

Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 36. Wallace, Evolution and Providence.

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Summary: One of Alfred Russel Wallace's most important contributions to thought was his identification of the key role provident behavior assumes in human evolution. In this essay I set out the way this idea influenced his thought process after 1864, and especially how it affected his appreciation of the possible role of spiritualism in evolution. *Key words:* Alfred Russel Wallace, natural selection, provident behavior, human evolution, social evolution, spiritualism

In 1866, as part of his first essay on spiritualism, Alfred Russel Wallace wrote:

Now here again we have a striking supplement to the doctrines of modern science. The organic world has been carried on to a high state of development, and has been ever kept in harmony with the forces of external nature, by the grand law of "survival of the fittest" acting upon ever varying organisations. In the spiritual world, the law of the "progression of the fittest" takes its place, and carries on in unbroken continuity that development of the human mind which has been commenced here. (Wallace 1866, pp. 49-50)

He then makes the bold claim that, insofar as spiritualism is concerned, he has now "shown cause for investigation; to have proved that it is not a subject that can any longer be contemptuously sneered at as unworthy of a moment's enquiry" (Wallace 1866, p. 56). But in reality, his sympathies in this direction had already been established some two years earlier in his famous address on racial evolution to the Anthropological Society, in which he states:

. . . But from the time when this mental and moral advance commenced, and man's physical character became fixed and immutable, a new series of causes would come into action, and take part in his mental growth. The diverse aspects of nature would now make themselves felt, and profoundly influence the character of the primitive man. When the power that had hitherto modified the body, transferred its action to the mind, then races would advance and become improved merely by the harsh discipline of a sterile soil and inclement seasons. Under their influence, a hardier, a more provident, and a more social race would be developed, than in those regions where the earth produces a perennial supply of vegetable food, and where neither foresight nor ingenuity are required to prepare for the rigours of winter. (Wallace 1864a, p. clxiv)

It is apparent from this passage he is supposing there is "a power" in nature that has advanced the cause of evolution by augmenting its execution with a wholly new set of causal influences. His intent was further clarified in comments made in the post-presentation question-and-answer session, in which he offers the following reply:

. . . Dr. Hunt wanted me to explain how I could use such a word as “provident”. Why, is it not perfectly clear that if people live in a country where there is a severe winter, in which little or no food is to be had, that they must provide against the scarcity, and that gradually the race would become a provident race? Therefore, I think I am justified in saying that, given two races of the same capacity, and put one in a tropical and the other in a temperate climate, the one in the temperate climate will become the more provident race of the two. (Wallace 1864, p. clxxxvi)

This notion of ‘provident’ behavior is a key feature of Wallace’s thought at this point, but it soon must have occurred to him that he actually lacked an understanding of how such providence had come into being, and how it could become a defining force for change. Wallace, like Darwin, believed that the adaptive process served survival, but did not extend further than that (leading to the issue of surplusage, the “the question as to why an organism should have a surplusage of mental power beyond the evolutionary needs of its possessor”: Boice 1977). So he began to focus. Two weeks after the ‘Human Races’ presentation he took up the ‘providence’ issue again, in this instance making some comments on a paper delivered by Henry F. J. Guppy at another Anthropological Society meeting, including, as reported:

. . . everyone required a stimulus to exertion. They had never seen the negro in that state of stimulus fitted to develop his moral and intellectual faculties and to enable him to appreciate the benefits of civilisation. When the negroes in our West Indian possessions were emancipated they ought to have been placed in circumstances that would have given them a stimulus to labour. . . . The necessity of exertion to obtain a livelihood was even among ourselves an excellent means of improvement. We had never seen the negro under favourable circumstances. (Wallace 1864b, pp. ccxiii-ccxiv)

Linking the notion of a “stimulus to exertion” to an ability to “appreciate the benefits of civilization” was perhaps a critical step in his thinking, as ‘appreciation’ in this sense is not a part of plant/animal motivation, and had to be considered in a distinct fashion. After a slow summer, Wallace continued this line of thought in a relatively well-known September paper entitled ‘On the Progress of Civilisation in Northern Celebes’. After introducing the natural and anthropological Indonesian setting, he gets to the main point, which is advocacy for the manner of economic cultivation introduced by the Dutch:

Here we have a picture of true savage life, of small isolated communities at war with all around them, subject to the wants and miseries of such a condition, drawing a precarious existence from the luxuriant soil, and living on from generation to generation with no desire for physical amelioration and no prospect of moral advancement. Such was their condition down to the year 1822, when the coffee plant was first introduced and experiments were made as to its cultivation. (Wallace 1865a, p. 63)

He continues with a description of the Dutch colonial influence on the island, which, while of despotic nature, at least seemed to be moving things along in the right direction:

No doubt the system here sketched is open to some objections. It is to a certain extent despotic, and interferes with free trade, free labour, and free communication. . . . [but] Neither the monopoly nor the restrictions on freedom should be considered permanent, or as anything but a step in the march of civilisation; and it is satisfactory to know that the present Dutch Government acknowledge this principle, and are steadily abolishing them; but, as a first step towards the civilisation of a savage race, the system and the mode in

which it is here carried out, appears to me worthy of our most attentive consideration.
(Wallace 1865a, p. 68)

He concludes by suggesting that the English approach to their colonies is an inferior one:

. . . we have brought them into direct contact with English wealth and energy, vigorously developing itself for its own ends, and the result must inevitably be, sooner or later, the extermination of the native race. In Ceylon and in India we have English capital largely invested in coffee and indigo culture, but can we point to any corresponding improvement in the moral or social condition of the natives? (p. 69)

So here is one possible element of provident behavior: the notion that some unasked-for imposition of will might yet lead to a greater freedom and morality, at least in the long run. Planning is important; in colonial settings final causes might not usually be recognized by commercial interests, but they should, at least, inform policies mandated by the overseeing governments. But . . .

Wouldn't it be better for the elements of society to evolve their own plans, without recourse to imposed standards, some of which, as he implies above about the English, might actually be counterproductive? In a response to a paper given at the 16 May 1865 meeting of the Anthropological Society of London, Wallace was recorded as noting:

. . . as a traveller he had seen something of the missionaries and their works, and his general impression was that the success attained was due rather to personal character than to doctrine. He was delighted with the bishop's view of the subject; for, in his opinion, nothing but simple teaching could be effective among savage peoples. The Zulus, with whom Dr. Colenso had to do, were considerably higher in intellectual status than, for instance, the aborigines of Australia, who can hardly count above three or five, and are incapable of comprehending that two and three make five. To such people it is idle to speak of religion, they cannot understand what it means. The best effects are produced when the missionary shows that he has no selfish interest – that he seeks only to do good; and this, in the speaker's opinion, would move the people more than aught besides. (Wallace 1865b)

So, it would seem that teaching or leading by example might be a better route than outright despotism. Ten days earlier, in a letter to the Editor of *Reader*, he had written:

. . . It seems to me, therefore, that if you can arrange matters so that every voter may be enabled to give his vote uninfluenced by immediate fear of injury or hope of gain (by intimidation or bribery), the only motives left to influence him are his convictions as to the effects of certain measures, or a certain policy, on himself as an individual, on his class, or on the whole community. The combined effect of these convictions on his mind will inevitably go to form his idea of "what is right" politically, that idea which, we quite agree with Mr. Mill, will in most cases influence his vote, rather than any one of the more or less remote personal interests which have been the foundation of that idea. From this point of view, I should be inclined to maintain that the right of voting is a "personal right" rather than a "public duty," and that a man is in no sense "responsible" for the proper exercise of it to the public, any more than he is responsible for the convictions that lead him to vote as he does. It seems almost absurd to say that each man is responsible to every or to any other man for the free exercise of his infinitesimal share in the government of the country, because, in that case, each man in turn would act upon others exactly as he is acted upon by them, and thus the final result must be the same as if each had voted entirely uninfluenced by others. ***What, therefore, is the use of such mutual influence and***

responsibility? You cannot by such means increase the average intelligence or morality of the country . . . [my emphasis] (Wallace 1865c)

Thus, some kind of initiative had to be injected if we expected to have the impact of “increasing the average intelligence or morality of the country.” Some few weeks later, in a short essay contributed to *Reader* entitled ‘How to Civilize Savages’, Wallace returned to the subject of enlightened example:

. . . In Java, where the natives are Mohammedans, and scarcely a Christian convert exists, the good order established by the Dutch Government and their pure administration of justice, together with the example of civilized Europeans widely scattered over the country, have greatly improved the physical and moral condition of the people. In all these cases, however, the personal influence of kindly, moral, and intelligent men, devoted wholly to the work of civilization, has been wanting; and this form of influence in the case of missionaries is very great. A missionary who is really earnest, and has the art (and the heart) to gain the affections of his flock, may do much in eradicating barbarous customs, and in raising the standard of morality and happiness. But he may do all this quite independently of any form of sectarian theological teaching, and it is a mistake too often made to impute all to the particular doctrines inculcated, and little or nothing to the other influences we have mentioned. We believe that the purest morality, the most perfect justice, the highest civilization, and the qualities that tend to render men good, and wise, and happy, may be inculcated quite independently of fixed forms or dogmas, and perhaps even better for the want of them. (Wallace 1865d, p. 671)

Perhaps at this point Wallace had begun to key on a particular aspect of ‘provident’ behavior: surely, in a more perfect world, happiness was not to be achieved through the forced imposition of dogmatic beliefs. Rather, it would be the end result of more enlightened behaviors, and the latter could only be interpreted as those which best harmonized with the various limits and opportunities set out by both the environment and one’s social milieu. Again, ‘provident’ behaviors were those that looked ahead, anticipating or even exploiting contingencies that so far had remained remote in time and space.

Just at this time Wallace began to take seriously the reports coming from his older sister, Fanny, regarding spiritualism. Fanny, and Wallace’s young wife Annie, apparently already were believers in spiritualistic teachings, and it undoubtedly occurred to him that the spirit beings alleged to exist as part of the so-called ‘Spirit Realm’ might represent the “kindly, moral, and intelligent personal influence” that was needed to help humans identify ever more provident behaviors. Over the summer he immersed himself in the written literature of spiritualism; he also attended a number of séances. On 23 September 1865, in a letter to his friend George Rolleston, he wrote:

I look upon the doctrine of future rewards and punishments as a motive to action to be radically bad, and as bad for savages as for civilized men. I look upon it, above all, as a bad preparation for a future state. I believe that the *only way* to teach and to civilize, whether children or savages, is through the influence of love and sympathy; and the great thing to teach them is to have the most absolute respect for the rights of others, and to accustom them to receive pleasure from the happiness of others. After this education of habit, they should be taught the great laws of the universe and of the human mind, and the precepts of morality must be placed on their only sure foundation – the conviction that they alone can guide mankind to the truest and most widespread happiness. I cannot see that the teaching of all this can be furthered by the dogmas of any religion, and I do not believe

that those dogmas really have any effect in advancing morality in one case out of a thousand. (Wallace 1905, Vol. 2, p. 54)

Importantly, the possible relationship between mind and environment he was now contemplating was actually not so different from what he understood to be going on between body and environment. In the latter instance, natural selection involved the opening up of new niches and adaptations; at the level of consciousness, in theory, spirit-originated feedback might encourage increasingly provident thoughts, and then, newly creative acts. How? By causing us to revisit (through dreams and other intuitions) our previous acts, a process leading to reassessment, and perhaps a vow to not make the same mistakes the next time around.

Wallace arguably has this figured out by his completion of *The Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural* in mid-1866. In this work, as noted earlier, he writes:

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. (pp. 49-50)

Thus, an extension of evolutionary *results* made possible by the emergence of a new form of influence: one operationalized through consciousness, at the level of internal dialog.

[I would be remiss not to specially notice three points made by my reviewers here. First: In a personal communication VRLD suggests that “a brief nod to Bernard Lightman, Gowan Dawson, Peter Bowler and especially Efram Sera-Shriar on Victorian spiritualism (notably Wallace’s) and science would help frame this interpretation within a broader historiography”. While a valid point, my intention here, in the form of a ‘Note’, was not to work up a full review of Wallace’s concerns in this arena (such as was last best attempted some fifty years ago, in 1974, by Malcolm Kottler), but simply to identify a connection that has been overlooked. Second: The same reviewer thought I had underplayed “Wallace’s racial assumptions” and how these reflected (at least to some degree) period tendencies toward “paternalistic racism”. Again, this is somewhat beyond-subject here, but in any case I see little evidence of this in Wallace’s writings, beyond his believing that any colonial process, even if well-meaning, could hardly avoid some degree of paternalism. (For the single most revealing Wallace writing in this regard, see Wallace 1906.) Third: JMRC made the excellent observation “that although there is indeed an initial link between spiritualism and his early anthropological work, this idea of provident behaviour matured as part of his reflections on the nationalisation of the land.” Sure enough, some of the consequences of improvident thinking at the social level are discussed in Wallace’s three best known works on land nationalization (Wallace 1880, 1882, 1883), and I would agree with JMRC that these mentions “are a reflection of some mental maturity or life experience” on Wallace’s part. JMRC sees no “direct relationship with spiritualism” there, but I would argue there is such – if only to the extent that the posed spiritualist ‘mental interventions’ suggest a general way provident thoughts may originate and be heeded, whereas land nationalization itself, as a social initiative, would constitute provident thoughts put into practical operation!]

Final Remarks

This working out of the place of provident behavior in evolution is one of Wallace's greatest gifts to the world. It seems to be a valid concept, regardless of whether one projects an alleged course of 'spirit influence' (or even, as some propose, alien interventions into our thought processes!), or prefers to accept more conventional interpretations of what dreams and other mental phenomena represent. The key point is that we are making use of the cues/clues hidden in our past and present-day surroundings to continually reassess our position, through emotional and intellectual re-investment. A provident society is not just a consuming one, it is one that becomes better and better able to envision the workings of a self-sustaining future.

Unfortunately, the jury is still out as to whether we as a species are up to the challenge. On the one side, the inevitable Malthusian constraints on population growth; on the other, whatever moral and intellectual forces we can summon to override them. It is sometimes suggested that technology can continue to save us from the imperfections of our character, but this is a shallow thought: does anyone really think that an earth populated by a trillion or more humans and their machines (and not much else) would be any fun to live in?

It seems apparent that, if we wish to avoid a catastrophic future, something more than a dependency on the simple technological devices invented by intellect is required. We instead need a global improvement in moral/ethical values; indeed, Wallace himself stressed this in dozens of his writings (beginning with the final impassioned pages of his *Malay Archipelago* in 1869). Admittedly, perhaps this actually can at some point be achieved deterministically, by intellect (for example, through some kind of medico-biological hack that alters our brain functions), but in that instance it would be intellect serving moral compass, and not our seemingly endless appetite for more and more material consumption. In *Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural* Wallace wrote:

. . . there is for all an eternal progress, a progress solely dependent on the power of will in the development of spirit nature. There are no evil spirits but the spirits of bad men, and even the worst are surely if slowly progressing. Life in the higher spheres has beauties and pleasures of which we have no conception. Ideas of beauty and power become realised by the will, and the infinite cosmos becomes a field where the highest developments of intellect may range in the acquisition of boundless knowledge. (Wallace 1866, p. 50)

Maybe so, but along the way we are facing a lot of daunting challenges. For just a few examples: How can we gracefully but quickly move toward having fewer children? or toward replacing the current 'expansion' model of business with one based (only) on improving efficiency of operation? or toward ending 'pet culture', our ethically dubious enslavement of the animal world (not to mention its costs in terms of the ravages of invasive diseases and unwanted feral populations)? Fill in the dotted line with your own choices . . . Even the most unassuming can be excused for believing that the spirits will be hard-pressed to get the job done, at least on their own.

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