

Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 19: Social Evolution's Useful Idiots.

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Summary: In today's world liberals look at conservatives as the villains, and *vice versa*. How did this come to pass? In this essay a model of the biological roots of liberalism and conservatism is advanced; this is followed by a discussion of why cognitive dissonance may represent the key process in our social evolution. Alfred Russel Wallace's experience with cognitive dissonance is then detailed, including how he dealt with it. *Key words:* Alfred Russel Wallace, evolution, natural selection, social evolution, conservatism, liberalism, useful idiots, cognitive dissonance

Introduction

The provocative title of this essay is a bit of a red herring; the discussion really focuses on the evolution of social ideologies, and the admonition we benefit little from thoughtlessly lowering the boom on one or another. Before diving in, we should address two items up front. We first need to remind ourselves of what the somewhat infrequently seen term 'useful idiot' actually connotes. Merriam-webster.com defines it as "a naive or credulous person who can be manipulated or exploited to advance a cause or political agenda." Urbandictionary.com gives: "Term used to describe someone who blindly supports his or her government despite its imperialistic behavior." Wikipedia adds: "In political jargon, a useful idiot is a derogatory term for a person perceived as propagandizing for a cause without fully comprehending the cause's goals, and who is cynically used by the cause's leaders." Finally, dictionary.cambridge.org explains that it's "a person who is easy to persuade to do, say, or believe things that help a particular group or another person politically." Some elements of each of these shades of meaning will be adopted here, but the context more concerns the nature of evolution than it does the nature of idiots (!).

Second, and as you may reasonably ask, what does any of this have to do with Alfred Russel Wallace, co-establisher, with Darwin, of the principle of natural selection? I don't mean to claim that Wallace invented the term 'cognitive dissonance,' or even the concept, and he certainly never specifically pointed to such an idea in his writings. Nevertheless, he had an appreciation of most of its component elements, as these did affect his own experiences, and in turn some of his thoughts on social interaction, and on evolution in general.

Evolution

Many people make the mistake – I believe it is a mistake – of synonymizing evolution with the theory of natural selection, à la Darwin and Wallace. We might of course try to refine our focus by saying 'evolution by natural selection,' but even this elaboration doesn't really help us much here. Wallace himself regarded natural selection more as an operating state-space – that is, as an ecological balance or persisting interaction – than as a process *per se* (Smith 2012, 2013), the result being that with passing years he most

frequently referred to it as the '*law* of natural selection' (implying that it represents the *necessary* outcome of colliding natural forces). Further, we recognize multiple kinds of 'evolution' by combining the word with various modifiers: for example, to denote stellar evolution, planetary evolution, or social evolution. And, additionally, it is not always clear as to whether we are speaking of origins, ongoing outcomes, or even eventualities. The planet Earth, for example, did not merely 'evolve,' past tense (*i.e.*, come into being some billions of years ago), it is *still* evolving (as its internal and surface lithology, hydroclimatosphere, and biosphere continue to change, nonrandomly, in unison) – as is everything else of any complexity and temporal longevity.

I submit that the term 'evolution' should be understood through this more universal context, reflecting cosmological events in general – and not more colloquially, as a simple tree-like representation of biological phylogeny. Here, I would nevertheless like to focus on a single aspect of universal evolution: the one that incorporates humans' place in the process, both as physical individuals that are elements of a biological population, and in our dual roles in our own general social evolution, and as planetary guardians. I personally suspect that Wallace's view of evolving humans (especially as regards the origins of higher consciousness) is more likely to be correct than Darwin's, but for the present this is not a matter addressed. And, in any case, the discussion at hand suits either's conception.

To begin... Should we wish to understand what most basically 'separates us from the brutes,' I think we need go no further than to carefully consider the matter of the role of self-preserving – selfish – behaviors in evolution. Now, use of the word 'selfish' here is perhaps ill-advised (anthropomorphic, actually), as the circumstances are more about survival of the fittest, and in turn persistence, than about *necessarily* consciously selfish acts. On the whole, animal behavior is implicitly geared toward surviving competition; otherwise, new generations building on the successful abilities of the last one will not be delivered. Adaptations evolve over time in a manner giving their possessors a potential immediate advantage – that is, some kind of ability that will help them persist, often or usually at the expense of their fellow creatures.

Still, and for all but the very most primitive organisms, cooperation with one's fellows is sometimes necessary, even if that means no more than a brief act of copulation. With structural advancements come more and more complex forms of cooperation, and for longer periods. This may lead, among the most advanced species, to such things as monogamous reproductive relationships, and full-blown social organization. Thus the more elemental 'all for myself' orientation is superseded, in favor of cooperative systems.

Note, however, that in a strictly biological sense, both individual and cooperative structures and behaviors can still be regulated by a fairly standard brand of natural selection. Cooperation and other social behaviors in the animal world are largely, if not entirely, effected through adaptations that are genetically based. Herd behavior or monogamous relationships are mediated by hormonal or other physiological mechanisms, and these outcomes can be produced by the operation of natural selection alone, as conventionally understood.

Humans, of course, are also, like their animal relatives, behaviorally regulated by a multitude of physiological mechanisms, but in addition to such rote influences they can

deliberately invoke more ‘advanced’ tools: the formidable powers of sympathy and abstract thought. This distinguishes them from other animals, for whom the concept and significance of the welfare of individuals or family groups beyond their immediate circumstances is entirely a non-issue. Even the most socially advanced animal forms – say, porpoises, lions, or elephants – seem to have few, if any, thoughts of acting in ways meant to help out those of their fellows who exist beyond their own immediate social groups (and even if they did, what could they actually *do* that would *mean* anything?).

Humans, by contrast, are potentially able to adjust their behaviors in ways that deal productively with groups outside their immediate family environs. They invoke their capacity to think about relationships that “transcend time and space,” to borrow a Wallace appreciation (Wallace 1870a, p. 358): that is, to plan acts that are realized outside the immediate setting of their lives. While some animals do display limited degrees of foresight, this is on a very restricted scale only, not extending beyond actions attuned to mere survival.

It appears to me that these considerations suggest a basic division of influences upon human motivation: one group that harkens back to natural impulses of self-preservation, and another that recognizes how sharing is useful to larger-scale, cooperative, betterment. The second, especially, features an expanding time and space dimension, as humans become more and more aware that our similarities are greater than our differences, and what the ultimate ramifications of this truth represent.

With this start, we can now proceed to the essential points made here.

Cognitive Dissonance

One of the most important psychology theories developed during the twentieth century concerns a form of mental coping known as ‘cognitive dissonance’ (‘c. d.’). The theory was most significantly introduced by Festinger (1957), a study which is among the most cited works in that field’s history. The entry for c. d. in *Wikipedia* succinctly describes it in these words:

In the field of psychology, cognitive dissonance occurs when a person holds contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values, and is typically experienced as psychological stress when they participate in an action that goes against one or more of them. According to this theory, when two actions or ideas are not psychologically consistent with each other, people do all in their power to change them until they become consistent. The discomfort is triggered by the person's belief clashing with new information perceived, wherein they try to find a way to resolve the contradiction to reduce their discomfort.

C. d. is not an evolutionary theory, at least in itself, as the ultimate ramifications of such behavior are not anticipated. Sometimes the mental conflict results in a change in beliefs, and then behavior, but equally often the subject retreats to a position from which he/she is no longer willing to receive information that doesn’t support hi/r existing frame of mind. The reasons for such obstinance are numerous: for example, an inability to appreciate higher forms of logical argumentation, fear of change, a distrust of ‘expert’ opinion, or an insecure dependence on feelings over the evidence of troublesome contradicting facts. A related phenomenon known as ‘psychological projection’ occurs when an inability to resolve the conflict is projected back upon the tormenter: that is, as a surmise that it is really the latter who is suffering from c. d., and is maliciously attempting

to confuse the protagonist. A famous instance of the application of c. d. theory is to flat-earthers, who appear as a group to have fallen prey to these misleading tendencies. One can see a perfect example of this in the actions of John Hampden, a flat-earther who prompted Wallace's Bedford Canal geodesy experiment, and harassed him for years afterward: see the many related writings reproduced at my *Alfred Russel Wallace Page* website.

It is not at all a stretch to suggest that such tendencies are only compounded in personalities dominated by strong personal motives linked to shortsightedness, greed, feelings of persecution, anger over a perception of denied rights, or an inability to recognize the ultimately equally valid desires of those different from oneself: in all, a me-first, 'protection of turf' attitude. Many such individuals have what we would term a generally 'conservative' bearing: that is, by definition, they resist any kind of change that might be, or is, disturbing the *status quo* – especially if the latter involves their control of money, power, or viewed entitlements. The desire to 'hold on to what we have,' or perhaps even to cling to low-stress comforts perceived as being from 'simpler times,' becomes a dominating behavioral motive.

This attitude confronts a dynamic human world reality that generally does not support it. Although it's to a degree true that all morality is relative, and is not rooted in any one era or place, at the same time it is difficult to argue that moral standards have not generally advanced – that is, *improved* – over the course of human history, and in a manner that is independent of specific culture (think, for example, of our evolving perceptions of slavery). Second, unlike the generally 'me first' world of animal life, human society is so complex and extensive that compromises of behavior are inevitable – at least, if one expects to 'get along' decently. Third, our behaviors are not, as with other animals, linked merely to a possible survival of our gene pool, but, increasingly, to a custodial role in which the survival of the whole biosphere is at stake. One can only conclude that a die-hard conservatism leading to 'me-first,' greed-based, thinking cannot result in stable human solutions; that is to say, it is a life-strategy that ultimately goes against an established, and irreversible, trend.

The visible manifestations of overtly 'me-first' conservative views are many: the corruption of governmental institutions otherwise geared toward organizing equal rights for all, an unwillingness to acknowledge unpleasant facts, a focus on gaining material wealth at any cost, self-preservation at the expense of moral responsibility, crude perceptions of entitlements inviting degradation of the natural environment, erosion of feelings of sympathy and/or empathy, and behaviors belying fear of loss of control, among others. It just depends on how far 'me-first' one wishes to go.

Having possibly lost some of my more conservative readers at this point, I now make some counter-statements that, if perhaps not quite so negative-sounding, nevertheless call for recognition if we ever hope to get past the worst of our 'me-first' tendencies. The argument goes as follows.

It can hardly be denied that some focus on personal advantage must be maintained if we expect to compete with, and advance among, our fellows. But it all comes down to which behaviors can be tolerated, and which not – at least, to the extent of *degree*. Society is not blind to this issue; indeed, we have two lines of defense in this regard. The first line

is group ethics and morality: humans, even when living only in small groups, have supported codes of behavior that brought on punishment or ostracism when bridged. This was no doubt just as true in the days of our earliest ancestors as it is now. Even simple rules of etiquette are intended to help keep the peace. But we have also codified punishments and rules of engagement into an elaborate legal system, and when society as a whole agrees as to what is unfair or reprehensible, deviating practices can be identified and dealt with.

But there remain behaviors and practices whose legitimacy, at any given time, cannot be agreed upon by the population as a whole, and/or by the power elite. I suggest something basic: that as a society we have very nearly reached the point at which further legal codifications of behavior will not be capable of much improving the social system. Simply, we are not up to it, morally or ethically.

Evolution, however, is a very powerful force, and I believe it will find a way to continue, whether we like it or not. And although liberals may often find the antics of their conservative opponents frustrating in this regard, the latter are performing an important – essential – role in moving us forward. The conservatives of the world may be fighting battles they ultimately cannot win, but the battle-lines they draw represent elemental challenges that will force us to reimagine our objectives.

Think of this for a moment. What has happened in the past is over; this statement is obvious enough, but conservatives, in their desire to hold onto the ‘happy’ and/or convenient elements of the *status quo*, have defended those positions that actually *have* led to many or most of the things we now hold dear. But history is finite, its causalities having already played out. The future, on the other hand – that place that liberals wish to make – is by contrast un-lived-in and uncertain, and even good intentions are not always enough to ensure that the ‘better’ things wished for at a given time are advisable, sustainable, or even possible. Not only must perceived injustices be eradicated, but those elements of society that are truly essential to individual rights and responsibilities must be protected and maintained.

Alas, liberals are not derided as ‘bleeding hearts’ and ‘tree-huggers’ without reason; it is one thing to have one’s heart in the right place, but quite another to have sufficient native foresight to read the universe intelligently enough to reach harmony with it. ‘Reading the universe,’ if it can mean anything, means suggesting changes that have implications for a future that attends *both* to individual rights and needs, and a socialization process that inherently recognizes the complexities of our planetary guardianship.

And so, we come to the ultimate role of ‘useful idiots’ in our social evolution: they serve, at least in theory, to help ensure that our group ingenuity does not lose track of the possible negative effects of summary adjustments to our sense of individuality. That sense can only be modified slowly, and by paying very close attention to the foundations of the complaints of the conservative flock. As we approach the limits of consensus and, especially, as the power structure solidifies in a manner tending to protect its administrators, any successes at modifying our social system for the better will increasingly be based on identifying the varieties of cognitive dissonance afflicting our more conservative citizens, and finding creative ways of dissipating them.

I claim no originality in this analysis; indeed, by the seventeenth century Baruch de Spinoza had already offered similar thoughts. In an 1868 translation of his *Theological-Political Treatise* – a work Alfred Wallace may well have seen – Spinoza wrote:

...They who have had much experience of the fickle and uncertain temper of the multitude have almost despaired of humanity; for men are not governed by reason and the higher sentiments, but by appetite and affection alone. Always inconsiderate, they are easily led by their greediness and their love of indulgence; arrogant, each thinks that he alone knows all, and desires to arrange everything in his own way; selfish, he judges this and that to be just or unjust, right or wrong, as he believes it to square or not to square with what he thinks his interest; vainglorious, he despises his equals, and refuses to be guided by them; envious, he grudges to others greater honour and better fortune than fall to himself; vindictive, he desires evil to others and rejoices when it happens, – but enough, it is needless to go further; for all know full well what crime and wickedness discontent with the present and desire of change have produced; what blind rage and the prospect of escape from hateful poverty have led mankind to do, and how entirely mere personal considerations engage and influence men's minds. To foresee and forestall disturbance in a state from such causes, to leave no room for disorder to creep in, so to arrange matters that every one, whatever his temper and disposition, shall prefer the public good to his private advantage, this is the task undertaken, this the work to be achieved by the patriot ruler. From sheer necessity much has mostly been done to secure these great ends; matters, however, I think have scarcely yet been so satisfactorily arranged but that governments have still been in even greater danger from their own citizens than from foreign foes, and have feared unfriends at home fully as much as enemies abroad... (Spinoza 1868, p. 290).

Another, more recent, translation, puts this passage as:

...All men, whether they rule or are ruled, tend to prefer pleasure to difficult work. Those who've experienced how changeable the mentality of the multitude is almost despair about it. They're governed only by affects, not by reason. Rushing headlong toward everything, they're easily corrupted either by greed or by extravagant living. Everyone thinks that he alone knows everything, and wants everything to be done according to his mentality. He thinks a thing fair or unfair, permissible or impermissible, just to the extent that he judges it brings him profit or loss. From love of esteem, he disdains equals, and will not put up with being ruled by them. From envy for the greater praise or better fortune someone else receives – these things are never equal – he wishes the other person ill, and is delighted when bad things happen to him. There's no need to go over all this. Everyone knows how it goes – a disgust with the present, a craving to make fundamental changes, uncontrolled anger, a scorn for poverty – these affects lead men to wickedness. Everyone knows how much they fill and disturb men's hearts. To prevent all these things, and to establish the state so that there's no place for fraud – to establish things so that everyone, whatever his mentality, prefers the public right to private advantage, this is the task, this our concern. Though the necessity of solving this problem has compelled people to invent many solutions, we've never reached the point where a state is not in more danger from its own citizens than from its enemies, and where the rulers don't fear their citizens more than their enemies. (Spinoza 2016, pp. 298-299)

Translations may change somewhat through the years; other things, not so much. We have a long history of being insensitive to our own shortcomings, much less where we need to go to reduce them.

Social Criticism, and Alfred Russel Wallace

This brings us back to Wallace. Although, as I mentioned earlier, it would be inaccurate to suggest that Wallace had anything to do with the development of the cognitive dissonance idea, it is nevertheless true that his sphere of interest extended to a number of relatable phenomena. His strategies to deal with the situation might actually be helpful to our own struggles.

Early in his career Gregory Bateson, the anthropologist, developed a model of social interaction he termed 'schismogenesis.' In his 1936 book *Naven*, he laid out its basic elements:

...It is at once apparent that many systems of relationship, either between individuals or groups of individuals, contain a tendency towards progressive change. If, for example, one of the patterns of cultural behaviour, considered appropriate in individual A, is culturally labelled as an assertive pattern, while B is expected to reply to this with what is culturally regarded as submission, it is likely that this submission will encourage a further assertion, and that this assertion will demand still further submission. We have thus a potentially progressive state of affairs, and unless other factors are present to restrain the excesses of assertive and submissive behaviour. A must necessarily become more and more assertive, while B will become more and more submissive; and this progressive change will occur whether A and B are separate individuals or members of complementary groups... Progressive changes of this sort we may describe as complementary schismogenesis. But there is another pattern of relationships between individuals or groups of individuals which equally contains the germs of progressive change. If, for example, we find boasting as the cultural pattern of behaviour in one group, and that the other group replies to this with boasting, a competitive situation may develop in which boasting leads to more boasting, and so on. This type of progressive change we may call symmetrical schismogenesis (pp. 176-177).

Bateson is posing a cultural change model here founded on negative *or* positive feedbacks. As Fuller (2007, pp. 201-202) has observed:

...Bateson's point, which guided all his subsequent work, was that learning is always a process of distinguishing oneself from the environment, which may have either benign or malign consequences, depending on the context, which itself always changes as a result of the learning experience. Indeed, an important source of such malign consequences is a failure to register the resulting shift in the frame of reference. As popularized by Cold War operations research, Bateson was thus preoccupied with the problem of positive feedback. This problem can be posed most abstractly in terms of communications theory, which defines the meaning of a transmitted message in terms of the change it produces in the receiver's knowledge base: the bigger the change, the more informative the message. Now, as this process is reiterated over time, the receiver must try harder and invest more resources to find comparably informative messages – or else halt the inquiry, having decided she has learned enough to achieve equilibrium with the environment. He was struck by how rarely human systems took the latter route of negative feedback, even though it was often warranted by the cost and potential risk involved in indefinitely reiterating one's earlier efforts. However, biological systems paid attention to negative feedback all too well. Darwin's scientific rival, Alfred Russel Wallace, had already compared natural selection to a steam engine's governor, which disposed of the lingering image of nature in 'natural selection' operating with human-like deliberation.

In Bateson's thinking we have a position that is close to an evolutionary model, in that it strongly anticipates the 'push-pull' foundations of Maruyama's (1963) 'deviation-amplifying second cybernetics.' Maruyama was able to envision an environmental coupling of negative and positive feedbacks such that information was accrued, resulting in 'evolution.' Fuller does not mention it above, but Bateson himself was much taken with Wallace's original 'steam engine governor' analogy, bringing it up approvingly in two of his best known books (Bateson 1972, p. 435; Bateson 1979, p. 43).

This governor analogy turns out to be crucial to Wallace's portrayal of natural selection as a law rather than a theory, and is directly relevant to the discussion here. Wallace adopted the period notion, partly due to the German polymath Alexander von Humboldt, that nature was 'in balance' – or, we might now say, 'in equilibrium' – though it became Wallace's innovation to frame this balance as a response to both ecological and evolutionary forces. By invoking von Humboldt's 'general equilibrium of forces' ideal (Smith 2016) he could envision conflicting ecological systems that remained in balance, even as the individual species populations that mediated that balance underwent locally-induced evolutionary change (Smith 2021). All that was necessary were gene pools flexible enough to respond to the exigencies of local conditions (including the gene pools of other species) at a pace advancing productive manipulations of those conditions. We now might apply the term 'dynamic equilibrium' to describe the situation, but such a model and usage only came along after Wallace's time. Nevertheless, Wallace would come to treat his natural selection model as a law of nature, and we can understand why he did by noting that the ever-present juxtaposition of population variation, species superfecundity, and limited worldly resources *must* result in the outcome 'selection.'

I have discussed elsewhere (Smith 1986, 2004) how well Wallace's approach fits the Maruyama model, *i.e.*, how a coupling of negative and positive feedback processes can result in an evolutionary progression, but Wallace never got any further with his proto-cybernetics than his steam engine governor analogy. Still, it is relatively easy to move in this direction by suggesting that the positive feedback part of the process is fueled by (1) genetic mutations (and epigenetic ramifications), and (2) a natural tendency for populations to disperse, nonrandomly, toward (and be integrated into) those environments that are relatively less stressful, and therefore less likely to encourage evolution-constraining bottlenecks through over-specializations (Smith 1986).

In the passage quoted from Fuller (2007) above, the following words appear: "Bateson was thus preoccupied with the problem of positive feedback. This problem can be posed most abstractly in [the parlance] of communications theory, which defines the meaning of a transmitted message in terms of the change it produces in the receiver's knowledge base." Wallace was interested in this subject as well, though without benefit of a prior knowledge of feedback theory. It has remained largely unnoticed that the likely main impetus for his adoption of spiritualism was that belief's support of the notion that the 'Spirit Realm' was relaying moral and ethical messages to the living population that, one could say, was increasing "the receiver's knowledge base" (Smith 2008, 2019). This was accomplished not only through séance contacts (if we charitably assume that any of these were actually legitimate), but generally, and much more importantly, through dreams, premonitions, and emotional messaging (leading, as a result, to conscience-initiated changes in behavior). A constant flow of such feedback could be expected to have the

cumulative effect of changing people's appreciation/understanding of the world, and, centrally, their proper actions within it:

In every case that passes beyond simple transference of a thought from one living person to another, it seems probable that other intelligences co-operate ... The powers of communication of spirits with us, and ours of receiving their communications, vary greatly. Some of us can only be influenced by ideas or impressions, which we think are altogether the product of our own minds. Others can be so strongly acted on that they feel an inexplicable emotion, leading to action beneficial to themselves or to others. In some cases, warning or information can be given through dreams, in others by waking vision. Some spirits have the power of producing visual, others audible hallucinations to certain persons... (Wallace 1891a, pp. 272-274).

Wallace would come to believe that a major barrier to such change was the social environment: that is, that social inequalities were such a consuming problem that few had the leisure time to deliberately pursue self-improvement vehicles (such as spiritualism). It was only some fifteen years after his own adoption of spiritualism that he came upon a social organization plan he felt might address many of the equality-defeating trends he was witnessing; thus, in 1880, he began his land nationalization campaign. Through this program, which included a strategy for creating state-leased lands, he hoped to show "how we can best carry into effect right and just principles so as most certainly to reap the reward of moral and physical well-being" (Wallace 1883, p. 358).

A major obstacle for Wallace and his many agendas, on both natural and social fronts, was cognitive dissonance: despite his spectacular talent for marshalling evidence, it was often not enough merely to back up his arguments with factual information. And he was aware of this from quite early on. As far back as the mid-1840s, when he found himself able to elicit many of the effects of mesmeric trance scoffed at by most doctors and men of science, he felt he had learned his

...first great lesson in the inquiry into these obscure fields of knowledge, never to accept the disbelief of great men or their accusations of imposture or of imbecility, as of any weight when opposed to the repeated observation of facts by other men, admittedly sane and honest. The whole history of science shows us that whenever the educated and scientific men of any age have denied the facts of other investigators on *a priori* grounds of absurdity or impossibility, the deniers have always been wrong. (Wallace 1893, pp. 440-441)

Years of resistance to his natural selection model by conservative thinkers provided another such lesson, as did his attempts to convince his peers of the relevance of spiritualism. But the *coup de grace* came with the earlier-mentioned 1870s conflict with the flat-earthers over the Bedford Canal Experiment, devised to prove that the earth is, the urgings of cult extremists notwithstanding, a sphere. The experience cost him fifteen years of worrisome harassment, and a vivid lesson in just how impossible it is to make some people see reason – especially when one's antagonist is indulging in extremes of psychological projection, as was the case in that instance.

Most of Wallace's professional life after his return to England in 1862 was in fact one struggle after another with the more conservative voices of the world, most notably a sizable number of groups engaged in trying to maintain the *status quo* of their particular corners of society. The circles with whom he had various run-ins included religious officials, professional people (including scientists and academicians), government representatives, wealthy capitalists, and many others. The range and number of these

battles is worth highlighting, so I present a reasonably extensive summary list below to make the point. [Note that this list does not include mention of the equally large number of discussions he took part in that merely concerned differences of opinion on particular subjects – for example, his exchanges with Darwin. Following each item below are ‘S’ reference numbers to related Wallace publications whose texts may be viewed at *The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*.] Wallace scholar H. Lewis McKinney once stated that Wallace “did not easily tolerate ignorant, pompous arguments,” and indeed often “charged into battle” (McKinney 1976, p. 140) against them, accordingly:

- On the supposed large average size and extraordinary brightness of tropical insects, and superior showiness of tropical flowers: Apparently believing that many of his readers were naively incapable of believing comments contrary to such well-ingrained ideas, Wallace touched on this subject on a surprising number of occasions (e.g., [S44 p. 6122](#), [S49 p. 67](#), [S289 pp. 61-64](#), [S290 p. 98](#), [S318 p. 128](#), [S715 p. 244](#)).

- On another such matter, he would sometimes attack the prevalent opinion of the time that white men were unable to work effectively under tropical climate conditions ([S248](#), [S554a](#), [S562](#), [S646b](#), [S729 vol. 2 p. 220](#)).

- Wallace was not very patient with those who attacked Darwinism with flimsy arguments, and was not afraid to respond accordingly (e.g., [S83](#), [S107](#), [S108](#), [S140](#), [S142a](#), [S197](#), [S198](#), [S210](#), [S493](#)).

- Wallace had advanced ideas on museum design, on a number of occasions challenging conventional thought on the subject ([S143](#), [S170](#), [S226](#), [S402](#), [S405](#), [S526](#)).

- Wallace was ever critical of the attitude of men of science toward spiritualism ([S191](#), [S206](#), [S263](#), [S264](#), [S270](#), [S283](#), [S287](#), [S478](#), [S726 Chap. 17](#)).

- Wallace was one of the least racist of nineteenth century observers, often speaking to his perception that all humans, including wholly uncivilized peoples, are essentially alike ([S93](#), [S95](#), [S146](#), [S152](#), [S207](#), [S559](#)).

- We have already alluded to Wallace’s battles with the flat-earth folks (e.g., [S115](#), [S116](#), [S202](#), [S248a](#), [S729 vol. 2 pp. 364-376](#)).

- One of the results of the Enlightenment was a pendulum-swing rejection of many ancient beliefs, including those related to alleged mythical beings, animals, and events. Wallace was an important force in questioning the universality of this reversal trend (see Smith 2022, in prep.), arguing that many of these beliefs likely had a factual, real-world, basis (e.g., [S119 p. 93](#), [S174](#), [S191 pp. 30-31](#), [S207](#), [S208](#), [S257](#), [S430](#), [S433](#), [S478 p. 441](#), [S578](#), [S714 pp. 343-344](#), [S715 1869 p. 569](#), [S717 pp. 26-27](#), [S720 p. 446](#)).

- Wallace’s position on wills and trusts ([S236](#), [S329](#)) – that after their death the ‘wishes of dead people’ should not dictate the actions of the still-living – was not what one would term a ‘wildly popular’ one. In 1894 he even proposed a progressive death duty rate scheme that at a certain level would increase to one hundred percent of the amount taxed! The idea was “that very rich men would be more inclined to utilise their wealth for public purposes when alive, since it would not benefit their heirs to leave more than a few millions at their death” ([S493a](#)).

- Wallace was a well-known supporter of suffrage and other civil rights for women. This made him popular within the women’s rights communities, but less so among most of the male population. Isabella Beecher Hooker thought so highly of his views that at one point she invited him to join her civil rights mission in America ([S729, vol. 2, pp. 122-123](#)). (See also [Shorthouse 1880](#) (concerning his effort to make it possible for women to attend meetings of a scientific society), [S427](#), and [S671](#).)

- Wallace argued against the imposition of bounties and tariffs, a stance not very popular among many of those who were pulling the strings ([S231](#), [S306](#), [S310](#), [S312](#), [S747](#), [S752c](#)).
- Wallace published more than a hundred writings on his plans for land nationalization; every single one was of course anathema to the majority of those in power in the government ([S329](#), [S365](#), [S722](#), etc.).
- Wallace was an enthusiastic critic of capitalism, at least to the extent that he believed it invited exploitation of the masses by powerful industrialists and financiers ([S370](#), [S466](#), [S507](#), [S512](#), [S622](#), [S726 Appendix](#), [S734](#)).
- One of the particular arguments for a land nationalization program was Wallace's perception that there had been historically, and allegedly still were, frequent illegal enclosures of commons lands by wealthy individuals. He wrote on various dimensions of this subject more than twenty times (e.g., [S292](#), [S370ab](#), [S373b](#), [S373c](#), [S376aa](#), [S383aa](#), [S443](#), [S450](#), [S482a](#), [S498](#), [S679](#)).
- As a proto-socialist, Wallace believed in fighting for a more equal distribution of wealth ([S358aa](#), [S375](#), [S450](#), [S507](#), [S573](#), [S700ac](#), [S726 Chap. 20](#)).
- Wallace was not afraid to take other writers to task for what he felt was their biased application of statistics, whether that meant number of smallpox deaths ([S376a](#), [S542](#), [S551](#), [S616](#), [S697](#)), number of landowners ([S358aa](#), [S383b](#)), historical wage rates ([S368a](#), [S414](#), [S722 Chap. 7](#), [S726 Chap. 20](#)), agricultural production totals ([S337a](#), [S337b](#)), alleged poverty rates ([S358a](#), [S360a](#), [S361](#), [S423](#), [S510a](#), [S723](#)), etc.
- Over a wide spread of years Wallace expressed his sympathy for home rule for India, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, a position that did not endear him to conservative politicians (e.g., [S392a](#), [S410a](#), [S454](#), [S597a](#), [S692a](#), [S735b](#), [S744a](#)).
- By the latter part of the nineteenth century many or most biologists had given in to a trend favoring neo-Lamarckian explanations over Darwinian ones, but Wallace was never a part of this movement (see [S311](#), [S394](#), [S397](#), [S415](#), [S439ac](#), [S468](#), [S473](#), [S510](#), [S524](#), [S527](#), etc.).
- Despite his allegiance to spiritualism, Wallace was not a big fan of theosophy – largely because he considered the posed phenomenon of reincarnation an unlikely reality ([S285a](#), [S422a](#), [S425a](#), [S447a](#), [S618a](#)).
- Although Malthusianism was a strong influence on nineteenth century thinking, Wallace bucked the trend by denying its relevance to the evolution of humankind's 'higher' abilities ([S750](#)).
- Wallace could not support the more centrist telepathic thought-transference theories of his day ([S430](#), [S434](#), [S561](#), [S726 Chap.17](#)).
- Wallace had many battles with the Society for Psychical Research over its methodologies and objectives (e.g. [S411](#), [S416](#), [S434](#), [S467](#), [S565](#)).
- Wallace often departed from the majority's opinions on the causes and limits of instinct: he was more of an 'I'm from Missouri' figure in that regard ([S83](#), [S136](#), [S164](#), [S216](#), [S222](#), [S227](#), [S470](#), [S534](#)).
- Wallace was, notoriously, an anti-vaccinationist, though largely for reasons not altogether relevant to the complaints of today's critics (see [S536](#), and dozens of other writings).
- Most sources in the late nineteenth century insisted that poverty was decreasing, but Wallace produced evidence that the reality was otherwise (see [S369](#), [S369a](#), [S387](#), [S510a](#), [S512](#), [S726](#)).
- Most of Wallace's short book *Bad Times* ([S723](#)) consists of arguments questioning the main causes that had been proposed to account for an ongoing depression.

- He despised ‘might makes right’ arguments, and occasionally came right out and said so ([S540](#), [S549](#), [S579](#), [S580](#), [S601](#)). Consistent with this, he also frequently projected anti-militaristic sentiments ([S559](#), [S567](#), [S610](#), [S617](#), [S659](#), [S703ac](#)), most notably taking part in protests against the Boer War ([S571](#), [S572](#), [S574a](#), [S576aa](#), [S595ad](#)).

- On several occasions Wallace proved well ahead of the pack by lobbying against the gold-based monetary standard ([S552](#), [S553](#), [S556](#), [S557](#)).

- Generally speaking, he was something of an extremist in considering most applications of interest-bearing funds unjust ([S370](#), [S507](#), [S552](#), [S553](#), [S584](#), [S587](#)).

- Those involved in anti-vivisection protests found him a willing voice for their concerns ([S622a](#), [S689a](#)).

- Wallace was highly critical of the means of punishment of the incarcerated, supporting prison reform and a more enlightened view of the treatment of lunacy: “We treat our prisoners as though they were utterly bad. There are none utterly bad, but only different degrees of goodness. When we understand that, we shall give up our absurd ideas of punishing crime, and shall, instead, try to reform the criminal.” ([S750 p. 663](#); see also [S623aa](#), [S684](#), [S726](#)).

- Not surprisingly, Wallace was opposed to the death penalty ([S626](#)).

- He reserved some of his most acerbic criticisms for imperialistic colonial policies (e.g., [S559](#), [S591](#), [S617](#), [S630](#), [S650ab](#), [S658a](#), [S676c](#), [S744a](#)).

- Wallace’s radical suggestions for re-toolings of the House of Lords and Church of England contained good points and received some approving comments at the time, but they never really had the slightest chance of being implemented ([S374a](#), [S635](#), [S639](#), [S668b](#)).

- Most turn-of-the-century sources favored the view that advanced life existed on Mars. After performing a thorough review of the likely Martian surface conditions, Wallace concluded there was no reason to believe this ([S643a](#), [S650aa](#), [S730](#), [S745](#)).

Rarely, if ever, has a man of science been so willing to involve himself in controversy on such a diversity of subjects – and again note that the list just produced excludes discussions on mere differences of opinion: these instead were confrontations that probably had but little chance of changing the opinions of Wallace’s adversaries, who generally were firmly committed to the *status quo*. With so many contentious dialogs in play – often simultaneously – it is not surprising that Wallace was sometimes branded a radical, or even a crank. In reality, however, he was of a more practical mind than such labels suggest, favoring the ballot box or simple rational discussion over revolutionary actions. Neither was his take on marital life very remarkable. Further, his generally leftist political bearing did not prevent him from sometimes taking positions that would surprise today’s liberals. For example:

1. Although a well-known supporter of labor, he opposed labor strikes, believing them wasteful and unproductive – if at least a sign of democracy awakening to its power. Instead, he suggested, workers should consider setting aside funds that eventually could be put toward employee buyouts of their capitalist oppressors. “All strikes are caused by bad management. No strike has ever occurred without reason. When Government removes the cause of unrest there will be peace and prosperity. It will be better for everybody.” (Wallace 1912; [S560](#), [S618b](#)).

2. Further, Wallace opposed State support for most kinds of schools or museums of art or science, as: “though I love nature much I love justice more, and would not wish that any man should be compelled to contribute towards the support of an institution of no interest to the great mass of my countrymen, however interesting to myself,” believing: “how unjust it is to take money from the public purse to pay for that which science-and-art-amateurs would very much like to have, but are not willing themselves to pay for.” (Wallace 1870b, p. 288)

3. And he was generally not in favor of encouraging alien immigration, because: “when thousands and millions of our own people are struggling for work, and often cannot obtain it, and other thousands are working long hours for barely enough to keep body and soul together, then it may be – and I believe it is – a greater wrong to permit free immigration from every other country, whose people may, perhaps, be enduring a similar struggle, but rarely a severer one, than our own,” and “while in the country from which the emigration takes place it to some extent relieves the pressure of competition [but] enables both the Government and the people to shut their eyes to the real causes of the evil... restriction of immigration is the lesser of the two evil courses at present open to us; and it has this advantage over the other course, that it compels each nation to solve its own social problems. Thus, perhaps, the people’s eyes may be the sooner opened, and the cause of humanity advanced.” (Wallace 1904)

4. Perhaps most interestingly, he supported rather restrictive age standards for voting: “My contention is that, as a whole, persons who are above 40 are, both by experience, knowledge, and that quality of cautious judgment which may be termed wisdom, much better fitted to be intelligent voters for our legislators and rulers than those who are between 21 and 40; and if none had votes till they reached their fortieth year we should have a much better chance of having good and honest representatives. And if every man and woman of that age had a vote, excluding only criminals and lunatics, the system of government would be as absolutely democratic as it would be if all above 20 had the vote.” (Wallace 1896)

And despite his eventual commitment to a land nationalization agenda (he was President of the Land Nationalisation Society for more than thirty years), Wallace was not simply an advocate of increasing the power of the State. Familiar with the objectives of socialist thinkers such as Robert Owen since his teens, he remained skeptical of them until as late as 1889:

From boyhood, when I was an ardent admirer of Robert Owen, I have been interested in Socialism, but reluctantly came to the conclusion that it was impracticable, and also, to some extent, repugnant to my ideas of individual liberty and home privacy. But Mr. Bellamy has completely altered my views in this matter. He seems to me to have shown that real, not merely delusive, liberty, together with full scope for individualism and complete human privacy, is compatible with the most thorough Socialism, and henceforth I am heart and soul with him. (Wallace 1891b, p. 9)

Wallace’s dual concern for intelligent collectivism and individual rights is difficult to appreciate in a current era that increasingly looks to ‘either-or’ positions, but for him it was an entirely logical tradeoff: the essence of social evolution. But of course this ‘libertarian-socialist’ stance only made him appear even more ‘cranky’ to his critics.

All of this adds up to a man who had deliberately immersed himself, neck deep, in a sea of cognitive dissonance. Certainly, he did not believe that most of his adversaries were suddenly going to change their mind on the basis of his words, but, importantly, he had objectives extending beyond mere confrontation.

Social Change

The relationship between ecological science and environmental ethics:

...is intimate and complex. ...The history of ecological science reflects not a single unchanging agreement but rather both continual debates within an ever-changing historical consensus. ...Newer themes that are important for ecology include work in physics on complexity, resilience, unpredictability, and chaos. All these approaches have ethical implications. The way that people perceive nature to operate often serves as a model, even a standard, for human actions and society. This is obvious in regards to themes such as competition and conflict, which – exaggerated and often distorted from their scientific origins – have fed into “Social Darwinism.” The exchange between ecological ideas and popular attitudes toward nature has been mutual. However, it is possible to identify themes from ecological science that have had a special impact on environmental values. Perhaps the most important is the principle of interdependence and mutual causality, which are central for Leopold along with many contemporary scholars, and probably the most important element of ecological understanding for the general public. This popular understanding is well reflected in Commoner’s *Laws of Ecology*, which highlight interdependence – “everything is connected to everything else,” “everything goes somewhere,” and “There is no free lunch.” (Kibert et al., p. 160)

Wallace was no stranger to the ‘everything is connected’ notion: indeed, this is one of the foundations of his natural philosophy, strongly linked to the convictions of von Humboldt. Still, he was a realist: “Wallace complained that in so many parts of the world the balance of nature was being constantly upset by those who were actuated by greed and the desire to exploit the earth for their own ends” (Clements 1983, p. 161). In a 10 November 1872 letter to Sir Charles Lyell he relayed a lament similar to the one expressed in the Spinoza excerpt produced earlier:

...ever since the establishment of Christianity, the education of Europe has been wholly in the hands of men bound down by penalties to fixed dogmas, that philosophy and science have been taught largely under the same influences, and that, even at the present day and among the most civilized nations, it causes the greater part of the intellectual strength of the world to be wasted in endeavours to reconcile old dogmas with modern thought, while no step in advance can be made without the fiercest opposition by those whose vested interests are bound up in these dogmas. (Wallace 1905, vol. 1, p. 431)

Still, Wallace was no pessimist. He was much heartened by the efforts of labor advocates, as shown in a portion of an interview carried out in 1913: “‘Ah, turmoil!’ broke in the old gentleman, with another flash through the blue spectacles. ‘Turmoil and unrest! The more of all that the better for all of us! That’s a very good sign, and so far as I can see things have never been more hopeful than they are just now on the threshold of 1913. And we want still more turmoil – more agitation – more determination’” (Wallace 1913). Some years earlier, he had ended an essay published in *The Young Man* with the dramatically hopeful words: “Truly, we will *not* despair of the Republic of Humanity.” (Wallace 1899, p. 223)

Again, however, while agitation might have been a good sign to him,

...I am myself wholly opposed to any attempt to establish a compulsory socialism (the very term is self-contradictory) as to all other governments by force, and I owe this conviction mainly to Tolstoy. Here, as in Russia, what we need first, is the repeal of bad laws, and especially of all those laws which either enforce or permit the existence of privileged classes, and of any inequality of opportunities as between man and man. Just in proportion as we are relieved from the most oppressive of the bonds and shackles with which our government binds our bodies and our minds, shall we adopt that system of voluntary co-operation for production as well as for all other useful purposes which will inevitably result, by a natural process of development, in a true Co-operative Commonwealth." (Wallace, 1901, p. 1)

And, more specifically:

...for pity's sake, let us get out of our heads the savage idea that life is all struggle and battle, each man fighting for himself the sole object of existence, a scramble to selfish ease or miserable egoism. Until we see life as a great field for co-operation and voluntary association, we are bound to make mistakes, bound to fill the air with discords and contentions. The beginning of a scientific and philosophic conception of politics lies in the apprehension and realisation of this universal brotherhood. We must apprehend that idea, and realise it. We must help one another. Our legislation must take the course of sharing among the whole community the burdens and joys, the responsibilities and pleasures, the opportunities and privileges which life offers to all human beings, to all members of a civilised society. (Wallace 1910, p. 5)

All of which brings us back a final time to the main theme of this essay. One of Wallace's debts to Robert Owen was his adoption of the older man's position that people should not be blamed for their beliefs in the same way they might be for their actions. In a famous letter to his brother-in-law Thomas Sims in 1861, Wallace wrote:

...suppose in any similar case the evidence on both sides leads you to a certain belief or disbelief, and then a reward is offered you for changing your opinion. Can you really change your opinion and belief, for the hope of reward or the fear of punishment? Will you not say, "As the matter stands I can't change my belief. You must give me proofs that I am wrong or show that the evidence I have heard is false, and then I may change my beliefs?" It may be that you do get more and do change your belief. But this change is not voluntary on your part. It depends upon the force of evidence upon your individual mind, and the evidence remaining the same and your mental faculties remaining unimpaired – you cannot believe otherwise any more than you can fly. Belief, then is not voluntary. How, then, can it be meritorious? (Marchant 1916, pp. 65-66)

Thus he concludes that in the contest between nature and nurture it is ambient social inertias that are wholly responsible for our current beliefs, it being unproductive to assign blame to water already under the bridge. Knowing this, Wallace always considered it more prudent to look beyond mere complaint as the means to an end. In a footnote in his book *The Wonderful Century* he saw fit to specially point out that "It is never my practice to condemn evils without suggesting remedies." (Wallace 1898, p. 368)

This is a key point. There are plenty of evils out there that need to be remedied before we can say we have achieved our evolutionary destiny. But how hard must the tide of evolution push to get us to where we need to be? Just how much will it take for the 'idiots'

to show their worth? Well, we'll see: if the rash reactions of the minority can generate enough of an impetus among the more far-seeing to close the loopholes in our aging laws and customs that permit such excesses, then *tolerably* hard. If not: then, all bets are off.

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