

Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 22: Stumbling Blocks to an Understanding of Wallace's Worldview.

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Summary: The writings of Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) present a challenge to modern readers, both for the large range of subjects he entertained, and his unique point of view. In this short treatment, ten 'stumbling blocks' to an appreciation of Wallace's thought are outlined which, it is suggested, have caused problems of interpretation in the past. *Key words:* Alfred Russel Wallace, spiritualism, evolution, natural selection, social critics, naturalists

Introduction

It hardly needs stating that Wallace is an easy target for his lifelong habit of putting out opinions on so many different kinds of subjects. Indeed, he was often in his own time, and remains so today, attacked as a crank or crackpot, and it doesn't help any that his interests included subjects that are still considered on the fringe. This has also sometimes led to his being accused of inconsistency: that is, how could all the various notions he held possibly be the product of a single, logical, train of thought (see Smith 2021)?

Could the real problem be, however, that we are just attributing a few too many things to Wallace that he never quite believed? After some forty years of studying Wallace's writings – to the extent of having read at least three times every one of the thousand plus works he published (an effort tied in part to assuring accurate transcriptions of them!), and a very large portion of the literature *on* him – I am convinced that this is the case. I believe that his worldview is in fact highly internally consistent, and while this does not argue that he was always correct in his theories or pronouncements, it seemingly should be an objective to uncover what his words *actually were, and meant*, before attempting to criticize them.

Wallace's volume of writings works against him here, as it is rare to find everything he had to say about any particular subject in one place. Some of his summary works are more complete in this respect than others, but it is a complication that his thoughts and conclusions on many individual subjects did in fact change over time (as one would expect of any thinker), though not necessarily in a way inconsistent with his earlier beliefs (Smith 2021).

In this note I should like to identify several key elements of Wallace's thought that I believe have tempted mass mis-diagnosis over the years: that is, that have led to misconceptions forestalling a more accurate picture of his overall worldview. Most of these sketches contain referrals to other writings I have published that extend the conversation. Further subjects could likely be targeted, but the following represent, at the

least, a good proportion of the most significant ones, and to which attention may first be drawn.

Wallace Stumbling Blocks: A Non-Comprehensive List

1. *That Wallace was not searching for an explanatory mechanism for evolution during the years of his early travels.* The theory that before 1858 Wallace was merely an itinerant insect collector not investigating possible causes of evolution, largely the brainchild of historian John van Wyhe, is not a viable one. Van Wyhe claims there is no period evidence of Wallace's intent in those early years, and that he only made the proper connections upon coming across some environment-related color patterns among tiger beetles early in that year (Van Wyhe 2013, pp. 206-208). But there *is* plenty of evidence that one of Wallace's main reasons for being where he was (both earlier, in South America, and then in the Malay Archipelago) was his search for an evolutionary mechanism. To begin with, there is his 1855 statement (Wallace 1855a, p. 185) that "It is about ten years since the idea of such a law suggested itself to the writer of this paper, and he has since taken every opportunity of testing it by all the newly ascertained facts with which he has become acquainted, or has been able to observe himself. These have all served to convince him of the correctness of his hypothesis." Beyond this there are, especially, many related comments in his travel journal (Costa 2013, 2014). Of course, it *is* true that Wallace initially set out on his journeys having no *particular* mechanism of organic change in mind to test, but no one has ever claimed that he did. (See also Smith 2015, Smith *et al.* 2020.)

2. *That Wallace reversed himself on natural selection's role in human evolution.* It has been charged – by just about everyone – that after 1864 Wallace went back on his position that natural selection could be used to explain both the 'animal' elements of humankind, *and* its more advanced elements of conscious awareness. However, this assumes that his original (1858) understanding of natural selection projected any such blanket position. I have written on this many times before (*e.g.*, Smith 1991, 2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2013, 2019) and am in the process of drafting a summary analysis (Smith, *in prep.* 1), but for the present it is enough to state that the arguments raised by other writers are entirely beside the point: most of these conjectures are implicitly based on the bad assumption that as of the time of the 1858 Ternate essay on natural selection he already believed that natural selection fully explained both the physical and mental condition of humankind. The evidence favors a different conclusion: that in that work he was holding off on any kind of assessment regarding the "higher consciousness" matter, waiting for an interpretation to present itself. Such an interpretation finally *did* present itself when he became familiar with the doctrines and phenomena of spiritualism in the late 1860s; he then *added* this body of explanation to his already existing model. Elements of his famous 1864 presentation on the origin of human races (Wallace 1864) have been used to defend the 'reversal of mind' hypothesis, but Wallace's discussion in this work revolves around what might have happened once an advanced conscious state was already in place, and not how that state originally came to be (further, his treatment in the 1864 work is almost certainly linked to his [self-admitted] temporary adoption of materialistic Spencerian ideals, especially those related to the concept of 'justice': see Smith 2013, Chapter 6). In the 1858 essay human beings are not even mentioned; yet it

has been tacitly assumed by almost everyone that he wished to treat all of our characteristics in the same fashion he did those of plants and the lower animals. Wallace himself never later admitted to such a post-1864 reversal (and actually specifically claimed otherwise in his Preface to 1875's *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism*), nor did he later write anything suggesting he had meant his pre-1864 position to extend to the advanced elements of consciousness. The end line is, it seems more likely that around 1866-67 he came to the conclusion that the previous hole in his understanding of evolution could be filled by *adding* the spiritualism hypothesis to it. Once this is fathomed, it is much easier to understand remarks he made in his 1864 paper and the 1870 emendations of it (in the last two chapters of his *Contributions to the Theory of Natural Selection*).

3. That Wallace was a pale imitation of Darwin, and not worthy of study within frameworks independent of the more famous man. I reject this conclusion, firstly because Wallace's early intellectual development was hardly influenced by Darwin, and secondly because he had a much broader concept of evolution than Darwin did. Wallace and Darwin had largely different early intellectual and philosophical influences, and neither was aware of the other's ideas on evolutionary mechanisms before their paths became intertwined in 1858. Thus it is not true that Wallace was a 'follower' of Darwin, any more than the reverse. It is true that Wallace accepted many or most of Darwin's pronouncements on the survival of the fittest, but this was also true of Darwin's reaction to most of Wallace's. Their independent discoveries of a similar natural selection concept made most of their later agreements on it inevitable, and therefore not due to any leader-follower relationship. Wallace allowed Darwin to take the lion's share of the credit for natural selection for several largely valid reasons, but this is not to argue that Darwin's overall vision was necessarily the more profound one. Darwin mostly restricted himself to considerations of biological adaptation, whereas Wallace was also interested in the evolution concept as it related to astronomical cosmology, physical geography, human consciousness, and social change. All told, Darwin was less speculative and more painstaking than Wallace, this difference being both a strength and weakness of each worker.

4. That Wallace adopted spiritualism because of his séance experiences. The standard picture of Wallace's adoption of spiritualism is that he was seduced into taking on the belief as a result of his experiences at séances, *circa* late 1865 and 1866. But this is likely an incorrect surmise. For one thing, it was only after the eighteen months between his initial attention to the subject and his finally finding a medium who seemingly could produce convincing phenomena, for free, and under his control at his own quarters, that he finally became a convert. More importantly, and as I have previously argued (e.g., Smith 2008b, 2013, 2019), the more likely reason for his interest was his coming to an appreciation of the way human consciousness might be schooled by 'preternormal' (his word) messages relayed by spirit entities – specifically, in the form of dreams, premonitions, conscience, etc. This kind of relationship exactly paralleled the way he thought natural selection operated: as a feedback process between populations and their changing environment, in which the latter operated as a stimulus to continually resort the gene pool. The parallel to the refinement of consciousness would finally have soaked in after those eighteen months, during which he was undertaking a thorough lit-

erature review of the subject (Smith 2008b). Just prior to his taking up the subject around July of 1865, he had published a trio of rhetorical anthropological commentaries in which he tossed around ideas on what kind of influence might be capable of resulting in an effective trajectory for social evolution, and when his sister convinced him to investigate spiritualism (she was already a believer), he did. It turned out to fit the bill set out in those three papers.

5. *That Wallace was a theist.* Wallace has usually been portrayed as a theist, probably for two main reasons: (1) his adoption of spiritualism (2) his position on purpose in the Universe. But such associations are arguably dubious. Regarding spiritualism, many (and quintessentially Wallace) within that movement have regarded the ‘Spirit Realm’ as a nonphysical extension of the natural world, subject to identifiable laws in the same way the physical world is, and quite distinct from conceptions of the afterlife adopted by the great religions. This may turn out to be proved incorrect, but at most Wallace’s actual conception of the interactions suggested might be labelled hypernaturalistic, or possibly scientific. Wallace himself was certainly not religious in any conventional sense, and was often highly critical of institutional religion. He entirely rejected the notion that there are Godly first causes; in fact the very concept of a monotheistic God was so foreign to his being that he almost never employed the word in his writings, not even applying it in the common sense of phrases like ‘God knows’ or ‘God willing’ (as Darwin commonly did) in his personal correspondence. He did, however, believe in the concept of Universal purpose, and for this he has frequently been labelled a teleologist. But again, most invocations of the word ‘teleology’ imply concepts of Divine intervention – that is to say, Godly first causes – and Wallace would have nothing of this, instead adhering to views more closely approaching to notions of final causation (or possibly ‘teleonomy’, per Pittendrigh [1958]: “the possible plan that will direct the development of natural phenomena is included in the structure of the system itself” [Aznar 2019, p. 7]). Along these lines, he has been credited as one of the most significant early anticipators of the anthropic principle (Dick 2008; R. Smith 2015, 2019), the idea that “we exist within this Universe, which has the fundamental parameters, constants and laws that it has. And our existence is proof enough that the Universe allows for creatures like us to come into existence within it” (Siegel 2017). So, most of those who advance anthropic principle-related ideas are not doing so within any apparent theistic context. I am currently taking up the ‘theism’ subject again in a work in preparation (Smith *in prep.* 2).

6. *That Wallace believed life only existed on Earth.* This is an oversimplification of Wallace’s position, which was that he thought it unlikely that beings equipped with advanced intelligence/awareness existed anywhere else in the universe. This conclusion initially was drawn in part from his literature review-based surmise that our solar system existed at the very center of the universe – a position he soon gave up. But it was also influenced by contemporary views that the universe consisted only of our own galaxy, another incorrect surmise. Further, however, he argued that the earth’s highly unlikely and favorable position in the solar system promoted stable conditions amenable to life, and guarded it from destruction by cataclysmic events – these arguments still holding some considerable acceptance (in the form of the so-called ‘Goldilocks zone’ hypothesis). But throughout his discussions of the matter he never

held that life in general could not exist elsewhere, only that advanced forms probably didn't. To correct this misappreciation, he even at one point issued a published letter to the editor distinguishing between the two conditions, and giving his own position (Wallace 1910).

7. That Wallace's attention to social issues was dilettantish. Wallace is most famous for his work within the natural sciences, but throughout his adult years he maintained a strong interest in social evolution. After about 1880, the year of publication of his book *Island Life*, his attention was pretty evenly divided between natural and social science subjects. And, his work on social issues was easily as deeply based on his consumption of writings in these areas as his natural science studies had been. He took his social criticism efforts quite seriously, and many figures of the time, and even after his death, were influenced by them.

8. That Wallace was as Eurocentric in his positions as others of his time. Wallace was born a nineteenth century European, and to that extent some traces of Eurocentrism are evident. But one of Wallace's core tenets was the Robert Owen-inspired belief that people are responsible only for their actions, and not for the conditions they are born into. For Wallace, this meant that people are not to be judged, either morally or intellectually, for their race or lack of technological advancement or societal sophistication. Unfortunately, he often did use terms like 'primitive' and 'savage' that fall unpleasantly on present-day ears, but such usage reflected his positions on social/technological advance (or biological affinity), and not a moral/ethical judgment. At times he was critical of the habits and morals of the people he travelled among, but arguably no more so than he was of the governments and social and economic characteristics of 'his own' people: remember, this is the man who in 1913 wrote: "...it is not too much to say that our whole system of society is rotten from top to bottom, and the Social Environment as a whole, in relation to our possibilities and our claims, is the worst that the world has ever seen" (Wallace 1913, p. 169). At the same time, he often praised peoples from outside his own culture, recognizing many examples of their ingenuity and integrity (see Wallace 1869 for many such statements).

9. That Wallace was a 'liberal'... a 'radical'... A 'socialist'... To assign Wallace a simple label in this direction is to invite confusion. That he was throughout his life a political liberal is perhaps a reasonable pigeonholing, but in individual habit he was actually rather conservative, even to the extent of being priggish on certain personal matters. More to the point, he had lifelong concerns regarding the possibility that government policies might infringe on individual freedoms – feelings strong enough that today he might even be viewed as having libertarian leanings. He did finally turn socialist about 1889, but only after more than forty years of questioning how a socialist society might function without interfering with the rights of the populace. (The extent of his concern is well demonstrated by a letter he sent to *Nature* which argued that government funds should not be invested in artworks or scientific projects better supported by private sources: Wallace 1870b.) And certainly he was never a 'radical', in the sense of advocating societal change through aggressive acts: instead, he favored applying political pressure through the vote, peaceful economic buyouts by unionized labor (Wallace 1899), and a government landlord approach in which privately-held land

was to be slowly converted into leasing arrangements (Wallace 1882).

10. That Wallace was, as so many of his time are now viewed, highly racist. A deep enough search through Wallace's private correspondence will turn up a few – a very few – instances of mildly disrespectful language, but on the whole there are hardly any nineteenth century public figures who are less deserving of such labeling. Steeped in Owenist values since his early teens, Wallace's appreciations of race and behavior were solidly rooted in these views, as discussed in #8 above. Consider the following, quoted from one of his 1855 letters from the field: "The more I see of uncivilized people, the better I think of human nature on the whole, and the essential differences between so-called civilized and savage man seem to disappear" (Wallace 1855, p. 684).

Conclusion

In this short work I have briefly profiled some areas where the common appreciation of Wallace's intent often seems to fall short. I invite readers to look into Wallace's actual words, reflect on these matters further, and come to their own conclusions.

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