August Friedrich Leopold Weismann (1834-1914) [1]

By: Zou, Yawen Keywords: Germ-plasm [2] Germinal selection [3]

August Friedrich Leopold Weismann studied how the traits of organisms developed and evolved in a variety of organisms, mostly insects [4] and aquatic animals, in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Weismann proposed the theory of the continuity of germ-plasm, a theory of heredity. Weismann postulated that germ-plasm was the hereditary material in cells, and parents transmitted to their offspring only the germ-plasm present in germ-cells (sperm [5] and egg [6] cells) rather than somatic or body cells. Weismann also promoted Charles Darwin's 1859 theory of the evolution [8] of species. Weismann argued that only changes to the germ cells [9], and not body cells, could be inherited, a theory that influenced theories of heredity throughout later centuries.

Weismann was born on 17 January 1834 in Frankfurt am Main, in the German Confederation. His mother, Elise Eleanore Lübren, was a musician and painter, and his father, Johann Konrad August Weismann [10], was a classics professor. Weismann studied music, particularly the works of Beethoven, and he studied nature, from which he collected butterflies. He noted diverse patterns and colors of butterflies, information that later informed his research on the development and evolution [8] of butterflies and caterpillars.

In 1856 Weismann got his medical degree from the University of Göttingen in Göttingen, in the German Confederation. After graduation, Weismann worked as an assistant in a hospital for three years in Rostock, in the German Confederation, before becoming a physician in Frankfurt am Main in 1859. From 1861 to 1863, Weismann was the private physician for Archduke Stephen of Austria. In 1861, Weismann studied at the University of Giessen in Giessen in the German Confederation, with Rudolf Leuckart [11] for two months, working on the ontogeny [12] (development) and morphology [13] (form) of animals, insects [4] in particular. That year, Weismann read Charles Darwin's [7] On the Origin of Species two years after it was published in 1859, after which he adopted evolutionary theory. Weismann studied different factors he thought might cause morphological transformations in insects [4], including natural selection [14].

In 1863, Weismann became a docent in zoology and comparative anatomy, a mid-ranking academic position, in the University of Freiburg [15] in Freiburg im Breisgau, also in the German Confederation. In 1864, Weismann's eyesight declined, which left him partially blind and limited his ability to use microscopes. Nonetheless, he studied the metamorphosis [16] and development of butterflies.

Weismann became the founding director of the Zoological Institute at the University of Freiburg [15] in 1867. That year, he married Marie Dorothea Gruber from Genoa, Italy. The couple had at least five children. Along with his students and assistants, Marie aided his experimental and observational studies after his eyesight failed. Marie died in 1886, but Weismann remarried at the age of sixty in the mid-1890s to Willemina Tesse from the Netherlands, a marriage that lasted six years.

In 1868, Weismann delivered a lecture: "Über die Berechtigung der Darwin'schen Theorie" ("On the Validity of the Darwinian Theory"), in which he argued that the evolution [8] of new species occurred by natural selection [14]. From 1868 to 1872, he debated with Moritz Wagner of the University of Munich in Munich, Germany, about the role of geographic isolation in speciation. Weismann agreed with Darwin that natural selection [14] and sexual selection alone could explain how species diverged from one another, whereas Wagner argued that geographical isolation of populations was necessary for speciation. That debate was one of Weismann's earliest public debates about the theory of natural selection [14].

In 1872, that debate culminated in a monograph by Weismann on Wagner's theories, called Über den Einflus der Isolierung auf die Artbildung (On the Influence of Isolation on Speciation). Weismann argued that natural selection [14] played a significant role in the development of organisms. Edwin G. Conklin, a biologist who studied evolution [8] and development in the US, said in 1895 that Weismann appeared more Darwinian than Darwin about natural selection [14]. Weismann taught evolutionary theory for more than forty years, and he published books on evolutionary theory.

Weismann's eyesight improved after 1871, so he resumed his microscopic studies. He studied the metamorphosis [16] of butterflies, especially how changes in environmental conditions such as temperature caused variations in the wings of butterflies. Other studies dealt with the markings of caterpillars and the metamorphosis [16] of Axolotl [17], also known as the Mexican salamander [18]. These works culminated in a two-volume account published in 1875 and 1876 titled Studien zur Descendenz-Theorie (Studies on the Theory of Descent). From 1878 to 1883, he investigated how sex cells were generated in
Weismann postulated that variations resulted from different combinations of determinants in one organism to vary from those in another and whether or not such variation was random or generated in a definite direction.

In 1896, based on his germ-plasm theory, Weismann proposed the theory of germinal selection as an extension to the theory of evolution by natural selection. In Über Germinal-Selection: eine Quelle bestimmter gerichteter Variation (On Germinal Selection as a Source of Definite Variation), Weismann proposed that germinal selection applied to the biophors and determinants in the germ cells even before those cells joined to form a zygote. At that time, biologists debated what caused the traits in one organism to vary from those in another and whether or not such variation was random or generated in a definite direction. Weismann postulated that variations resulted from different combinations of determinants in germ cells. The stronger half came from the father's germ cell. That theory explained why the offspring had traits that resembled those in the mother and those in the father.
Weismann argued that the germinal selection created adaptive rather than simply random variations. Weismann used his theory to explain the loss of useless organs, such as the eyes of blind cave fish, during development, by suggesting that germinal selection eliminated the determinants for those organs. Weismann acknowledged that external factors, such as environmental factors, could play a role in development of organisms. But his theory of germinal selection enabled him to explain how new variations of traits in organisms arose even when changes to determinants did not pass from parents to offspring. Only variations to the determinants housed in the germ cells, affected by changes in nutrition, could be passed on to the next generation.

Weismann received numerous awards, including the Linnaean Society of London's Darwin-Wallace Medal in 1908, and the Darwin Medal from the Royal Society of London in 1909. Weismann died on 5 November 1914.

Sources

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