

Mutations

Und was in schwankender Erscheinung schwebt,
Befestiget mit dauernden Gedanken.¹

GOETHE

'JUMP-LIKE' MUTATIONS — THE WORKING-
GROUND OF NATURAL SELECTION

The general facts which we have just put forward in evidence of the durability claimed for the gene structure, are perhaps too familiar to us to be striking or to be regarded as convincing. Here, for once, the common saying that exceptions prove the rule is actually true. If there were no exceptions to the likeness between children and parents, we should have been deprived not only of all those beautiful experiments which have revealed to us the detailed mechanism of heredity, but also of that grand, million-fold experiment of Nature, which forges the species by natural selection and survival of the fittest.

Let me take this last important subject as the starting-point for presenting the relevant facts — again with an apology and a reminder that I am not a biologist:

We know definitely, today, that Darwin was mistaken in regarding the small, continuous, accidental variations, that are bound to occur even in the most homogeneous population, as the material on which natural selection works. For it has been proved that they are not inherited. The fact is important enough to be illustrated briefly. If you take a crop of

¹And what in fluctuating appearance hovers,
Ye shall fix by lasting thoughts.

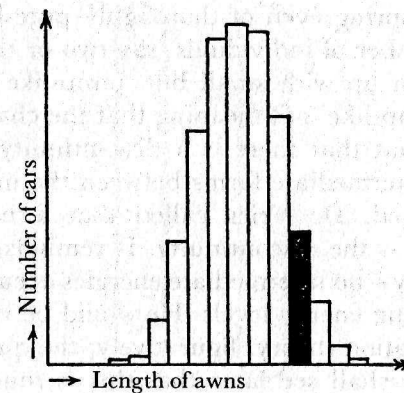


Fig. 7. Statistics of length of awns in a pure-bred crop. The black group is to be selected for sowing. (The details are not from an actual experiment, but are just set up for illustration.)

pure-strain barley, and measure, ear by ear, the length of its awns and plot the result of your statistics, you will get a bell-shaped curve as shown in Fig. 7, where the number of ears with a definite length of awn is plotted against the length. In other words: a definite medium length prevails, and deviations in either direction occur with certain frequencies. Now pick out a group of ears (as indicated by blackening) with awns noticeably beyond the average, but sufficient in number to be sown in a field by themselves and give a new crop. In making the same statistics for this, Darwin would have expected to find the corresponding curve shifted to the right. In other words, he would have expected to produce by selection an increase of the average length of the awns. That is not the case, if a truly pure-bred strain of barley has been used. The new statistical curve, obtained from the selected crop, is identical with the first one, and the same would be the case if ears with particularly short awns had been selected for seed. Selection has no effect — because the small, continuous variations are not inherited. They are obviously not based on the structure of the hereditary substance, they are accidental. But about forty years ago the Dutchman de Vries discovered

