

Throughout this chapter and elsewhere I have spoken of selection as the paramount power, yet its action absolutely depends on what we in our ignorance call spontaneous or accidental variability. Let an architect be compelled to build an edifice with uncut stones, fallen from a precipice. The shape of each fragment may be called accidental; yet the shape of each has been determined by the force of gravity, the nature of the rock, and the slope of the precipice,—events and circumstances, all of which depend on natural laws; but there is no relation between these laws and the purpose for which each fragment is used by the builder. In the same manner the variations of each creature are determined by fixed and immutable laws; but these bear no relation to the living structure which is slowly built up through the power of selection, whether this be natural or artificial selection.

If our architect succeeded in rearing a noble edifice, using the rough wedge-shaped fragments for the arches, the longer stones for the lintels, and so forth, we should admire his skill even in a higher degree than if he had used stones shaped for the purpose. So it is with selection, whether applied by man or by nature; for although variability is indispensably necessary, yet, when we look at some highly complex and excellently adapted organism, variability sinks to a quite subordinate position in importance in comparison with selection, in the same manner as the shape of each fragment used by our supposed architect is unimportant in comparison with his skill.