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‘Other Worlds. Is Earth the Only Peopled Planet?’

The views of the distinguished Principal of Birmingham University have a special value and interest. Sir Oliver Lodge writes:

In so far as Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace points out the delicate planetary adjustments necessary for the support of terrestrial human life, and the remarkable character of the long ages of preparation through which the earth had gone before that result was achieved; in so far also as he emphasises the fact that we can now take our share in consciously improving the conditions, and in providing not only pure water, but pure and smokeless air, for every inhabitant of the British Isles, I am heartily with him.

But when he goes on to argue that the earth is probably the only inhabited planet in space, I entirely fail to follow him. It may indeed be the only inhabited planet of the solar system; that is not improbable, because for by far the greater part even of the earth’s history it was, in the human sense, “uninhabited.” The period of man’s existence on it is comparatively short, and so it may be said that taking any planet at random the probabilities are strongly against its being in a state at all corresponding to what may be called a human period.

But to suppose that of all the myriads of solid bodies in space this particular lump of matter is the only one inhabited by intelligent beings seems to me—if, with all due respect to so great a man, I may so express it—absurd.

I say nothing about Dr. Wallace’s biological arguments, but I feel bound to say that his astronomical arguments appear to me to be of a futile description; and I would urge that whether we happen to be somewhere near the middle of the Milky Way cluster, or in some other part of it, at the present time, is a matter which makes no difference at all.

The only gravitation that we effectively feel is the gravitation of the earth; the only active radiation is the radiation of the sun; and what our relation may be to the almost infinitely distant stellar components of our cluster is absolutely beside the mark, in my judgment, since they exert no perceptible influence at all, except on our minds and intelligence; and their influence there is to suggest enormous possibilities of other existences than our own.

Oliver Lodge.

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