

Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 13: Wallace on Prayer.

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Summary: Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) is known to most for his natural history explorations and theoretical biology, but he also developed thoughts on a number of subjects relatable to a wider appreciation of evolutionary cosmology. His adoption of spiritualism, for one, was attuned to this mission, and in turn his otherwise difficult-to-interpret two-sided position on prayer. *Key words:* spiritualism, prayer, selflessness, selfishness, evolution, gambling, Alfred Russel Wallace

Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913), celebrated for his fundamental contributions to the studies of evolution and biogeography, is less known for his other concerns, of which, nevertheless, there were many. These ranged from social criticism and land planning, to economics and spiritualism. In fact, the very range of his interests has proved a problem for historians, especially those who attempt to examine portions of his thought in relative isolation. As a result, he has often been accused of inconsistency, though I would maintain that his critics have too often been unable to ‘see the forest for the trees’ in related appraisals.

In this brief note I should like to examine Wallace’s varying appreciation of prayer; at times he seems to support its efficacy, while at others he appears a good deal less enthusiastic about its practice. It turns out, however, he is more consistent on this matter than he initially appears to be.

We begin with one of his own utterances on this issue, and some relevant comments on these by another observer.

Wallace’s first discussion of the efficacy of prayer appears in his well-known treatise on spiritualism, ‘A Defence of Modern Spiritualism,’ in 1874:

The recently discussed question of the efficacy of prayer receives a perfect solution by Spiritualism. Prayer may be often answered, though not directly by the Deity. Nor does the answer depend wholly on the morality or the religion of the petitioner; but as men who are both moral and religious, and are firm believers in a divine response to prayer, will pray more frequently, more earnestly, and more disinterestedly, they will attract towards them a number of spiritual beings who sympathise with them, and who, when the necessary mediumistic power is present, will be able, as they are often willing, to answer the prayer. A striking case is that of George Müller, of Bristol, who has now for forty-four years depended wholly for his own support, and that of his wonderful charities, on answer to prayer. . . . He never asked any one or allowed any one to be asked, directly or indirectly, for a penny. No subscriptions or collections were ever made; yet from 1830 (when he married without any income whatever) he has lived, brought up a family, and established institutions which have steadily increased, till now four thousand orphan children are educated and in part supported. It has happened hundreds of times, that there has been no food in his house and no money to buy any, or no food or milk or sugar for the children.

Yet he never took a loaf or any other article on credit even for a day; and during the thirty years over which his narrative extends, neither he nor the hundreds of children dependent upon him for their daily food have ever been without a regular meal! They have lived, literally, from hand to mouth; and his one and only resource has been secret prayer. . . . The spiritualist explains all this as a personal influence. The perfect simplicity, faith, boundless charity, and goodness of George Müller, have enlisted in his cause beings of a like nature; and his mediumistic powers have enabled them to work for him by influencing others to send him money, food, clothes, &c., all arriving, as we should say, just in the nick of time. The numerous letters he received with these gifts, describing the sudden and uncontrollable impulse the donors felt to send him a certain definite sum at a certain fixed time, such being the exact sum he was in want of, and had prayed for, strikingly illustrates the nature of the power at work. All this might be explained away, if it were partial and discontinuous; but when it continued to supply the daily wants of a life of unexampled charity, for which no provision in advance was ever made (for that Müller considered would show want of trust in God), no such explanation can cover the facts. (Wallace 1874, pp. 799-800)

An immediate reaction to these words might be that they fall a bit heavy on interpretation, and a bit light on proof. Indeed, shortly after they appeared they were criticized by an anonymous writer in the magazine *London Society*:

. . . Now Mr. Wallace's explanation of Mr. Müller's success is, that his large-hearted charity attracted a number of spiritual beings towards him, and that they acted upon material wealthy beings, who suddenly felt themselves impelled to send large donations to Mr. George Müller. But is it not much simpler to believe, as apparently Mr. Müller himself believes, that the Almighty heard his prayers and answered them, without our calling in the aid of mediumistic powers for an explanation? The simplest Christian believes that the Holy Spirit of God suggests good and benevolent thoughts, and the mere reading of the 'Narrative of some of the Lord's Dealings with George Müller' may satisfactorily explain the wealth that has flowed in upon him, without calling in supernatural agencies. Without detracting from the efficacy of prayer, we may express a hope that the pecuniary success which has attended Mr. Müller's wrestlings will not at once induce a large number of young men to marry with no more substantial marriage settlement than Mr. Müller could give, or it is to be feared that pauperism will largely increase. (Anonymous 1874, pp. 89-90)

So, it is argued here, why bother considering the idea of an intervening intelligence, when all we need to assume is that God is there when we need Him? An impartial judge might be inclined to observe that the anonymous replier's position is actually no more defensible: still, play of the 'no middleman' card here does expose the weakness that Wallace's words contain no stated larger context.

Nevertheless, many years later, Wallace, when interviewed, gave some indication that his position on this matter had not changed much:

"Your use of the word 'mind,' doctor, leads me to ask if you think events can be influenced by prayer?" [Wallace:] "I think prayer does affect those nearest and dearest to us who have died, and that they can in turn affect us. I think there is every bit as much evidence in support of this as there is for what are called scientific facts. There are innumerable and well-authenticated instances of warnings given of events that

subsequently occurred which, if acted upon, would have saved from accident or death. But unbelievers do not examine the evidence.” (anonymous 1911, p. 1)

But something is still missing here, as it was some years earlier when he implied that in practice the basic causal sequence attached to conventional religious belief contained some flaws:

Religious belief would, on the other hand, furnish an adequate incentive to morality, if it were so firmly held and fully realised as to be constantly present to the mind in all its dread reality. But, as a matter of fact, it produces little effect of the kind, and we must impute this, not to any shadow of doubt as to the reality of future rewards and punishments, but rather to the undue importance attached to belief, to prayer, to church-going, and to repentance, which are often held to be sufficient to ensure salvation, notwithstanding repeated lapses from morality during an otherwise religious life. The existence of such a possible escape from the consequences of immoral acts is quite sufficient to explain why the most sincere religious belief of the ordinary kind is no adequate guarantee against vice or crime under the stress of temptation. (Wallace 1894, pp. 8-9)

These words clearly indicate some level of suspicion as to a possible useful role for prayer – a suspicion that is confirmed in the following personal letter that was printed after Wallace died:

To Mr. R. E. Smedley. Old Orchard, Broadstone, Dorset. December 25, 1910. Dear Mr. Smedley,— Thanks for your long and interesting letter. Man is, and has been, horribly cruel, and it is indeed difficult to explain why. Yet that there is an explanation, and that it does lead to good in the end, I believe. Praying is evidently useless, and should be, as it is almost always selfish – for our benefit, or our families, or our nation. Yours very truly, Alfred R. Wallace. (Marchant 1916, pp. 398-399)

So what did Wallace actually believe: that prayer was good and functional, or ‘useless’ and a waste of time? One more quotation, from Elbert Hubbard’s *Little Journeys to the Homes of Great Scientists*, helps get us closer to the essence of the matter:

. . . The priest expected the man, who was a bit irregular in his church-going, to say, “I would spend my last hours in confession and prayer.” But the peasant replied, “How would I spend the rest of the day if I were to die to-night ? – why, I’d plow!” Wallace holds that it is better to plow than to pray, and in fact, rightly understood, good plowing is prayer. All useful effort is sacred, and nothing else is or can be. Wallace believes that the only fit preparation for the future lies in improving the present. (Hubbard 1905, p. 110)

This observation brings us to the crux of Wallace’s two-sided appreciation of the activity of prayer: how it might be involved in creating a better future. It all gets down to evolution.

An oversimplified view of Wallace’s cosmology would have it that he took a consuming interest in evolutionary biology, while maintaining secondary infatuations with a range of fringe subjects. More to the point (as I have argued in numerous publications over the years: e.g., Smith 1992, 2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2012, 2013, 2019), most of his studies were in one fashion or another pursuant to the construction of a general evolutionary cosmology that extended far beyond natural selection *per se*. Within this more general cosmology, spiritualism – at least its supposed natural world basis – represented a key element.

Basically, the ‘Spirit Realm’ as envisioned by followers of spiritualism was a means whereby, or through which, human behavioral modification could be effected. Spiritualists believed, for example, that dreams – including the premonitions mentioned above – represented messages ‘from beyond’ that help people modify their actions in productive ways through the vehicles of conscience and re-considered action. Within this framework, prayer represents an effort to contact the spirit agents to enlist their support for the agenda at hand.

In this view there was no role for a personal God. Wallace never, over the full extent of his life, had much regard for organized religion, and indeed was even less enthusiastic about the idea of an individual, omnipotent, father figure: “But to claim the Infinite and Eternal Being as the one and only direct agent in every detail of the universe seems, to me, absurd” (Wallace 1910, p. 400). In the same work, however, he suggests there has been “thought-transference as an agent in creation”:

We are led, therefore, to postulate a body of what we may term organising spirits, who would be charged with the duty of so influencing the myriads of cell-souls as to carry out their part of the work with accuracy and certainty. In the power of “thought-transference” or mental impression, now generally admitted to be a *vera causa*, possessed by many, perhaps by all of us, we can understand how the higher intelligences are able to so act upon the lower and that the work of the latter soon becomes automatic (pp. 394-395).

Further,

. . . Some such conception as this – of delegated powers to beings of a very high, and to others of a very low grade of life and intellect – seems to me less grossly improbable than that the infinite Deity not only designed the whole of the cosmos, but that himself alone is the consciously acting power in every cell of every living thing that is or ever has been upon the earth (p. 395).

I surmise Wallace recognized a distinction between the possibly ‘productive’ or ‘unproductive’ agendas behind such ‘thought-transference.’ Whereas premonitions in some cases represented useful event-specific warnings, and the contents of dreams were attuned to more general ethical lessons, the proactive, pre-emptive, strategy of prayer was more problematic. Simply, so many prayers were merely self-serving efforts that could not be justified in the larger scheme of things. (Consider, for example, the pre-game prayers for victory sometimes offered by athletic teams: except in the rarest of situations, why would any self-respecting higher power feel compelled to honor these desires any more than they would their opponents’?) As Hubbard states above, “all useful effort is sacred, and nothing else is or can be.”

Wallace surely recognized this connection between the ‘Spirit Realm’ and evolution right from the very beginning of his study of spiritualism in mid-1865. In his first writing on the latter, *The Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural*, composed over the first half of 1866, he opined:

Now here again we have a striking supplement to the doctrines of modern science. The organic world has been carried on to a high state of development, and has been ever kept in harmony with the forces of external nature, by the grand law of “survival of the fittest” acting upon ever varying organisations. In the spiritual world, the law of the “progression of the fittest” takes its place, and carries on in unbroken continuity that

development of the human mind which has been commenced here. (Wallace 1866, pp. 49-50)

In this world view, prayer was a slippery activity. Since the 'progression of the fittest' mediated by the 'Spirit Realm' in large part consisted of an increasing rejection of selfish individual motives, acts such as self-absorbed prayer that stood in the way of this were anathema. On the other hand, prayer that promoted unselfish agendas of the type exemplified by the efforts of Major Moor was going a good deal more with the program.

This kind of thinking may be found in other places within Wallace's overall ethical model. For example, consider his position on gambling:

All these inconsistencies as regards the moral status of various kinds of gambling or dishonest speculation arise from our inveterate habit of dealing with limited cases, each judged on its supposed merits as to consequences, instead of looking to fundamental principles. Why is gambling immoral? Not because it is a game of chance entered into for mere amusement, even when played for small money stakes which are of no importance to any of the players. The fundamental wrong arises whenever it is used for obtaining wealth or any part of the player's income; and the reason is, that whatever one wins, some one else loses; while its evil nature, socially, depends upon the fact that whoever acquires wealth by such means contributes nothing useful to the social organism of which he forms a part. If it were taught to every child, and in every school and college, that it is morally wrong for anyone to live upon the combined labor of his fellowmen without contributing an approximately equal amount of useful labor, whether physical or mental, in return, all kinds of gambling, as well as many other kinds of useless occupation, would be seen to be of the same nature as direct dishonesty or fraud, and, therefore, would soon come to be considered disgraceful as well as immoral. (Wallace 1913, pp. 69-70)

Here again we see the notion of a contrast between productive and unproductive action, and its relation to a larger-scale social evolution agenda.

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