,—and on the amount of change to which domesticated organisms are liable. We shall learn something on the laws of inheritance, on the effects of crossing different breeds, and on that sterility which often supervenes when organic beings are removed from their natural conditions of life, and likewise when they are too closely interbred. During this investigation we shall see that the principle of Selection is all important. Although man does not cause variability and cannot even prevent it, he can select, preserve, and accumulate the variations given to him by the hand of nature in any way which he chooses; and thus he can certainly produce a great result. Selection may be followed either methodically and intentionally, or unconsciously and unintentionally. Man

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may select and preserve each successive variation, with the distinct intention of improving and altering a breed, in accordance with a preconceived idea; and by thus adding up variations, often so slight as to be imperceptible by an uneducated eye, he has effected wonderful changes and improvements. It can, also, be clearly shown that man, without any intention or thought of improving the breed, by preserving in each successive generation the individuals which he prizes most, and by destroying the worthless individuals, slowly, though surely, induces great changes. As the will of man thus comes into play, we can understand how it is that domesticated breeds show adaptation to his wants and pleasures. We can further understand how it is that domestic races of animals and cultivated races of plants often exhibit an abnormal character, as compared with natural species; for they have been modified not for their own benefit, but for that of man.

In a second work I shall discuss the variability of organic beings in a state of nature; namely, the individual differences presented by animals and plants, and those slightly greater and generally inherited differences which are ranked by naturalists as varieties or geographical races. We shall see how difficult, or rather how impossible it often is, to distinguish between races and sub-species, as the less well-marked forms have sometimes been denominated; and again between sub-species and true species. I shall further attempt to show that it is the common and widely ranging, or, as they may be called, the dominant species, which most frequently vary; and that it is the large and flourishing genera which include the greatest number of varying species. Varieties, as we shall see, may justly be called incipient species.

But it may be urged, granting that organic beings in a state of nature present some varieties,—that their organization is in some slight degree plastic; granting that many animals and plants have varied greatly under domestication, and that man by his power of selection has gone on accumulating such variations until he has made strongly marked and firmly inherited races; granting all this, how, it may be asked, have species arisen in a state of nature? The differences between natural varieties are slight; whereas the differences are con-

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siderable between the species of the same genus, and great between the species of distinct genera. How do these lesser differences become augmented into the greater difference? How do varieties, or as I have called them incipient species, become converted into true and well-defined species? How has each new species been adapted to the surrounding physical conditions, and to the other forms of life on which it in any way depends? We see on every side of us innumerable adaptations and contrivances, which have justly excited in the mind of every observer the highest admiration. There is, for instance, a fly (*Cecidomyia*)<sup>3</sup> which deposits its eggs within the stamens of a *Scrophularia*, and secretes a poison which produces a gall, on which the larva feeds; but there is another insect (*Misocampus*) which deposits its eggs within the body of the larva within the gall, and is thus nourished by its living prey; so that here a hymenopterous insect depends on a dipterous insect, and this depends on its power of producing a monstrous growth in a particular organ of a particular plant. So it is, in a more or less plainly marked manner, in thousands and tens of thousands of cases, with the lowest as well as with the highest productions of nature.

This problem of the conversion of varieties into species,—that is, the augmentation of the slight differences characteristic of varieties into the greater differences characteristic of species and genera, including the admirable adaptations of each being to its complex organic and inorganic conditions of life,—will form the main subject of my second work. We shall therein see that all organic beings, without exception, tend to increase at so high a ratio, that no district, no station, not even the whole surface of the land or the whole ocean, would hold the progeny of a single pair after a certain number of generations. The inevitable result is an ever-recurrent Struggle for Existence. It has truly been said that all nature is at war; the strongest ultimately prevail, the weakest fail; and we well know that myriads of forms have disappeared from the face of the earth. If then organic beings in a state of nature vary even in a slight degree, owing to changes in the surrounding

<sup>3</sup> Léon Dufour in 'Annales des Scienc. Nat.' (3rd series, Zoolog.), tom. v. p. 6.

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conditions, of which we have abundant geological evidence, or from any other cause; if, in the long course of ages, inheritable variations ever arise in any way advantageous to any being under its excessively complex and changing relations of life; and it would be a strange fact if beneficial variations did never arise, seeing how many have arisen which man has taken advantage of for his own profit or pleasure; if then these contingencies ever occur, and I do not see how the probability of their occurrence can be doubted, then the severe and often-recurrent struggle for existence will determine that those variations, however slight, which are favourable shall be preserved or selected, and those which are unfavourable shall be destroyed.

This preservation, during the battle for life, of varieties which possess any advantage in structure, constitution, or instinct, I have called Natural Selection; and Mr. Herbert Spencer has well expressed the same idea by the Survival of the Fittest. The term "natural selection" is in some respects a bad one, as it seems to imply conscious choice; but this will be disregarded after a little familiarity. No one objects to chemists speaking of "elective affinity;" and certainly an acid has no more choice in combining with a base, than the conditions of life have in determining whether or not a new form be selected or preserved. The term is so far a good one as it brings into connection the production of domestic races by man's power of selection, and the natural preservation of varieties and species in a state of nature. For brevity sake I sometimes speak of natural selection as an intelligent power;—in the same way as astronomers speak of the attraction of gravity as ruling the movements of the planets, or as agriculturists speak of man making domestic races by his power of selection. In the one case, as in the other, selection does nothing without variability, and this depends in some manner on the action of the surrounding circumstances on the organism. I have, also, often personified the word Nature; for I have found it difficult to avoid this ambiguity; but I mean by nature only the aggregate action and product of many natural laws,—and by laws only the ascertained sequence of events.

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In the chapter devoted to natural selection I shall show from experiment and from a multitude of facts, that the greatest amount of life can be supported on each spot by great diversification or divergence in the structure and constitution of its inhabitants. We shall, also, see that the continued production of new forms through natural selection, which implies that each new variety has some advantage over others, almost inevitably leads to the extermination of the older and less improved forms. These latter are almost necessarily intermediate in structure as well as in descent between the last-produced forms and their original parent-species. Now, if we suppose a species to produce two or more varieties, and these in the course of time to produce other varieties, the principle of good being derived from diversification of structure will generally lead to the preservation of the most divergent varieties; thus the lesser differences characteristic of varieties come to be augmented into the greater differences characteristic of species, and, by the extermination of the older intermediate forms, new species come to be distinctly defined objects. Thus, also, we shall see how it is that organic beings can be classed by what is called a natural method in distinct groups—species under genera, and genera under families.

As all the inhabitants of each country may be said, owing to their high rate of reproduction, to be striving to increase in numbers; as each form is related to many other forms in the struggle for life,—for destroy any one and its place will be seized by others; as every part of the organization occasionally varies in some slight degree, and as natural selection acts exclusively by the preservation of variations which are advantageous under the excessively complex conditions to which each being is exposed, no limit exists to the number, singularity, and perfection of the contrivances and co-adaptations which may thus be produced. An animal or a plant may thus slowly become related in its structure and habits in the most intricate manner to many other animals and plants, and to the physical conditions of its home. Variations in the organization will in some cases be aided by habit, or by the use and disuse of parts, and they will be governed by the direct action

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of the surrounding physical conditions and by correlation of growth.

On the principles here briefly sketched out, there is no innate or necessary tendency in each being to its own advancement in the scale of organization. We are almost compelled to look at the specialization or differentiation of parts or organs for different functions as the best or even sole standard of advancement; for by such division of labour each function of body and mind is better performed. And, as natural selection acts exclusively through the preservation of profitable modifications of structure, and as the conditions of life in each area generally become more and more complex, from the increasing number of different forms which inhabit it and from most of these forms acquiring a more and more perfect structure, we may confidently believe, that, on the whole, organization advances. Nevertheless a very simple form fitted for very simple conditions of life might remain for indefinite ages unaltered or unimproved; for what would it profit an infusorial animalcule, for instance, or an intestinal worm, to become highly organized? Members of a high group might even become, and this apparently has occurred, fitted for simpler conditions of life; and in this case natural selection would tend to simplify or degrade the organization, for complicated mechanism for simple actions would be useless or even disadvantageous.

In a second work, after treating of the Variation of organisms in a state of nature, of the Struggle for Existence and the principle of Natural Selection, I shall discuss the difficulties which are opposed to the theory. These difficulties may be classed under the following heads:—the apparent impossibility in some cases of a very simple organ graduating by small steps into a highly perfect organ; the marvellous facts of Instinct; the whole question of Hybridity; and, lastly, the absence, at the present time and in our geological formations, of innumerable links connecting all allied species. Although some of these difficulties are of great weight, we shall see that many of them are explicable on the theory of natural selection, and are otherwise inexplicable.

In scientific investigations it is permitted to invent any hypothesis, and if it explains various large and independent classes of facts it rises to the rank of a well-grounded theory. The



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undulations of the ether and even its existence are hypothetical, yet every one now admits the undulatory theory of light. The principle of natural selection may be looked at as a mere hypothesis, but rendered in some degree probable by what we positively know of the variability of organic beings in a state of nature,—by what we positively know of the struggle for existence, and the consequent almost inevitable preservation of favourable variations,—and from the analogical formation of domestic races. Now this hypothesis may be tested,—and this seems to me the only fair and legitimate manner of considering the whole question,—by trying whether it explains several large and independent classes of facts; such as the geological succession of organic beings, their distribution in past and present times, and their mutual affinities and homologies. If the principle of natural selection does explain these and other large bodies of facts, it ought to be received. On the ordinary view of each species having been independently created, we gain no scientific explanation of any one of these facts. We can only say that it has so pleased the Creator to command that the past and present inhabitants of the world should appear in a certain order and in certain areas; that He has impressed on them the most extraordinary resemblances, and has classed them in groups subordinate to groups. But by such statements we gain no new knowledge; we do not connect together facts and laws; we explain nothing.

In a third work I shall try the principle of natural selection by seeing how far it will give a fair explanation of the several classes of facts just alluded to. It was the consideration of these facts which first led me to take up the present subject. When I visited, during the voyage of H.M.S. *Beagle*, the Galapagos Archipelago, situated in the Pacific Ocean about 500 miles from the shore of South America, I found myself surrounded by peculiar species of birds, reptiles, and plants, existing nowhere else in the world. Yet they nearly all bore an American stamp. In the song of the mocking-thrush, in the harsh cry of the carrion-hawk, in the great candlestick-like opuntias, I clearly perceived the neighbourhood of America, though the islands were separated by so many miles of ocean from the mainland, and differed much from it in their geological

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constitution and climate. Still more surprising was the fact that most of the inhabitants of each separate island in this small archipelago were specifically different, though most closely related to each other. The archipelago, with its innumerable craters and bare streams of lava, appeared to be of recent origin; and thus I fancied myself brought near to the very act of creation. I often asked myself how these many peculiar animals and plants had been produced: the simplest answer seemed to be that the inhabitants of the several islands had descended from each other, undergoing modification in the course of their descent; and that all the inhabitants of the archipelago had descended from those of the nearest land, namely America, whence colonists would naturally have been derived. But it long remained to me an inexplicable problem how the necessary degree of modification could have been effected, and it would have thus remained for ever, had I not studied domestic productions, and thus acquired a just idea of the power of Selection. As soon as I had fully realized this idea, I saw, on reading Malthus on Population, that Natural Selection was the inevitable result of the rapid increase of all organic beings; for I was prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence by having long studied the habits of animals.

Before visiting the Galapagos I had collected many animals whilst travelling from north to south on both sides of America, and everywhere, under conditions of life as different as it is possible to conceive, American forms were met with—species replacing species of the same peculiar genera. Thus it was when the Cordilleras were ascended, or the thick tropical forests penetrated, or the fresh waters of America searched. Subsequently I visited other countries, which in all the conditions of life were incomparably more like to parts of South America, than the different parts of that continent were to each other; yet in these countries, as in Australia or Southern Africa, the traveller cannot fail to be struck with the entire difference of their productions. Again the reflection was forced on me that community of descent from the early inhabitants or colonists of South America would alone explain the wide prevalence of American types of structure throughout that immense area.

To exhume with one's own hands the bones of extinct and