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On the Erroneous Consideration of Wells' Dr. Moreau as an Allegory for Darwin's  
Theory of Natural Selection

Dr. Moreau, the primary antagonist in H.G. Wells' novel The Island of Dr. Moreau, has often been popularly identified as an allegorical figure for Charles Darwin's theory of Natural Selection. This identification, however, is a profound mistake; as portrayed by Wells, Moreau in fact plays a role much more characteristic of Artificial Selection than Natural Selection. Darwin immediately places those two processes at odds with one another in The Origin of Species, citing their significantly different origins in "Variation Under Domestication" and "Variation Under Nature,"<sup>1</sup> respectively, in the work's first two chapters. Moreau is, by virtue of his human status, a conscious being, and is aware of the results that he wishes to attain through his work with vivisection. Natural Selection, as described by Darwin, is inherently unconscious; it is unaware of and thus equally unconcerned with the end to which it acts. The most significant distinction between Moreau and the property of Natural Selection lies in the manner in which each deals with chance in their unique quests for perfection. Moreau attempts to impose himself on chance by functioning as a selective agent on his island. Natural Selection is a passive organizer of the results of chance events which themselves give rise to variation, whereas Moreau acts directly as a conscious inducer of variation, thereby involving himself in a sort of power struggle with chance. It is quite clear that Moreau is far more

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<sup>1</sup> Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. London, 1859. First Edition. <<http://www.Literature.org/authors/darwin-charles/the-origin-of-species/>>.

in opposition to Natural Selection than he is an allegorical embodiment of it, as he acts through a process of artificial selection whose inability to progress with relative linearity through time renders it a mild and temporary impediment to the relentless action of Natural Selection.

Dr. Moreau forcibly imposes variation in the creatures upon which he performs his vivisections rather than selecting from the results of organismal variation that arises spontaneously in nature. Darwinian theory denotes this action on Moreau's part as the creation of "variation under domestication,"<sup>2</sup> the defining feature of which is "man's power of accumulative selection. Nature gives successive variations; man adds them up in certain directions useful to him." The element of chance associated with this form of variation, which derives itself from Moreau's variable human impulses and desires, is entirely separate from the chance involved in the variation upon which Natural Selection acts. Moreau makes decisions as to the type of physiological alterations to confer upon his various animal subjects in much the selfish manner that Montgomery made the decision to save Prendick at the opening of the work, about which Montgomery later explains to Prendick, "If I'd been jaded that day, or hadn't liked your face, well-; it's a curious question where you would have been now."<sup>3</sup> Moreau similarly exhibits a tendency to perform, on any given day, whatever type of vivisection will impose upon an animal "adaptation, not indeed to the animal's...own good, but to [Moreau's] use or fancy."<sup>4</sup> The variation introduced by this preferential selection, rooted in Moreau's conscious and subconscious biases and desires, differs vastly from the form of variation

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<sup>2</sup> Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. Ch. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Wells, H.G. *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. London, 1896. Ch. 4, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. Ch. 1.

upon which Natural Selection acts, which Darwin denotes “variation under nature.”<sup>5</sup> This latter form of variation encompasses the “many slight differences which may be called individual differences, such as are known frequently to appear in the offspring from the same parents, or which may be presumed to have thus arisen, from being frequently observed in the individuals of the same species inhabiting the same confined locality;”<sup>6</sup> it essentially concerns variety that arises randomly among members of a population due to variance in inherited characteristic genomes and sporadic genetic mutations. It is quite clear that Moreau and Natural Selection deal with distinct forms of variation to begin with, and thus the processes by which they each act are born of separate origins.

Moreau and Natural Selection both work towards achieving respective states of perfection, but the characteristics of these states are quite dissimilar. The lot of Moreau’s vivisectional procedures can be seen to culminate with the goal of transposing human-like status upon an animal; as described by Prednick, “Moreau took [animals] and stamped the human form upon them.”<sup>7</sup> Perfection for Moreau comes in the context of perfecting this physiological stamping process, or as he states, in “finding out the extreme limit of plasticity in a living shape.”<sup>8</sup> This goal is concrete, and it is tangible- it inherently possesses an ultimate structure, which Moreau explains that he has chosen to be “the human form”<sup>9</sup> in both the physical and psychological sense. Moreau implies that, upon the complete and successful attainment of this form, he will be satisfied, and will

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<sup>5</sup> Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. Ch. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. Ch. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Wells, H.G. *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Ch. 15, p. 127.

<sup>8</sup> Wells, H.G. *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Ch. 14, p. 115.

<sup>9</sup> Wells, H.G. *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Ch. 14, p. 112.

not attempt to improve it further. His goal is also theoretically accomplishable within some finite window of time- Moreau in fact appears to believe that this goal can be achieved within a matter of years, as he indicates his plan to “wake up English physiology”<sup>10</sup> by eventually returning to England and vindicate himself through the public presentation a humanly stamped creature.

Both the tangibility of Moreau’s goal and his belief in the feasibility of its accomplishment within a finite period of time place Moreau at allegorical odds with Natural Selection, which exhibits neither of those attributes. According to Darwin, Natural Selection possesses neither an explicit beginning nor a definable end; rather, it functions in perpetuity, “daily and hourly scrutinizing, throughout the world, every variation, even the slightest; rejecting that which is bad, preserving and adding up all that is good; silently and insensibly working, wherever and whenever opportunity offers,”<sup>11</sup> to drive a given population toward a perfected state of existence. This state is, paradoxically, not achievable in any ultimate form or at any point in time. Rather, it is the culmination of states of relative and instantaneous perfection which are constantly being improved along a continuous and infinite set of points in time. A given environment will not remain constant throughout time, but will tend to randomly and continuously change, causing the characteristic state of perfect adaptation to that environment to change as well. Darwin explains that local environments are constantly “undergoing some physical change, for instance, of climate. The proportional numbers of its inhabitants... hence almost immediately undergo a change, and some species might

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<sup>10</sup> Wells, H.G. *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Ch. 14, p. 118.

<sup>11</sup> Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. Ch. 4.

become extinct.”<sup>12</sup> Natural Selection inherently acts to ensure that a population is in the best-adapted state possible at any given point in time, but given more time to act in tandem with changing environmental conditions, it will inevitably form an even fitter version of that population at a later point in time. The differences in the perfectibility of the processes through which Moreau and Natural Selection function are clear: Moreau’s process works towards an end that is ultimately attainable in both form and time, while Natural Selection proceeds towards an end that quite simply is not.

When Moreau performs his vivisection experiments, he concurrently robs his animal patients of their procreative abilities, as demonstrated by Prendick’s observation that the animals “actually bore offspring, but these generally died. There was no evidence of the inheritance of the acquired human characteristics.”<sup>13</sup> The physiologically altered animals have virtually a zero percent chance of producing offspring that bear the characteristics imposed on them by Moreau. This circumstance is in keeping with Darwin’s observation that “modifications directly due to the physical conditions of life,” such as those that Moreau imposes through vivisection, “are supposed not to be inherited.”<sup>14</sup> However, heritable variation is a cornerstone of Natural Selection. As Darwin explains, “these [heritable] individual differences are highly important for us, as they afford materials for Natural Selection to *accumulate*”<sup>15</sup> over the course of successive generations. Simply put, heritability of variation is the mechanism which permits Natural Selection to progress relatively linearly and continuously through time, and thus Moreau’s failure to artificially reproduce this mechanism through his work with

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<sup>12</sup> Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. Ch. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Wells, H.G. *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Ch. 15, p. 127.

<sup>14</sup> Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*, Ch. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. Ch. 4.

vivisection denotes a major point of discontinuity between the respective processes by which Moreau and Natural Selection act.

The population of vivisected creatures on Moreau's island undergoes a sort of bounded sinusoidal oscillation, from which the probability of its breaking free is zero; Moreau introduces vivisected creatures into the environment of the island, which eventually die off without leaving any offspring bearing the vivisected form, impelling Moreau to vivisect additional creatures, and never leading to progress or phenotypical continuity that is observable over multiple generations. Moreau repeatedly refers to Prendick as an "uninvited guest"<sup>16</sup> on the island, but this term far more appropriately applies to Moreau's vivisected creatures, who themselves are clearly uninvited and unwelcome guests in the landscape of Natural Selection. Once Moreau introduces these creatures into the wilderness of the island, Natural Selection works to remove their artificially imposed form from the evolutionary pool, in keeping with Darwin's assertion that "domestic varieties, when run wild, gradually but certainly revert in character to their aboriginal stocks."<sup>17</sup> Moreau's vivisected creatures definitively lack the ability to produce offspring which retain the post-vivisectional form of the parents following their reintroduction into nature. In addition to this heritability barrier, Moreau notes that his vivisected creatures exhibit a strong tendency of psychological reversion: "As soon as my hand is taken from them," Moreau explains, "the beast begins to creep back, begins to assert itself again."<sup>18</sup> Clearly, the alterations Moreau makes to the mental facilities of the animals are also acted on by the corrective force of Natural Selection, which is in this

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<sup>16</sup> Wells, H.G. *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Ch. 7, p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. Ch. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Wells, H.G. *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Ch. 14, p. 121.

particular case manifested in the resurfacing of fundamental animal instinct. Natural Selection's ultimate success over Moreau's artificially introduced variation is demonstrated through its prevention of the vivisected creatures from exhibiting any heritability of the physiologically altered form by bearing viable offspring.

Moreau aggressively imposes himself on chance, interfering with its generation of variation, whereas Natural Selection depends upon the spontaneous operation of chance in nature in order to function. Once Moreau forcibly introduces his variation through the vivisection of animals, he does not further act as a selective agent for the survival of these animals in nature. Rather, Moreau releases them back into nature to fend for themselves with their physiologically altered forms, subjugating them once again to the full force of Natural Selection. This circumstance serves as still further evidence of the error of likening Moreau's work on the island to the process of Natural Selection- Moreau selects *for* variation, whereas Natural Selection selects *from* variation that has arisen naturally and spontaneously. This simple circumstance not only renders Moreau and Natural Selection at allegorical odds with each other, but also demonstrates the ineptitude and futility of attempts at their comparison to begin with. Wells' Dr. Moreau and Darwin's theory of Natural Selection function respectively as unique black boxes, each of which act at entirely different points along the span of evolutionary process. Chance itself is the input that enters Moreau's black box, and the output is the artificially generated variation that Moreau achieves through vivisection. This output of variation of Moreau's black box then proceeds to become input into the black box of Natural Selection, along with naturally generated variation, to result in a whittled-down output of the fittest organisms present in the initial input pool of genetic variety. Well's illumination and situation of

this system of evolutionary inputs and outputs embodies the true purpose of his novel- to demonstrate Natural Selection's immutable power over nature, and specifically over man as a part of nature. This power, as Wells shows, stems from Natural Selection's privileged position at the pinnacle of the cascade of evolutionary process, perched safely beyond the reach of man's heartiest thrusts. Moreau is himself being acted upon at all times by the invisible hand of Natural Selection; he is undeniably a part of the natural world on whose creatures he performs his scientific operations, and he has been passively selected through Natural Selection to survive to reproductive maturity. It is, in the end, quite simply impossible for Moreau to be accurately considered as an allegory for the infinite, intangible process of Natural Selection of which he is himself a finite and concrete product.