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[p. 12a]

‘Darwinism.’¹

It would be impossible to overrate the service which Mr. Wallace, the co-discoverer of Darwinism, has done in publishing this volume; nor can we overlook the magnanimity displayed in his undertaking the task which he has so successfully accomplished. It is 30 years since Darwin published his work “On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection, and the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life.” We need not recall the excitement caused at the time by its publication, nor the extent to which it has influenced all thought. Darwin himself developed and modified to some slight extent the doctrines of his initial volume in a further series of works giving the results of half a century of patient and keen investigation; so that any one desirous of understanding precisely what Darwinism is, as it left the hands of its author, would have to study some 20 volumes of minute research and close reasoning. Very few, however, it is to be feared, go to the original source for their knowledge of what Darwinism is. The majority even of intelligent people pick up this knowledge in casual ways, and learn what Darwinism is, not directly from its author, but from others, who, from ignorance, prejudice, or self-conceit, are inadequate or misleading expounders of the doctrine. The doctrine was scarcely launched into the world of thought before the friends and the disciples of its author, under the pretext of improving upon it or rendering it more adequate to explain the facts, subjected it to all sorts of modification, pressed it into all forms of curious moulds of their own invention, which the world generally has uninquiringly accepted as “Darwinism.” Few of these interpreters or supplementers of the original theory have had the patience of the master; what Darwin attained after the drudgery of a lifetime, they have in the main attempted to evolve from their own consciousness. The simple and easily intelligible doctrine of natural selection has been ingeniously changed into physiological and other selections. Darwin has been accused by his friends of overlooking quite a number of influences and factors, which aspiring young biologists have made haste to supply, in the faint hope, possibly, that they would be recognized as the inheritors of the prophet’s mantle. Apart from this, the reader need scarcely be reminded, tremendous conclusions in all directions have been put forth either as “Darwinism” or as legitimate deductions from the original theory. It is not to be wondered at, then, that even among thinking men the most confused and often the most erroneous notions exist as to what Darwinism really is. Hence the value of the service done by Mr. Wallace in the volume just published. He has written what may be accepted as a text-book of Darwinism. He has taken the score of volumes in which Darwin recorded the results of his long and varied researches and the conclusions to be drawn therefrom, and has condensed them into one volume of 500 pages. He has done this in a style which makes his book a delight to read. In language that is absolutely clear, simple, untechnical, and attractive, Mr. Wallace leads us throughout the new world opened out by Darwin. The method and orderliness of the exposition are admirable; the manner in which the facts and conclusions are arrayed will strike the most casual reader.

Mr. Wallace tells us his aim has been to take us back to Darwinism pure and simple, to the doctrines which accounted for the origin of species by means of natural selection and the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life. What the origin of species means, what natural selection means, what the struggle for life means, he expounds with a simplicity and clearness which render misconception

impossible. Mr. Wallace does not content himself with simply epitomizing and expounding the case as left by Darwin. Since Darwin wrote many new facts have been brought to light by a multitude of workers, which not only confirm the doctrines maintained by him, but throw a flood of light on important points on which he either remained in doubt or was compelled to leave obscure. Take the one fact of variation; the fact, that with a general resemblance of progeny to parents there is also great variety, giving ample room for the operation of natural selection. Darwin himself was not aware, apparently, of the immense extent and the many-sidedness of this variation. Mr. Wallace shows and proves, diagrammatically and otherwise, on the basis of recent researches, that in every organ of every individual belonging to any species there is a variety which is almost bewildering, giving room for much more rapid change under the operation of natural selection than Darwin had any idea of. In other directions Mr. Wallace gives the results of recent research, all, however, with the object of proving the truth and beauty of the Darwinian doctrine.

It must not, however, be thought that Mr. Wallace is entirely uncritical. He does not hesitate to point out any modifications rendered desirable by new lights, and on one particular point he expresses his decided dissent from the position taken by Darwin. He deals in detail with all the leading objections taken to Darwinism, and especially with the various attempts that have been made to develop (as it is called) the Darwinian theory, or to raise to prime importance factors which he shows are only subordinate to the great principle of variation and natural selection. The principles insisted on by such writers as Mr. Spencer, Dr. Romanes, Mr. Geddes, Dr. Weissmann, and others Mr. Wallace admits are no doubt factors in evolution, but, as he points out, they are factors which all play into the hands of the great Darwinian principle. The tone in which he criticizes the rival theories of others is admirable in its self-restraint and courtesy, and in marked contrast to the violent language indulged in by smaller controversialists. When we consider the relation of Mr. Wallace to Darwinism, that he was himself an independent discoverer of the great principle associated with the name of Darwin, and might with some justice have expounded the theory on his own account, his perfect loyalty to the great master in this volume is magnanimous.

There is only one section in which Mr. Wallace can be accused of allowing the personal equation to prevail. All readers of this volume will turn with special interest to the concluding chapter, which deals with Darwinism applied to Man. The relations of man to the lower animals, his antiquity, his probable origin, and certain other points, not the most extreme Darwinian could object to. Mr. Wallace suggests that the original home of man was probably somewhere in the enormous plateaus extending from Persia right across Tibet and Siberia to Manchuria. Here, therefore, it would seem advisable that research should be made for sub-fossil human remains. All the great objections to the application of Darwinism to man Mr. Wallace meets and answers. He recognizes distinctly the importance of geographical changes in modifying climate, and he maintains the essential permanence of the continents and oceans.

It is well known that in accounting for the mental and spiritual nature of man Mr. Wallace introduced an element which Darwin did not admit, an element distinct from natural selection. In the concluding chapter Mr. Wallace maintains his old position, but states it in a way that will probably render its acceptance less objectionable to thoroughgoing Darwinians, while at the same time it will greatly relieve many who dread the ultimate outcome of the doctrine. Mr. Wallace adduces the glacial period as compared with the ordinary effects of wind and weather, of rivers and oceans in sculpturing the land, as analogical to the additional influence on which he insists as necessary to account for the mental and spiritual faculties of humanity. But the action of ice is quite as natural a force as the action of running

water; they are both manifestations of the ordinary powers of nature. All the forces referred to are essentially of the same kind. The glacial epoch was simply an intense example of the effects of a cause at work every day, and not the result of a perfectly new force introduced without any precedents leading up to it. The whole of this chapter deserves careful study. Mr. Wallace never loses his temperateness of expression, and what he has written we are sure will bring consolation to many hundreds of readers. Darwinism has revolutionized thought in all directions; and no more perfect or more readable exposition of the doctrine as Darwin left it exists than is contained in this volume by one who, more than any one else, is in a position to place himself inside of the whole subject.

¹“Darwinism, an Exposition of the Theory of Natural Selection, with some of its Applications.” By Alfred Russel Wallace. London: Macmillan and Co. 1889.

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The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2015.