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THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE DARWINIAN ETHICS AND ITS PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS¹

By Dr. S. J. HOLMES

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It not infrequently happens that when one is called upon to deliver a presidential address he chooses a subject quite outside his own field of competence. This procedure has its dangers, of course, especially for the naive and unwary. In extenuation of my own intrepidity in venturing to discuss Darwinian ethics I may explain that in spite of the extensive literature which this subject has called forth it has rarely received adequate treatment and is not infrequently grossly misrepresented. Few people who accept the Darwinian theory

¹ Presidential address before the Western Division of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Stanford University, June 27, 1939.

of evolution realize its far-reaching import, especially in the social sciences. Sir Arthur Keith has remarked that "even our leading biologists and masters of history are evolutionists only from the lips outwards." The same statement is even more applicable to writers on ethics. Although there has been a number of relatively scholarly discussions of Darwin's views, in most books on morals the Darwinian standpoint is presented, if at all, in a few words, followed by a more elaborate criticism of the ethics of Spencer, which has commonly been treated as typifying the ethics of evolution. The subject has now lost its novelty. Ethics is still closely affiliated with metaphysics and theology, and Darwin,

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