

Wells's Martians as Godwin's Future Humans: A Critique of Human Perfectibility  
in the Darwinian Era

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## Wells's Martians as Godwin's Future Humans: A Critique of Human Perfectibility in the Darwinian Era

The last decade and a half of the nineteenth century saw what historians have long called the “socialist revival” in England. Beginning in the mid-1880s, a plethora of organizations identifying themselves as socialist were formed, each with its own unique take on the aims and strategies that best represented the socialist cause.<sup>1</sup> Among the many debates that inevitably emerged from within this heterogeneous movement circulated the question of what to do with Darwin. The problem lay in the fact that Darwinism, from the time of the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, had been associated with the political legacy of Thomas Malthus. This connection tied Darwinism to a politics of competitive individualism and laissez-faire economics that was seen as anathema to the cooperative nature of socialism. The early fiction of H.G. Wells is particularly concerned with this dimension of the socialist debates. Wells was equally dedicated to both socialism and a Malthusian interpretation of Darwinism. This put him at odds with a large majority of his fellow socialists, and his fiction reflects his continuing defense of Malthusian Darwinism in the face of this opposition. Wells was most firmly opposed to the socialists who, faced with the potential incompatibility of socialism and Darwinian natural selection, turned to the evolutionary mechanisms of early nineteenth century biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. I will argue that it is this particular branch—the neo-Lamarckian socialists—that Wells critiques in his 1897 Martian invasion novel, *The War of the Worlds*. In doing so, Wells draws a surprising parallel between neo-Lamarckian notions of the progressive evolution of human nature and the ideas of human perfectibility proposed by Malthus's contemporary opponent, William Godwin. I will show that Wells, through his conception of the Martians and

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the different socialist groups that emerged in at the end of the nineteenth century, see Mark Bevir's *The Making of British Socialism*.

their defeat, replays the debate between Malthus and Godwin at the end of the eighteenth century, recasting it to reflect the evolutionary concerns of the post-Darwinian era. His return to this debate, however, highlights the fact that there was not much recasting to be done. Malthus's critique of Godwin in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* focuses on the same questions that preoccupied Wells and his contemporaries: What is the relationship of human biology to human morality, and how does this relationship define the potential for societal advancement? Those socialists who turned to Lamarckian mechanisms sought scientific validation for their claims that a more cooperative and benevolent social order could be achieved in the foreseeable future. Wells suggests, in drawing a parallel between the neo-Lamarckians and Godwin, that the former, far from engaging with the scientific advancement of their time, are attempting to retreat to a pre-Darwinian era in which the revelation of biological realities did not restrain speculations on the future of humanity. Wells attempts, in short, to tear away the veil of scientific validity from the neo-Lamarckian socialists, revealing what he saw as the futile utopian speculation underneath.

*The War of the Worlds* marks the beginning of what is now a well-established tradition in science fiction: the alien invasion narrative. In the novel, nineteenth-century England is invaded by a technologically-advanced race of Martians intent on settling on Earth and subjugating the human population. Because of the clear parallels to the project of European colonial expansion, the novel has overwhelmingly been read as a commentary on colonialism. While scholars have read it as primarily a critique of colonialism, these readings emphasize the ethical ambiguity inherent to the text. John Huntington argues that while the Martians represent the intellectual and technological achievement that "we value in humanity," they also inversely represent a failure of humanity: the unethical treatment of colonized peoples by colonial powers (84). This leads

Huntington to conclude that *TWOTW* should not be understood as a straightforward critique of European colonialism but rather as a representation of the “moral dilemma of a triumphant civilization.” While the novel does express ethical concerns, it does so “without relinquishing its admiration for evolutionary success” (84). Likewise, John Rieder argues that while the dominant attitude of the novel is “indignation against colonial violence,” Wells’s critique is undermined by the fact that the Martian invasion is presented as necessary to the survival of their species, which “threatens to revalidate a naturalizing, quasi-Darwinian apology for colonial violence” (381). In these readings, Wells’s engagement with Darwinian evolutionary imperatives is seen to create an ethical ambiguity surrounding the text’s attitude towards colonialism. While Wells’s invasion narrative certainly calls for a conversation about the ethical concerns of colonialism, discussions of Wells’s engagement with evolution in the text have been largely limited to its relationship to such concerns. What readings of the text have overlooked is the way in which the Martians represent an ethical debate occurring within the realm of evolutionary politics itself. This essay will consider the way in which the ethical ambiguity of *TWOTW* does not function as an exception to its critique of colonialism, but rather as its central critical motive. I will argue that Wells, who was at the forefront of late-Victorian debates concerning the potential of humans to evolve into more innately ethical beings, creates the Martians as a representation of the limits of a human ethical advancement that is reliant on the biological adaptation of the species.

#### The Malthusian Controversy

Thomas Malthus’s 1798 treatise of political economy, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, is now perhaps best known for its proposition that human population growth would always outpace the ability of society to produce the means of subsistence necessary to maintain its population, thus establishing conditions of scarcity as an inevitable and eternal element of

human civilization. H.G. Wells was convinced of the importance of this aspect of the Malthusian legacy and was concerned with the question of population control. In his 1901 compendium of predictions for the future of humanity, *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought*, Wells asserts: “Probably no more shattering book than the *Essay on Population* has ever been, or ever will be written [...] it made as clear as daylight that all forms of social reconstruction, all dreams of earthly golden ages must be either futile or insincere or both, until the problems of human increase were manfully faced” (88). Wells dedicates a considerable amount of time in his 1905 novel *A Modern Utopia* to “manfully fac[ing]” this problem, speculating on ways in which population control might be justly enacted in a future society.<sup>2</sup> Wells’s engagement with Malthus, however, goes much deeper than the question of how best to control population growth. For Wells, Malthus had not just challenged “dreams of earthly golden ages” through his laying bare the issues of population growth, but also through his understanding of the way in which human nature is irrevocably defined by the struggle for existence.

In the introduction to *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin acknowledges his debt to Malthus. He says of his theory of natural selection that it “is the doctrine of Malthus, applied to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms. As many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive [...] there is a frequently recurring struggle for existence” (14). While Darwin was applying Malthus’s concepts of political economy to the natural world, the association between the two thinkers was consistently and influentially configured as also functioning in the reverse: the Darwinian conception of natural selection was seen to present a biological justification for the competitive and individualistic social relations of a *laissez-faire*

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<sup>2</sup> See Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, p. 124-34.

economy. Moreover, the debates about the political application of Darwin were not just about a justification of the present, but, perhaps more importantly, about the possibilities of social change. As Piers J. Hale has outlined, the association of Darwin with Malthus laid the grounds for a debate about the future of society that was structured around the opposition between Malthusian and anti-Malthusian viewpoints. This debate centered on the question of human nature. Those who supported a Malthusian evolutionary politics saw human nature as fundamentally static: the human species was shaped by a struggle for survival and thus was biologically wired to be self-interested and competitive. Those who opposed this Malthusian stance argued that human nature was shaped by environment and was thus malleable: with a change in environment, human beings could evolve to become cooperative and altruistic beings (Hale 3-7).

One of the foremost advocates of the Malthusian evolutionary perspective was T. H. Huxley, who, in his 1893 essay “Evolution and Ethics,” proposes that there is a necessary duality which future hopes for the ethical improvement of society must address: civilized man will always be in contention with his biological nature. He argues that the “ethical nature” humans construct through the creation of civilization cannot seamlessly integrate itself with our “cosmic nature,” but must combat it. The development of “goodness and virtue,” Huxley explains, “involves a course of conduct” which is “opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence” (82). Given that we have developed this “cosmic nature” of competition and self-assertion over millions of years, “it would be folly to imagine that a few centuries will suffice to subdue its masterfulness to purely ethical ends” (85). Wells, who studied with Huxley at the Normal School and was an admirer of his work,<sup>3</sup> also opposed the idea that human nature

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<sup>3</sup> See Hale, *Political Descent*, p. 265-8.

could, in any foreseeable future, intrinsically change. Like Huxley, he proposes a necessarily contentious duality, figured for Wells as the “artificial” versus the “natural” man. In his 1896 essay “Human Evolution, an Artificial Process,” Wells argues that “there are satisfactory grounds for believing that man [...] is still mentally, morally, and physically, what he was during the later Paleolithic period” and will continue to remain, for “a vast period of time, at the level of the Stone Age” (211). Wells sees evidence for the “permanence of man’s inherent nature” in the persistent presence of human characteristics that connect to a fundamental struggle for survival which has largely been ameliorated by civilization—man’s continued “disposition to rages and controversy, his love of hunting and violent exercise, and his powerful sexual desires” are all proof that his inherent nature is attuned to the fight for bare existence (215). That this inherent nature would remain unchanged for the foreseeable future is based on Wells’s rejection of Lamarck’s theory of acquired characteristics; since natural selection was the only means by which changes to the biological make-up of the human species could be enacted, any changes to human nature would take hundreds of thousands of years (211). Wells concludes that as much as “artificial man” might be shaped by the civilizing forces of society, “natural man” remains “obstinately unchangeable” (217). Because natural man is wired for competition and aggression, “Morality becomes the padding of suggested emotional habits necessary to keep the round Paleolithic savage in the square hole of the civilized state” (217). As for Huxley, the ethical behavior necessary to social existence becomes an external imposition on, not extension of, human nature. For Wells, “artificial man” could become a more ethical being through the moral education provided by a civilized society, but “natural man” would remain driven by the passions and impulses that arise from the struggle to survive and procreate.

## Wells, Morris, and Lamarckism

For Wells, the intractability of human nature did not mean that radical social change was not possible or desirable. As a dedicated socialist throughout this entire life, Wells was by no means a defender of the status quo.<sup>4</sup> He believed, however, that any potential application of socialist principles must take into account the naturally competitive disposition of man and the struggle for existence that had shaped his biological being. While Malthusian Darwinism and socialism were often considered antithetical, Wells married the two in his vision of a socialist society that would create a true equality of opportunity, a social state in which every individual would be given the necessary resources to succeed through his or her own merit. His 1905 work, *A Modern Utopia*, imagines a new socialist utopian vision that would reflect the continuing presence of struggle and competition. Wells asserts that the modern utopia must fundamentally differ from “the Nowheres and Utopias men planned before Darwin quickened the thought of the world” (11). “Nowheres” is here a reference to William Morris’s highly influential 1890 socialist utopia, *News from Nowhere*, and it is against Morris that Wells will primarily position himself. These utopias, Wells argues, were “perfect and static States, a balance of happiness won forever against the forces of unrest and disorder that inhere in all things” (11). The modern utopia, on the other hand, must be “kinetic,” open to change and development; it must ready to continually contend with these forces of disorder (11). This foreclosure of the possibility of static perfection applies also the nature of the inhabitants of the modern utopia. Again, Wells returns to a specific critique of Morris: “Were we free to have our untrammelled desire, I suppose we should follow Morris to his Nowhere, we should change the nature of man and the nature of things together; we

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<sup>4</sup> Wells first publicly declared himself a socialist in 1886 and remained engaged with the socialist cause until his death in 1946, publishing an anti-fascist article just a month before he died in the *Socialist and the New Leader*. For a thorough account of Wells’s life-long engagement with leftist politics, see John S. Partington, “H.G. Wells: A Political Life.”



should make the whole race wise, tolerant, noble, perfect—wave our hands to a splendid anarchy, every man doing as it pleases him, and none pleased to do evil” (12). Wells’s modern utopia, on the other hand, will consider the “limitations of human possibility” and will imagine its men and women of the future as very much the same as they currently are, subject to conflict and “uncertainties of mood and desire” (13). Wells here expresses a continuation of the views he puts forth in “Human Evolution,” that “natural man,” even in a more perfect future, will not become a fundamentally more ethical being.

Wells sees Morris as following in a utopian tradition that is predicated on the possibility of human perfectibility. He connects Morris with a long tradition of pre-Darwinian utopian thought that fails to acknowledge the indelible impact on humanity of the evolutionary imperatives of struggle and competition. Morris, however, was not pre-Darwinian. He, like his fellow late-Victorian socialists, was engaged in the debate over how to address Malthusian interpretations of Darwinism. In fact, *News from Nowhere* shows considerable evidence that Morris was a proponent of an evolutionary perspective that turned away from Darwinian natural selection in favor of the evolutionary mechanisms of the early nineteenth century biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck.<sup>5</sup> In his 1809 work *Zoological Philosophy*, Lamarck had proposed the presence of an evolutionary mechanism called use-inheritance. In Lamarck’s conception, an organism would respond to changes in its environment by developing a new habit or behavior pattern. This changed behavior would lead to a bodily modification in the organism, which it would then pass on directly to its offspring. The offspring would then carry on the new behavior pattern, pushing forward the biological change. These bodily modifications generally involved the strengthening

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<sup>5</sup> While Morris does not directly address his debt to Lamarck, other socialists of the time, like Edward Carpenter and George Bernard Shaw, did. See Carpenter’s chapter on Lamarck in his *Civilization: Its Causes and Cures*, p. 161-84 and Shaw’s “The Basis for Socialism: Economic.” I focus on Morris here because it is against Morris’s vision of the future that Wells positions his own.

or weakening of a particular organ and could lead, over a long period of time, to the complete loss of the organ, or, inversely, to its perfection. As Hale explains, this Lamarckian evolutionary mechanism was employed by late-Victorian socialists to counter the argument that socialism was not tenable because man was naturally selfish and individualist.<sup>6</sup> The theory of use-inheritance was used to create a conception of ethical evolution, in which humanity, under cooperative and equitable conditions, “might form habitual socialistic behaviors that through repetition might become instinctive and therefore heritable” (177). Human nature, while perhaps originally configured for a competitive existence, could evolve to become more cooperative and benevolent.

Unlike Wells’s utopian vision, which is designed to allow for the continuation of human struggle, both with nature and among the people, Morris’s *News from Nowhere: An Epoch of Rest*, presents a vision of humanity that is perpetually at peace. As Guest, a visitor to Nowhere, describes it, England “is now a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt” (105). Labor is no longer forced by necessity, but all work is considered a pleasure and is undertaken willingly by all inhabitants. The people live in harmony with nature and with one another. Struggle and competition have been eliminated in favor of a social system that is based on the voluntary cooperation of its members. Wells’s critique of Morris is predicated on the idea that a system based entirely on voluntary cooperation requires a perfected human, one that, in Wells’s opinion, cannot exist. Morris, however, does suggest that such a perfected (though never entirely perfect) human could evolve into being through the Lamarckian mechanism of use-inheritance.

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<sup>6</sup> Not all socialists turned to Lamarck to counter the Malthusian conception of Darwinism. Most notably, the socialist anarchist Peter Kropotkin, in a series of articles written between 1890 and 1896, argued that natural selection favored cooperation, attempting to retrieve Darwin for the socialist cause. For an explanation of Kropotkin’s stance, see Peter J. Bowler’s *Eclipse of Darwinism*, p. 55-6. This text is also an excellent resource for a discussion of the many different challenges to the theory of natural selection at the turn of the century.

The perfect beauty of Morris's natural environment is reflected in the people of his utopia, who have become uniformly "shapely and well-knit of body, and thoroughly healthy-looking and strong" (53). As in Lamarck's conception, the physical evolution of Nowhere's residents is directly attributed to their change in environment; Morris's utopian residents have been biologically altered through their interactions in a social system free from the degrading living and working conditions imposed under capitalism.<sup>7</sup> This biological evolution is not limited to the physical appearance of the utopian residents. Lamarckian mechanisms are also at play in the moral evolution of the human species in Morris's utopia. As Guest's utopian guide, Dick, tells him, everyone in Nowhere finds genuine pleasure in work, and idleness has been eliminated from the population. Idleness was once a "disease" that was passed down from the former bourgeoisie, but it is now "extinct" (75). Morris presents idleness as a heritable trait that was developed in response to social systems that were predicated on inequitable labor conditions. Under the equitable and pleasurable labor conditions of the new society, this biological trait has been eliminated through a process of ethical evolution that is grounded in a reconfiguration of human nature. Idleness, like an organ that is no longer of use, has withered away in the human species.<sup>8</sup> Idleness is not the only biologically-transmitted trait to have been eliminated through disuse in Morris's utopia. In Nowhere, there is no need for a legal system or official punitive measures against crime because the people have developed, over time, "a habit of acting on the whole for the best" (111-2). As Hammond, one of Guest's utopian companions explains, without the external motivators of poverty and envy created by inequitable social conditions,

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<sup>7</sup> See Rachel Teukolsky's chapter "Socialist Design at the Fin de Siècle" in her *The Literate Eye* for a discussion of the way in which both humans and nature in Morris's utopia are "cultivated (or bred) into order and beauty" using Lamarckian mechanisms (171-8). Teukolsky draws a connection between Morris's use of Lamarckian mechanisms and the tradition of eugenics. For a further discussion of Morris's employment of eugenics, see Patrick Parrinder "Eugenics and Utopia: Sexual Selection from Galton to Morris."

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of the way in which Lamarckian mechanism are invoked here, see Hale, p. 263-4.

criminal impulses have been eliminated. While the use of the word “habit” could suggest merely a cultural transmission, it should be remembered that, in the Lamarckian conception of use-inheritance, evolutionary adaptations begin with the formation of a new habitual behavior. That this habitual behavior has become part of the inherent make-up of the citizens of Morris’s utopia becomes clear when Guest asks Hammond if they “consider crime a mere spasmodic disease.” Hammond replies in the affirmative, explaining that “we are a healthy people generally, so we are not much likely to be much troubled with *this* disease” (115, emphasis in original). Like idleness, criminal impulses of all kinds are discussed as a disease to which the people of Nowhere, with their superior ethical constitutions, are no longer susceptible. While there is no mention here of the criminal impulse as a specifically hereditary disease, it is clear that the absence of criminal behavior, while initiated by the removal of external factors, has now become part of the inherent make-up of the physically and morally evolved utopian population.

While Morris discusses the ethical evolution of the human species as one that is grounded in the biological, Wells’s critique of Morris is based on his understanding that Morris’s “wise, tolerant, noble, perfect” population had been abstracted from biological realities. For Wells, “natural man” is a creature shaped by the struggle to physically survive and procreate and is therefore “naturally” selfish, competitive, and aggressive. He is essentially a being without an ethical concern for the other. Thus, any ethical improvement man could accomplish would always be in contention with his natural self. Wells makes clear in “Human Evolution” that his rejection of Lamarckian evolutionary mechanisms that makes the possibility of an evolved human nature impossible in the foreseeable future. For Wells, his neo-Lamarckian contemporaries were confusing the “artificial” moral evolution of man with his natural evolution as a species. The kind of ethical evolution imagined by Morris involved, for Wells, an erasure of

the biological reality of the human species. While Wells does not make mention of Morris's recourse to Lamarckian mechanisms in *A Modern Utopia*, he makes clear in earlier work that he associates the neo-Lamarckian vision of the future with the kind of abstracted human perfection that he sees in Morris's utopia.<sup>9</sup> While *The War of the Worlds* is an invasion narrative that takes place in Wells's own time, it presents what is perhaps his most stringent critique of the argument that Lamarckian evolutionary mechanisms could bring about a more ethical future.

In *The War of the Worlds*, Wells imagines a horrifying and powerful race of Martians that have evolved through the Lamarckian mechanism of use-inheritance to become a species of giant brains with virtually no bodies. Wells thus enacts, through the creation of his Martians, the literal erasure of biological reality that he sees being figuratively enacted in neo-Lamarckian visions of the future. In doing so, he turns for inspiration to an ethical debate a century earlier that has direct parallels to his own debate with the neo-Lamarckians. Despite the century separating them, Wells and Malthus were responding to the same social phenomenon: a surge in utopian thinking and writing fueled by the political turmoil of their time.<sup>10</sup> Both advocated a viewpoint that acknowledged limits to human progress based on what they saw as the fundamental laws of nature. Wells, as a dedicated Malthusian, would have been well aware of the fact that Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* was preoccupied with a disavowal of the theory of human perfectibility proposed by William Godwin in his 1793 political treatise, *An Enquiry*

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<sup>9</sup> In addition to works discussed in this essay, Wells also engages in a critique of Lamarckism in his 1895 novel *The Time Machine*. His future population of weak and unintelligent Eloi have been subject to what the German naturalist Friedrich Leopold August Weismann termed "panmixia." In opposition to Lamarck, Weismann argued that, in the absence of the conditions of competition provided by natural selection, an organism would undergo a process of degeneration in which the evolutionary advantages previously obtained were lost. Thus, *The Time Machine* challenges Lamarck's notion of evolutionary advancement without the necessity of competition (Hale 275-80). He does not, however, as in *The War of the Worlds* present a direct critique of Lamarckian mechanisms.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the boom of utopian writing that accompanied the socialist revival, see Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.*, 1-6. For a discussion of the rise of speculative writing at the end of the eighteenth century and its relationship to Godwin and Malthus, see Maureen McLane, *Romanticism and the Human Sciences*, p. 115-7.

*Concerning Political Justice*. Wells's imagining of the Martians suggests he found in Malthus's critique of Godwin's speculations about human perfectibility a workable model to contest the neo-Lamarckian conception of ethical evolution. While it is perhaps surprising that Wells found in Godwin an apt target for his critique of neo-Lamarckism, Godwin's image of human perfectibility presents a vivid vision of the subordination of "natural man" that Wells saw as implicit in the speculations of the neo-Lamarckians. Moreover, Godwin's speculations about the connections between biological and ethical advancement were easily adapted to a critique of neo-Lamarckism because of their parallel to the mechanism of use-inheritance.

### Malthus and Godwin

While Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* is now best known for its establishment of his principle of population, Malthus spends much of the text not establishing his own theory, but directly countering what he saw as a problematic trend, the "present rage for wide and unrestrained speculation" (69). In the wake of the French revolution, the 1790s were marked by a speculative boom concerning the potential of radical social change. Malthus acknowledges that he is writing in a "period big with most important changes, changes that would in some measure be decisive of the future fate of mankind" (9). While Malthus does not wish to avoid discussions of human progress, he finds it his duty to respond to recent "speculations on the perfectibility of man and of society" by exposing what he sees as the "unconquerable difficulties" that they ignore (11). Malthus centers his critique of notions of perfectibility on the speculative section that concludes Godwin's *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. As with the debate between Wells and Morris, the core the disagreement between Malthus and Godwin is the question of whether or not human nature is fundamentally selfish and competitive or can evolve to be more benevolent and altruistic. For Malthus, as for

Wells, the question of humanity's ethical capacity is tied to the struggle for survival that defined the nature of human existence.

The premise of Godwin's speculations on the possibility of human perfectibility is that humans are primarily intellectual, not physical, beings: "[W]e first stand in need of certain animal subsistence and shelter, and after that [...] our only true felicity consists in the expansion of our intellectual powers, the knowledge of truth, and the practice of virtue" (445). For Godwin, human beings in their current state were already fundamentally beings of the mind; he imagines physical pleasures as being primarily an illusion that distract man from the more substantial pleasures that the intellect can provide. He argues that the "cultivated and virtuous mind" is already largely "indifferent to the gratifications of the sense" and comes to "despise the mere animal function" (464-5). Thus, Godwin's notions of the more perfect human involve a decreased role for this "animal function," a lessening of man's attention to both bodily needs and pleasures. Concerning eating, Godwin imagines that no man who was not driven by the desire for ostentation that the current obsession with wealth creates would "continue to maintain even a plentiful table" but would instead naturally embrace a "frugal diet" (423). Just as men would "eat and drink because eating and drinking are essential to our healthful existence," they would take the same moderate and rational approach to sex: "Reasonable men will then propagate their species, not because a certain sensible pleasure is annexed to this action, but because it is right that the species should be propagated; and the manner in which they exercise this function will be regulated by the dictates of reason and duty" (454). The future human, then, would strip away the illusion that is the pleasures of the body and dictate the exercise of her "animal function" not by passion but by reason. For Godwin, it is a matter of economy: even "the smallest excess in sensual pleasures" diminishes one's capacity to experience the "more exquisite" pleasures of the

mind (445). The subjugation of the body is thus understood by Godwin as a necessary step towards greater mental efficiency.

Beyond the suppression of sensual pleasures, Godwin also imagines that the mind might more literally exercise control over the body. Again, his speculations are based on an extrapolation from what he sees as the current conditions of human existence. Godwin argues that the mind already directly affects the body in a variety of ways: for instance, emotion “occasions the most extraordinary revolutions in the frame, accelerates the circulation, causes the heart to palpitate, the tongue to refuse its office, and has been known to occasion death by extreme anguish or extreme joy” (460-1). Further, Godwin sees the mind as already exercising a considerable amount of control over physiological health. He stresses the current “power of the mind in assisting or retarding convalescence” (461); indisposition, he argues, “only becomes formidable in proportion as it is seconded by the consent of the mind” (34). For Godwin, the extent of physical illness is already considerably determined by our mental state; more generally, our mental disposition largely dictates our physical condition. From this, Godwin speculates that the advancement of the human condition would involve a more controlled and purposeful wielding of this mental power that is virtually without limits. He asks, “If mind be now in a great degree the ruler of the system, why should it be incapable of extending its empire? [...] [W]hy should we not, in the process of time [...] subject the thoughts which are at present involuntary to the government of design?” (462). Godwin thus imagines an increased control of the physiological condition that leads to the elimination of disease and perhaps, eventually, immortality; we may quite probably cease to get sick and die “because we refuse to suffer these accidents” (464). This general proposition leads to two interesting side speculations that are of particular interest to this essay. Firstly, Godwin speculates that before we can mentally conquer



death, we must first conquer sleep. Sleep is an infirmity, “an irregular and distempered state” of the mind, that must ultimately be overcome in the march toward mental perfection (463). In imagining the complete control of mind over body, Godwin sees sleep, as a state in which the mind is not being put to controlled and voluntary use, as an aberration to be eliminated.

Secondly, Godwin imagines that the closer we approach to immortality, the less necessary sex will become and that it may eventually be eradicated altogether (465). Because sex, in Godwin’s conception, will be used by the rational man not for pleasure, but solely for procreation, a race of immortal men would have absolutely no need for it.

Malthus flatly denies that the kind of physiological advancement Godwin imagines could ever occur: “The slowly moving tortoise, *the body*, never fails to overtake *the mind*, however widely and extensively it may have ranged, and the brightest and most energetic intellects [...] must yield the empire of the brain to the calls of hunger, or sink with the exhausted body in sleep” (95, my emphasis). While Malthus centers his critique of Godwin on his concept of physiological perfectibility, the debate between the two thinkers is, at its core, an ethical one. Godwin’s notions of physiological perfectibility were a speculative extension of his primary social concerns: the elimination of property and the creation of an equitable and cooperative social order. For Godwin, man was not innately competitive and selfish; rather, his ethical shortcomings, along with all crime and vice, were products of the system of private property: “In a state of plenty, and where all alike shared the bounties of nature, these sentiments would inevitably expire” (432). For Godwin, a more equitable system of distribution meant an end to the need for competition and thus the elimination of oppression and the “principle of selfishness” (432). He realized, however, that such social improvement could not occur until humanity had reached “a state of great intellectual improvement. So bold a revolution cannot take place in

human affairs, until the general mind has been highly cultivated” (438). For Godwin, intellectual advancement was the necessary partner of ethical advancement: a humanity guided by intellect and reason would necessarily be guided by principles of justice. For Malthus, Godwin’s belief in the ability of a more just society to eliminate humanity’s ethical shortcomings is “entirely a false conception”: “[I]ndependent of any political or social institutions whatever, the greater part of mankind, from the fixed and unalterable laws of nature, must ever be subject to the evil temptations arising from want, besides other passions” (110). Malthus not only believed that want could never be eliminated because population growth would always outpace society’s ability to provide food for its growing population, he also believed that human nature was fundamentally shaped by this inevitable struggle for survival. Because he believed that competition for resources was a “fixed and unalterable” condition, human selfishness would always triumph over benevolence and a concern for the other. He argues that “[t]he mighty law of self-preservation expels all the softer and more exalted emotions of the soul” (80). While Godwin saw the presence of selfishness as an ethical problem to be solved, Malthus believed that the struggle for survival and its accompanying traits were a fundamental part of what makes us human. Malthus refuted Godwin’s assertion that man could be considered a wholly intellectual being. Malthus argues that while voluntary behaviors may arise from the will of the mind, these behaviors “will be very differently modified in *creatures compounded of a rational faculty and corporal propensities*, from what they would be in beings wholly intellectual” (103-4, my emphasis).

This idea of the “compound being” was central to Malthus: he believed that the growth and operation of the intellect could not be separated from the needs and desires of the body. As he rather eloquently argues, “As we shall all be disposed to agree that God is the creator of the

mind as well as the body; and as they both seem to be forming and unfolding themselves at the same time; it cannot appear inconsistent [...] to suppose that God is constantly occupied in forming mind out of matter” (143). This process of forming “mind out of matter” meant, for Malthus, the way in which the growth of intellectual capacity was tied to the attempt of man to meet his material needs. The wants of the body, he argues, “are the first great awakers of the mind” (144). Thus, the struggle for survival, along with all its accompanying “roughnesses and inequalities,” are what form the mental condition of man (144). For Malthus, the principle of selfishness which emerges from these conditions is not unethical, but a necessary part of human nature; he argues that it is the “apparently narrow principle of self-love” which is responsible for the creation of everything that “distinguishes the civilized form from the savage state” (118). Because our intellectual growth is spurred by the need for self-preservation, we have only advanced as a civilization because we are driven by bodily needs. Therefore, Godwin’s idea that humanity might advance through intellectual growth to a state of benevolence and equality was neither possible nor preferable. Humans, for Malthus, cannot be guided by pure reason; they are always subject to the needs of the body, as well as the passions and desires that arise from these needs. These bodily needs and desires would always fuel man’s innate tendency towards selfishness, and thus a benevolence fueled by the rational mind could never wholly triumph. Further, this selfishness was not in need of elimination: while Malthus was not blind to the pain caused by competition and inequality, he saw it as both an inevitably and also as the fundamental catalyst for human advancement.

#### Wells’s Martians

Wells draws from Malthus his belief that any imaginable social improvement for mankind could not be based on the idea that the humans would be fundamentally more ethical

than they currently were. Like the neo-Lamarckians, Godwin presents a notion of human perfectibility that is based on the idea that human beings would evolve to become more benevolent and altruistic as the society around them advanced away from a system based on economic competition and, through their advancement, would further contribute to the evolution of a more just society. While Godwin did not have recourse to evolutionary mechanisms, his notion of physiological perfectibility is based on the idea that ethical advancement is tied to a fundamental change in the human. Godwin's conception of physiological perfectibility is a culmination of what he sees as a process of interaction between a steadily progressing society and a steadily progressing human species. It is in this that he foreshadows the employment of Lamarckian mechanisms at the end of the nineteenth century to support the possibility of a socialist future. The parallel between Godwin and Morris, for instance, can easily be seen. Both saw economic competition as the root cause of the ethical failures of man and believed that equitable social conditions would lead to a virtual elimination of these failures. Both believed that the species as a whole, given the correct conditions of existence, could become more innately moral. While Morris's vision of perfectibility was not centered on rationality in the same way as Godwin's, in Wells's conception of the limitations of human advancement, both were committing the same miscalculation. Both were denying the immutability of natural man as a creature biologically defined by the struggle for existence. While Morris did not figure the suppression of the "animal function" as part of his ethical advancement, he still, in Wells's view, imagined an abstracted moral perfection that did not take into account the "animal" side of man, the part of his human nature that was governed by Malthus's "mighty law of self-preservation." With the creation of his Martians in *The War of the Worlds*, Wells marries Godwin's speculations of human perfectibility with Lamarckian mechanisms, thus drawing a direct line

between his critique of the socialist utopian speculations of the late nineteenth century and Malthus's critique of the "unrestrained speculation" of the 1790s.

When Wells's narrator first sees the Martians emerging from the cylinder in which they have travelled to Earth, he is overcome with "disgust and dread" by their monstrous appearance and fundamental inhumanity (55). While the narrator provides an initial description in this moment, it is only later in the novel, when he is trapped in a crumbling house with the Martians directly outside, that he is able to observe them in great detail. Since the narrator is relating his experience from the future, this description also incorporates knowledge learned through the autopsies performed on the Martian bodies in the wake of the failed invasion. The reader learns that the Martians are "huge round bodies—or rather, heads" with large eyes, no nose, and a lipless but beaked mouth that is surrounded by "whip-like tentacles"; these tentacles, the Martians' only appendages, function both as "hands" and as the Martians' means of locomotion (143). As the narrator relates, a study of Martian anatomy revealed the internal logic to this external series of oddities: the round homogeneity of the Martians is the product of the fact that they are "heads, merely heads. Entrails they have none" (144). The Martians are "practically mere brains" (148); they have lungs and a heart but none of the "glands and tubes and organs" that make up the human digestive system, no visible sex organs, and no limbs (144-5). Through both his own observations and studies performed after the invasion, the narrator learns that the Martians do not have digestive systems because they have evolved beyond the need to eat or digest solid food; instead, they inject the blood of other creatures directly into their veins (144). The absence of sex organs is explained by the fact that they have evolved a form of asexual reproduction in which their young simply "bud off" from the adult; and they no longer need external bodily structures, such as limbs, because they rely almost entirely on their technological

appliances, which function as exchangeable “bodies,” to perform their physical actions for them (145). The narrator further discovers that the Martians no longer need to sleep: because they “had no extensive muscular mechanisms to recuperate,” they had reached a level of energy efficiency that rendered this period of rest unnecessary (145). Thus, the narrator’s initial visual impression of the inhumanity of the Martians is confirmed by further knowledge. Not only do they appear as radically different beings, they are also removed from the scope of the most fundamental human needs and desires: they do not eat, have sex, engage in physical activity, or sleep.

While the narrator’s initial reaction to the Martians is one of fear and revulsion, both his time observing them and his retrospective viewpoint allow him to engage in more dispassionate speculation. He is no longer overcome with disgust, and his discussion of the Martians is tinged with a tone of respect, perhaps even admiration. In regards to the Martian practice of blood injection, he notes that the “physiological advantages of the practice of injection are undeniable, if one thinks of the tremendous waste of human time and energy occasioned by eating and the digestive process” (144). Humans, he proposes, are slaves to our digestive systems: “Men go happy or miserable as they have healthy or unhealthy livers, or sound gastric glands,” while the Martians “were lifted above all these organic fluctuations of mood and emotion” (145). That the Martians have moved beyond eating is presented as an evolutionary advantage: they are freed from the drain of both physical and emotional energy that eating and digestion entail. Likewise, the narrator notes that in being “absolutely without sex,” the Martians have “freed themselves from the tumultuous emotions that arise from that difference among men” (145). The narrator notes also that the lack of sleep makes them more efficient and productive; they can perform “twenty-four hours of work” in a day (145). They are also not subject to the physical stresses and limitations of disease; they exist in a world free from “all the fevers and contagions of human

life” (147). The Martians are thus presented as, in important ways, superior: they lead, it is suggested, a more peaceful existence, untroubled by much of the stress and conflict that mars the life of man, and they are more physiologically efficient, allowing them to channel their saved energy into greater mental and material productivity. This analysis leads the narrator to speculate that the Martians might be a more highly-evolved species than humans, one that has “descended from beings not unlike ourselves” (146).

A straight reading of the narrator’s tone in this section might suggest that the Martians represent the positive potential of human evolution, but it is important here to remember that the narrator does not speak for Wells himself.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the narrator’s reference in this section to Wells’s own essay, “The Man of the Year Million,” highlights the way in which Wells’s own attitude towards the Martians as figures of human evolution differs from that of the narrator. As the narrator admits, the essay he references was written in a “foolish facetious tone” (146), and a reading of the essay certainly supports this assessment. In “The Man of the Year Million,” Wells presents the text as being written by a fictitious professor named Holzkopf who has written a treatise “severely scientific” in nature from which he is merely extracting the less technical parts for the “unscientific reader”; that this is meant to satirize the idea that there could be any credible scientific support for his speculations is made clear by Wells’s sidelong allusion to the fact that the professor “has access to the only copy” of this scientific work, which implies that it has never been seen and certainly not vetted by other scientists (4). The professor’s speculations are based on the fundamental hypothesis that “man is a creature of the brain; he will live by intelligence, and not by physical strength, if he live at all. So that much which is purely ‘animal’ about him is being, and must be, beyond all question, suppressed in his ultimate development” (4). While this

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<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Malia, in “Public Imbecility and Journalistic Enterprise,” argues, in a different but related context, that Wells is satirizing his narrator’s scientific views and presents him as unreliable (88).

statement is not, in itself, ludicrous, the images of future man which arise from it are clearly marked by a satirical tone: “Great hands they have, enormous brains, soft, liquid, soulful eyes. Their whole muscular system, their legs, their abdomens, are shriveled to nothing, a dangling, degraded pendant to their minds” (8). Future man, in the name of efficiency, has freed himself from the burden of digestion and instead “nourish[es] himself in elegant simplicity by immersion in a tub of nutrient fluid” (8). Wells has Holzkopf conclude “The Man of the Year Million” with the assertion that in his virtually bodiless future, “the irrational fellowship of man will give way to an intellectual co-operation” (8). Wells presents the possibility of “intellectual co-operation” on a large social scale as necessarily involving a disappearance of the human body, an end to the physical imperatives that structure human nature.

While in Godwin’s conception of human perfectibility, the body has not been rendered superfluous, the physical disappearance of the Martian body in many ways echoes the decreasing importance of bodily imperatives that Godwin’s speculations propose. While, in Godwin’s conception, the body still exists, its role in human existence has been virtually superseded by the life of the mind. The passions of the body, the sensual pleasures of eating and sex, have been wholly displaced by the “more exquisite” pleasures of the mind. The meeting of bodily needs has been reduced to a bare minimum; the body is essentially sustained as a structure to house the mind. The body no longer acts by its own laws; its actions are instead dictated by the rational faculty. The way in which this control of mind over body manifests itself in Godwin’s future man contains striking parallels to the way in which Martian evolution has involved the physical withering away of their bodies. While Godwin’s men of the future have not eliminated the need to eat altogether, they have reduced eating to a sensually-deprived action that is performed solely to survive in a way that parallels the efficient injection system of the Martians. Like the



Martians, Godwin's men of the future have become virtually sexless creatures; they will have at least reduced sex to a passionless, rational act performed in the service of procreation, if not eliminated it entirely. Both the Martians and Godwin's men of the future have so mastered their bodies that they have moved beyond the need for sleep and are no longer victims to disease and infirmities. While the Martians are certainly not immortal, they do, initially, represent a figure of invincibility. The vulnerability of their bodies has been largely eradicated by their technological advancements; it is the products of the mind which protect the body. What makes this connection between Godwin and Wells perhaps most striking, however, is their shared underlying language of economy and sense that the subjection of the body is necessary for mental development to proceed. Wells's narrator echoes Godwin's language of efficiency and prioritization: the superiority of the Martian intellect has been made possible because they have eliminated "the tremendous waste of human time and energy occasioned by eating and the digestive process" and "freed themselves from the tumultuous emotions" that are associated with sex. What Wells's narrator calls the "animal side of the organism" and Godwin almost identically refers to as the "animal function" must be suppressed if the perfection of the rational and intellectual faculties is ever to be attained.

Wells's Martians can thus be read as a literalized representation of the subjugation of the body proposed by Godwin. In order to achieve this imagery, Wells turns to the well-known Lamarckian conception that the organs would become weakened or strengthened through the mechanism of use-inheritance. The brain, as the only organ of any importance, has continued to grow larger and larger, while the other organs, rendered superfluous by the continual recourse to intellect and invention, have been virtually eliminated. While "The Man of the Year Million" has a humorous tone, Wells employs the figure of the alien to create a horrifying and grotesque

parody of human perfectibility. Darko Suvin argues that Wells, at his best, was especially skilled at producing the “cognitive shudder” unique to science fiction that is achieved through the “shocking transmutation of science into aesthetic cognition” (220). In *TWOTW*, Wells employs Lamarckian mechanisms to enact this “shocking transmutation.” Suvin sees the bourgeois reader as the primary target of Wells sophisticated shock mechanisms (217), but the grotesque giant brains and shriveled bodies of the Martians seem to be aimed specifically at discomforting those of his contemporaries who saw in Lamarckian mechanisms the possibility of a more perfect human. While the neo-Lamarckian socialists were concerned with an ethical evolution that did not require, as in Godwin’s conception, a suppression of bodily desires and imperatives, Wells saw their attempts to envision a morally perfected human as necessarily suppressing the biologically-established traits of natural man. The disturbing inhumanity of the Martians is a testament to the fact that, for Wells, the attempts by neo-Lamarckians to imagine a morally evolved human were reenacting the erasure of the innate characteristics of natural man in a way that paralleled the more overt dismissal of human bodily imperatives in Godwin’s conception of an ethical evolution driven by rationality.

That the Martians, despite all their intellectual and technological advancement, are driven to Earth by the need for basic survival and ultimately defeated by the bodies they have virtually eliminated is a testament to the triumph of Malthusian Darwinism. The Martians invade Earth because they can no longer survive on their own planet, which is being rendered uninhabitable by a process of “secular cooling” (42). Their intellect has not saved them from the struggle for survival and the necessarily aggressive and self-interested behavior that arises in their competition for resources with the people of Earth. The novel further emphasizes the Malthusian component of the Martian invasion by highlighting that the Martians have chosen Earth, after

careful observation, because the humans will provide a food source similar to the one on their home planet (41, 145). Despite the fact that the Martians have evolved past the need to eat and digest, their existence is still predicated on the need to acquire sustenance. Not only are the Martians driven to Earth by the needs of basic physical survival, they are also defeated by the vulnerability of their bodies. While their technology makes the Martians seemingly invincible, as overwhelmingly powerful in relationship to human beings as human beings are to ants (167), their “artificial” strength cannot protect them from their “natural” weakness. After “all man’s devises had failed,” the Martians are killed by “the putrefactive and disease bacteria against which their systems were unprepared” (181). Due to an absence of bacteria on Mars, the Martian body had no defense against the Earthly bacteria; thus, they were “irrevocably doomed, dying and rotting even as they went to and fro” (181). The defeat of the Martians thus represents a justification of the Malthusian critique that even the “brightest and most energetic intellects” will always ultimately yield their “empire” to the body.

At the time of the Martian invasion, Wells’s narrator is writing a treatise “on the probable development of the Moral Ideas with the development of the civilizing process” (187). As Mark Rose notes: “The Martian invasion interrupts the narrator’s work midsentence, evidently just as he was about to sketch an advanced and humane future; instead of a version of utopia, the narrator is compelled to portray the collapse of a society and the reduction of men to anonymous creatures, scabbling like animals to remain alive” (69). While the vision of human beings “scabbling like animals to remain alive” may have undermined the narrator’s vision of human progress, this paper has argued that it is Wells’s Martians which serve to critique ideas of human ethical advancement. It is not the reduction of the humans to animalistic behaviors that disrupts the vision of a utopian future in the novel, but rather the Martians as figures of a future humanity

that has been stripped of its “animal” body. That Wells’s narrator is writing a treatise on the progressive development of “Moral Ideas” connects the novel directly to the kind of speculation concerning ethical evolution that Wells was countering in the neo-Lamarckian socialists. For Wells, as for Malthus, man was subject to a dual existence. Malthus expresses this duality in his conception of the “compound being,” the idea that the activity of the mind is inseparable from the activity of the body. For Wells, this duality is figured as the embodied presence in the human of both “natural” and “artificial” man. Both saw speculations on the perfectibility of man as engaging in a denial of this duality. While Godwin and Malthus were writing before the work of Lamarck and Darwin, their debate over the possibility of the progressive moral improvement of man is as grounded in the biological as the debates between Wells and his neo-Lamarckian contemporaries. While the connection between Malthus and the Darwinian debates of the late nineteenth century is well-established, Wells brings Godwin into these same debates, drawing a previously overlooked connection between Godwin’s speculations of human perfectibility and those of the neo-Lamarckian socialists. Wells sees in Godwin’s economy of human energy, his notion that the “animal function” must be diminished to allow for the growth of the human intellect, an admittance of the necessary tension between natural and artificial man that neo-Lamarckian socialists like Morris obscured. For Wells, Morris’s imagining of a more ethically perfect human involved a necessary rejection of an essential part of what it means to be human. In creating his grotesquely inhuman Martians, Wells calls to attention the fact that part of what makes us human are the needs and desires that arise from our “animal function.”

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