THE MECHANISM

OF

MENDELIAN HEREDITY
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PREFACE

From ancient times heredity has been looked upon as one of the central problems of biological philosophy. It is true that this interest was largely speculative rather than empirical. But since Mendel’s discovery of the fundamental law of heredity in 1865, or rather since its re-discovery in 1900, a curious situation has begun to develop. The students of heredity calling themselves geneticists have begun to draw away from the traditional fields of zoology and botany, and have concentrated their attention on the study of Mendel’s principles and their later developments. The results of these investigators appear largely in special journals. Their terminology is often regarded by other zoologists as something barbarous,—outside the ordinary routine of their profession. The tendency is to regard genetics as a subject for specialists instead of an all-important theme of zoology and botany. No doubt this is but a passing phase; for biologists can little afford to hand over to a special group of investigators a part of their field that is and always will be of vital import. It would be as unfortunate for all biologists to remain ignorant of the modern advances in the study of heredity as it would be for the geneticists to remain unconcerned vii
as to the value for their own work of many special fields of biological inquiry. What is fundamental in zoology and botany is not so extensive, or so intrinsically difficult, that a man equipped for his profession should not be able to compass it.

In the following pages we have attempted to separate those questions that seem to us significant from that which is special or merely technical. We have, of course, put our own interpretation on the facts, and while this may not be agreed to on all sides, yet we believe that in what is essential we have not departed from the point of view that is held by many of our co-workers at the present time. Exception may perhaps be taken to the emphasis we have laid on the chromosomes as the material basis of inheritance. Whether we are right here, the future—probably a very near future—will decide. But it should not pass unnoticed that even if the chromosome theory be denied, there is no result dealt with in the following pages that may not be treated independently of the chromosomes; for, we have made no assumption concerning heredity that cannot also be made abstractly without the chromosomes as bearers of the postulated hereditary factors. Why then, we are often asked, do you drag in the chromosomes? Our answer is that since the chromosomes furnish exactly the kind of mechanism that the Mendelian laws call for; and since there is an ever-increasing body of information that points clearly to the chromosomes as the bearers of the
Mendelian factors, it would be folly to close one's eyes to so patent a relation. Moreover, as biologists, we are interested in heredity not primarily as a mathematical formulation but rather as a problem concerning the cell, the egg, and the sperm.

T. H. M.
CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

MENDELIAN SEGREGATION AND THE CHROMOSOMES

Introduction. The Groups of Linked Factors and the Chromosomes .................. 1
The Inheritance of One Pair of Factors ............................................. 8
The Inheritance of Two or more Pairs of Factors ................................. 20

CHAPTER II

TYPES OF MENDELIAN HEREDITY

Dominance and Recessiveness ....................................................... 27
Manifold Effects of Single Factors ............................................... 32
Similar Effects Produced by Different Factors ................................. 36
 Modification of the Effects of Factors .......................................... 38
   I. By Environmental Influences .............................................. 38
   II. By Developmental Influences ........................................... 42
   III. By the Influence of Other Factors .................................... 45
   IV. Conclusion ........................................................................ 46

CHAPTER III

LINKAGE

Examples Illustrating “Coupling” .................................................. 48
Examples Illustrating “Repulsion” .................................................. 51
Examples of Different Frequencies of Crossing Over .......................... 52
The Mechanism of Crossing Over .................................................. 59
Double Crossing Over ................................................................. 62
The Principle of Interference ....................................................... 64
The Linear Arrangement of Factors shown by Linkage Relations ...... 64
Linkage in Other Animals and in Plants ........................................ 70
The Reduplication Hypothesis ..................................................... 74
CONTENTS

CHAPTER IV

SEX INHERITANCE

The Drosophila or XX-XY Type ........................................... 78
The Abaxas or WZ-ZZ Type ................................................ 83
What are Sex Factors? ...................................................... 90

CHAPTER V

THE CHROMOSOMES AS BEARERS OF HEREDITARY
MATERIAL

The Evidence from Embryology .......................................... 108
The Individuality of the Chromosomes ............................... 118
The Chromosomes during the Maturation of the Germ Cells ... 122
Crossing Over ................................................................. 131
Cytoplasmic Inheritance ................................................... 135

CHAPTER VI

THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THE DISTRIBUTION OF
THE CHROMOSOMES AND OF THE GENETIC FACTORS

Parallelism between the Distribution of Chromosomes and of Factors 140
1. In Cases of Normal Distribution ...................................... 140
2. In Crosses between Species ............................................. 141
3. In Mutant Races ........................................................... 146
4. Tetraploid Races ......................................................... 147
Identity of Distribution of the X-chromosomes and of Sex-
linked Factors ............................................................... 148
1. In Ordinary Crosses ..................................................... 148
2. In Cases of Non-disjunction ............................................. 149

CHAPTER VII

MULTIPLE ALLELOMORPHS

Definition of Multiple Alleломorphs ................................... 155
Examples of Multiple Alleломorphs .................................... 155
The Alternative Interpretations of Identical Loci and Complete
Linkage ........................................................................... 157
# CONTENTS

**CHAPTER VIII**

**MULTIPLE FACTORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Meaning of the term &quot;Multiple Factors&quot;</th>
<th>172</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examples of Multiple Factors</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection and Multiple Factors</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER IX**

**THE FACTORIAL HYPOTHESIS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On the Relation between Factors and Characters</th>
<th>208</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The Organism-as-a-Whole Objection</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Invariability of the Factor and the Variability in the Character</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. So-called Contamination of Allelomorphs</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Fractionation</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The Presence and Absence Hypothesis</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weismann's Præformation Hypothesis and the Factorial Theory 223

**APPENDIX**

| Methods of Breeding Drosophila                | 229 |
| Acknowledgments                              | 235 |
| Bibliography                                 | 237 |

**INDEX** 259