

Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 27. When Wallace Broke with Darwin.

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Summary: The year 1866 was the first year Alfred Russel Wallace showed definite signs of breaking with Darwin over the limits of natural selection. Attention is drawn to a July 1866 exchange of letters between the two, and how this foreshadowed what followed. *Key words:* Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), natural selection, survival of the fittest, progression of the fittest, evolution, spiritualism, Charles Darwin, Emma Hardinge (Britten)

1866 was a pivotal year in the career of Alfred Russel Wallace. Only four years returned from his breakthrough studies in the East Indian Archipelago, he had assumed the role of Charles Darwin's leading supporter on the subject of the evolution of species. He had even published some landmark papers of his own in the interim (for example Wallace 1863, 1864, 1865), along with more than a dozen systematic accounts of ornithological specimens he had taken while in the East. But in the middle of 1865 he suddenly dropped all of his biological pursuits in favor of an in-depth examination of the world of spiritualism. Much has been written on this, but a full review would draw us away from the main point here, which nevertheless casts light on the subject (see Kottler 1974, Malinchak 1987, and Smith 2008 for further discussion).

Wallace's attention to spiritualism during this period was characterized by two rather different approaches to the matter. First, he started to attend seances hosted by spiritual mediums. None of those in which he took part in 1865 made much of an impression on him (nor for that matter did those he attended over the first five-sixths of 1866), as it turned out. However, he also began to dive into the extensive spiritualist literature, and on 6 November 1865 attended the first lecture in a new speaking tour organized for the celebrated trance medium Emma Hardinge (later, E. H. Britten). Some years later (Wallace 1870) he was recorded as having attended as a "strong disbeliever" on the earlier date, but it is evident that Hardinge's words that night, arguing that spiritism was not incompatible with scientific explanation, made a very strong impression on him. By early 1866, and still avoiding scientific work (including not delivering papers at the meetings of scientific societies), he started piecing together what would become known as "The Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural" ('SAS': Wallace 1866).

SAS could hardly have been created before that time, if indeed Wallace was still a "strong disbeliever" as of November 1865. Hardinge seems to have been instrumental in changing his mind – not to the extent of converting him outright (that would only happen around the end of 1866), but to a position now arguing that the subject merited serious study. Predictably, quotes from her writings take up more than twice as much space in the published editions of SAS than those of any other person.

A comment about the title of this work... The word 'Aspect' here sounds a bit foreign to modern ears, with the result that we immediately tend to translate it into more familiar terms such as 'characteristics', 'elements', 'nature', or 'quality', but this is evidently not quite the connotation Wallace had in mind, adept wordsmith that he was. Instead, and drawing on his idolatrous knowledge of the writings of Alexander von Humboldt (and especially H's *Aspects of Nature*), Wallace had used this term in a number of his earlier writings to depict, either: (1) for individual organisms, their general demeanor, air, bearing, carriage, or presented 'face' or 'figure', or (2) for environments, their defining topographical form, and/or characteristic vegetation. All of this ties in directly with one of Hardinge's primary messages: that what we describe with the objective language of science has another "face": that of spiritistic influence. In an anonymous May 1866 article in London's *The Spiritual Magazine* Hardinge is quoted from one of her speeches as having said:

...Admitting that God's laws are adequate to define the spiritual as well as the natural body of history, and that no miracle or transcendence of natural law can exist, there remains but one mode of explaining the phenomena of the ages, and that would seem to be, by the discovery of some occult force in nature sufficiently potential and applicable to our case, to cover its phenomenal manifestations. ...we affirm that law it is which governs the manifestations of spiritual communion with earth, or the relations between the visible and invisible worlds.

When exactly SAS was completed we do not know, but we do know that newspaper accounts indicate that the last two lectures in Hardinge's tour took place in London on 22 and 24 June 1866, and that she left England for America not long after. Overall she had delivered two dozen or more lectures after the first one in November 1865, and all had been given in or near London. Wallace, for his part, had been present in London for almost this entire period as well (as ascertained from the sequence of letters listed in George Beccaloni's *Alfred Russel Wallace Collection* at Epsilon). On 17 June 1866 he sent out a letter to Cajetan von Felder from London; his next known mailing was dated 29 June 1866, and sent to Alfred Newton from Treeps, Hurstpierpoint (the home of his new wife). Just then, things started to get interesting.

Within a couple of weeks of the late June dates Wallace had put the finishing touches on SAS and sent it out for publication. A note on page nine of the 21 July 1866 issue of the secularist periodical *The English Leader* informs us that they have received his manuscript and are poised to give it "immediate attention"; they did: it was printed serially over an eight week stretch beginning on 11 August 1866 (Smith 2008), just twenty-one days later. (Wallace subsequently issued a pamphlet version the following November.)

It is highly unlikely that the above sequence of events was accidental: Wallace very likely wanted to hear (and/or then read) at least some of Hardinge's last few lectures before finalizing SAS and submitting it for publication. (It should also be noted that earlier, in a letter to Alfred Newton dated 6 January 1866, Wallace asks Newton what he knows about the Cambridge Ghost Club, a group organized around the study of unusual phenomena.) But as of the 24 June date had he yet written the following words, appearing on pages 49-50 of the pamphlet version of SAS?:

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.

The debt to Britten here is unmistakable, but even more interesting is that this is Wallace's first use of the phrase "survival of the fittest" in print – and in a treatise on spiritualism, yet! Wallace surely was aware of the term's frequent use by Herbert Spencer in the latter's *Principles of Biology*, issued in October 1864, as soon as that book was available, so why did he wait so long before drawing attention to it?

Amid all this, on 2 July 1866 Wallace sent (also from Treeps) a letter to Darwin airing the following complaints:

My dear Darwin, – I have been so repeatedly struck by the utter inability of numbers of intelligent persons to see clearly, or at all, the self-acting and necessary effects of Natural Selection. that I am led to conclude that the term itself, and your mode of illustrating it, however clear and beautiful to many of us, are yet not the best adapted to impress it on the general naturalist public. The two last cases of this misunderstanding are (1) the article on "Darwin and His Teachings" in the last *Quarterly Journal of Science*, which, though very well written and on the whole appreciative, yet concludes with a charge of something like blindness, in your not seeing that Natural Selection requires the constant watching of an intelligent "chooser" like man's selection to which you so often compare it; and (2) in Janet's recent work on the "Materialism of the Present Day," reviewed in last Saturday's *Reader*, by an extract from which I see that he considers your weak point to be that you do not see that "thought and direction are essential to the action of Natural Selection." The same objection has been made a score of times by your chief opponents, and I have heard it as often stated myself in conversation. Now, I think this arises almost entirely from your choice of the term Natural Selection, and so constantly comparing it in its effects to man's selection, and also to your so frequently personifying nature as "selecting," as "preferring," as "seeking only the good of the species," etc., etc. To the few this is as clear as daylight, and beautifully suggestive, but to many it is evidently a stumbling-block. I wish, therefore, to suggest to you the possibility of entirely avoiding this source of misconception in your great work (if not now too late), and also in any future editions of the "Origin," and I think it may be done without difficulty and very effectually by adopting Spencer's term (which he generally uses in preference to Natural Selection), viz. "Survival of the Fittest." This term is the plain expression of the *fact*, Natural Selection is a metaphorical expression of it, and to a certain degree *indirect* and *incorrect*, since, even personifying Nature, she does not so much select special variations as exterminate the most unfavourable ones.

Combined with the enormous multiplying powers of all organisms, and the "struggle for existence," leading to the constant destruction of by far the largest proportion – facts which no one of your opponents, as far as I am aware, has denied or misunderstood – "the survival of the fittest," rather than of those which were less fit, could not possibly be denied or misunderstood. Neither would it be possible to say that to ensure the "survival of the fittest" any intelligent chooser was necessary, whereas when you say Natural Selection acts so as to choose those that are fittest it is misunderstood, and apparently always will be. Referring to your book, I find such expressions as "Man selects only for his own good; Nature only for that of the being which she tends." This, it seems, will always be misunderstood; but if you had said, "Man selects only for his own good; Nature by the inevitable survival of the fittest, only for that of the being she tends," it would have been less liable to be so.

I find you use the term Natural Selection in two senses – (1) for the simple preservation of favourable and rejection of unfavourable variations, in which case it is equivalent to “survival of the fittest”; (2) for the effect or change produced by this preservation, as when you say, “To sum up the circumstances favourable or unfavourable to natural selection,” and, again, “Isolation, also, is an important element in the process of natural selection”: here it is not merely “survival of the fittest,” but change produced by survival of the fittest, that is meant. On looking over your fourth chapter, I find that these alterations of terms can be in most cases easily made, while in some cases the addition of “or survival of the fittest” after “natural selection” would be best; and in others, less likely to be misunderstood, the original term might stand alone... (Marchant 1916, pp. 140-142)

To which Darwin responded, in a letter dated 5 July 1866:

My dear Wallace, – I have been much interested by your letter, which is as clear as daylight. I fully agree with all that you say on the advantages of H. Spencer’s excellent expression of “the survival of the fittest.” This, however, had not occurred to me till reading your letter. It is, however, a great objection to this term that it cannot be used as a substantive governing a verb; and that this is a real objection I infer from H. Spencer continually using the words “Natural Selection.”

I formerly thought, probably in an exaggerated degree, that it was a great advantage to bring into connection natural and artificial selection; this indeed led me to use a term in common, and I still think it some advantage. I wish I had received your letter two months ago, for I would have worked in “the survival,” etc., often in the new edition of the “Origin,” which is now almost printed off, and of which I will, of course, send you a copy. I will use the term in my next book on Domestic Animals, etc., from which, by the way, I plainly see that you expect *much* too much. The term Natural Selection has now been so largely used abroad and at home that I doubt whether it could be given up, and with all its faults I should be sorry to see the attempt made. Whether it will be rejected must now depend “on the survival of the fittest.” (Marchant 1916, p. 144)

The dates of this exchange, 2 and 5 July 1866, were within just a few days of Wallace’s submission of SAS for publication. In that work, Wallace has clearly crossed the line into “yes, I think spiritualism is worthy of consideration as a supplemental understanding to natural selection” thinking (but, again, he has not necessarily progressed all the way to true believer) – as is obvious enough from the tone expressed throughout that work. Still, he probably realized that his defense of the belief even at that level would inevitably force him to distance himself from Darwin’s views, and in the 2 July 1866 letter he sought to clear the air.

In this communication, and in one fell swoop, he: (1) points out the problems with personifying natural selection as a ‘guiding’ active force (2) contrasts the Darwinian struggle for existence concept with his own view of natural selection as the “elimination of the unfit” (Smith 2012) and (3) points out the potential tautological consequences of simultaneously conceiving adaptation as a *process* of the more fit tending to more frequently survive, and the *changes produced* by this process. Seemingly, he was becoming increasingly concerned with Darwin’s continuing acceptance of domestication as a true analog to the natural process of adaptation. Breeding practices did eliminate the ‘inferior’ varieties, but there, unfittedness was determined only by human perceptions of what was useful to them, as opposed to what ultimately might be supported by the overall

environment. He had warned Darwin about this in an early (October 1856) letter, even before natural selection had been revealed to him; the Ternate paper on natural selection in fact had also used this distinction as a primary means of argument regarding how natural forces differed from humans' attempts to effect adaptive change. Now, some people were again getting the wrong idea.

Wallace had never bought into any kind of thinking connecting God-induced first causes to natural forms of change, and by the 1860s was beginning to contemplate how humankind's "higher faculties" could come into existence, and themselves be further refined, without such interference. He was likely worried that critics would accuse him of thinking that, in analogy to the way domesticated animals are shaped, humankind can be considered "God's domestic animal" (and in fact see his comments against this notion in a note he added to the second edition of his *Contributions to the Theory of Natural Selection*: Wallace 1871, p. 372). As his review of spiritualism suggested a way around this complaint, it was time to fully separate himself from any Darwin position that might tempt such thoughts.

By July 1866, in fact, Wallace's temporary infatuation with Spencerian materialism, most clearly expressed in the March 1864 paper on the evolution of human races, had run its course (note his own statements to this effect in Wallace 1896; Wallace 1905 v. 1, p. 104 & v. 2, p. 266; and Wallace 1912). Replacing it was a more skeptical view in which more complex kinds of evolutionary causality (*i.e.*, involving spiritualism) were being entertained. On the 23rd of August 1866, in an address before the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, he states:

Anthropology is the science which contemplates man under all his varied aspects (as an animal, and as a moral and intellectual being) in his relations to lower organisms, to his fellow men, and to the universe. The anthropologist seeks to collect together and systematize the facts and the laws which have been brought to light by all those branches of study which, directly or indirectly, have man for their object. These are very various.... Now it is our object as anthropologists to accept the well-ascertained conclusions which have been arrived at by the students of all these various sciences, to search after every new fact which may throw additional light upon any of them, and, as far as we are able, to combine and generalize the whole of the information thus obtained. We cannot, therefore, afford to neglect any facts relating to man, however trivial, unmeaning, or distasteful some of them may appear to us.... It will be only after we have brought together and arranged all the facts and principles which have been established by the various special studies to which I have alluded, that we shall be in a condition to determine the particular lines of investigation most needed to complete our knowledge of man, and may hope ultimately to arrive at some definite conclusions on the great problems which must interest us all – the questions of the origin, the nature, and the destiny of the human race. I would beg you to recollect also that *here* we must treat all these problems as purely questions of science, to be decided solely by facts and by legitimate deductions from facts. (Wallace 1867, pp. 93-94)

In these words are between-the-lines referrals to Wallace's new interest in spiritualism, as is evident from the opening line of a short 22 November 1866 note to Thomas Huxley that accompanied a copy of his newly printed pamphlet version of SAS: "Dear Huxley, – I have

been writing a little on a new branch of Anthropology, and as I have taken your name in vain on the title-page I send you a copy..." (Marchant 1916, p. 418)

Thus began Wallace's re-orientation toward a consideration of the possible dimensions of the "progression of the fittest" phenomenon he first alludes to in SAS. His attack was two-pronged; on the one hand he outlined for public consumption the various aspects of spiritualism bearing on the reception of its communications by individual people. Related works explored not only its moral philosophy, but elements of the characteristics of spirit-human contact: for example, the meaning of prayer, premonitions, and miracles (concerning the last, he took a Spinozian view that these were merely obscure, yet-to-be-scientifically-explained, natural events). But increasingly he ranged beyond treatments of the 'aspects' of spiritualism *per se* to studies of the social elements of the 'progression.' For example, in 1892 he wrote:

...although the natural process of elimination does actually raise the mean level of humanity by the destruction of the worst and most degraded individuals, it can have little or no tendency to develop higher types in each successive age; and this agrees with the undoubted fact that the great men who appeared at the dawn of history and at the culminating epochs of the various ancient civilizations, were not, on the whole, inferior to those of our own age. It remains, therefore, a mystery how and why mankind reached to such lofty pinnacles of greatness in early times, when there seems to be no agency at work, then or now, calculated to do more than weed out the lower types ... (Wallace 1892, p. 149)

Notice here how Wallace is still emphasizing the notion that, although a "natural process of elimination" of unfavorable variations represents the real 'active' element in natural selection, it is incapable by itself of developing novel "higher types" that can be inserted into the process. Mutation theory would soon provide the answer behind such complexification at the biological level, but there was still the matter of "how and why mankind reached to such lofty pinnacles of greatness in early times," yet had progressed but little further. Is Wallace hinting here? Does he really believe that the agency of progress actually exists, but is being resisted in its implementation by selfish motives caused by (and also resulting in) poorly thought-out social policies? This is, remember, the man who only a couple of years earlier had stated how "our present phase of social development is not only extremely imperfect but vicious and rotten at the core." (Wallace 1890, p. 330)

In 1844 or 1845 Wallace read Robert Chambers's anonymously-published *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, and was instantly attracted to its support for the transmutation (*i.e.*, evolution) thesis. He further bought into that author's conclusion that humankind was ultimately destined to evolve into 'superhuman' beings. There is no evidence he ever abandoned that worldview. But the plain fact of the matter seems to be that Wallace never regarded a Darwinian brand of natural selection alone to be capable of supporting the kind of evolution that would ultimately produce such results. The 'progression of the fittest' concept is at its essence an attempt to understand how the 'provident responses' he speaks of in his 1864 presentation on the evolution of human races might come ('evolve') into being: that is, how the notion of social cooperation and

projection can be gently introduced into the human worldview, and then refined in ways avoiding options-restricting forms of inculcation.

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