

Transcription, June 2016:

A.M.E. Church Review 6 (October 1889): 161-165 (Henry L. Phillips).

[p. 161]

‘VI. Alfred Russell Wallace, LL.D., F.L.S., etc., on Darwinism.’

By the Rev. Henry L. Phillips, Rector of the Church of the Crucifixion, Philadelphia, Pa.

The diversities of life on our planet is a most interesting subject. Darwinism attempts to account for it. Hence its hold on the thinking public. It says these diversities are to be accounted for not by separate creative fiats but by a process of development—evolution.

Dr. Wallace’s book, “Darwinism,” is worth reading. It will bear studying. It is full of the result of patient research and cogent reasoning. His own position is summed up in the phrase: “I therefore claim for my book the position of being the advocate of pure Darwinism.

The difference that exists between mammals, birds, reptiles and fishes must not be accounted for by “special creation.” “The idea of special creation or any altogether exceptional mode of production is absolutely extinct!”

The chapter on the struggle for existence is dramatic. Dr. Wallace thinks that this struggle is one of the most important elements in bringing about the origin of species in plants and animals. “There is perhaps no phenomenon of nature that is at once so important, so universal and so little understood as the struggle for existence continually going on among all organized beings.” In this struggle, countless millions of life yearly perish. That sight draws these words from a brilliant writer: “Pain grief, disease and death—are these the inventions of a loving God? That no animal shall rise to excellence except by being fatal to the life of others, is this the law of a kind Creator? It is useless to say that pain has its benevolence, that massacre has its mercy. Why is it so ordained that bad should be the raw material of good? Pain is not the less pain because it is useful; murder is not the less murder because it is conducive to development. Here is blood upon the hand still, and all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten it.”*

Professor Huxley adopts similar views. He sees in the “struggle for existence” myriads of generations of herbivorous animals “tormented and devoured by carnivores; carnivores and herbivores” subject to all the miseries incidental to old age, disease and overmultiplication. He says: “were our [p. 162] ears sharp enough, we should hear sighs and groans of pain like those heard by Dante at the gate of hell.” He therefore concludes: “The world cannot be governed by what we call benevolence.”

Our author thinks that the “torments” and “miseries” of animals are more imaginary than real. Animals do not suffer from anticipation of death. Their lives are almost a perpetual enjoyment. Then, violent deaths, if not too prolonged, are painless and easy. Persons who have been seized by lions or tigers say they suffered little or no pain, physical or mental. Livingstone describes such an occasion when the “shock produced a stupor similar to that which seems to be felt by a mouse after the first shake of the cat. It causes a sort of dreaminess, in which there is no sense of pain or feeling of terror, though I was quite conscious of what was happening... The shake annihilated fear and allowed no sense of horror in looking at the beast.”

As a rule animals are supplied with abundance of food. They grow vigorously. They enjoy life. "We err in giving to animals feelings and emotions they do not possess. On the whole...the popular idea of the struggle for existence entailing misery and pain on the animal world is the very reverse of the truth."

The chapter on "Natural Selection" affords much food for thought. Through variation, rapid multiplication and the struggle for existence, our author easily accounts for species. In this way the varieties found in the human race would be explained. The theory of the creation of separate races finds no foothold here. Climate, soil, food, area of country will determine the mode of life. That mode will slowly but surely affect the character. It will affect even the physical nature. Under such a law, which can be easily understood, how important the environment becomes!

In the chapter on "Warning Coloration and Mimicry" animals exhibit a marvelous amount of thinking. They adopt means to accomplish ends that must put to shame many a man. There is the skunk. Apparently it is conscious of the fact that it possesses a mighty weapon of defense. It feels safe among enemies. Its motion is slow, bold and defiant. Is it not thinking? Does it not seem to say, "I know that you would like to kill me; But come near enough to me if you dare!" There are some insects that are objectionable to birds and other insect-eating animals. They possess a certain color by which they become known. They are avoided. What will other insects of a similar shape, but much relished as food, do? Try as far as they possibly can to become possessors of the same color as the insects that are avoided. They gradually succeed, and thus are preserved. Do they not try to avoid death?

That part of the book, however, that is of most interest to the general reader is "Darwinism applied to Man." Our author [p. 163] does not altogether walk in the same path as Mr. Darwin. He says man's body agrees, in its essential features, with the bodies of all other animals. He rejects special creation as to man. "He (man) possesses the same number of limbs terminating in the same number of digits as belong fundamentally to the mammalian class. His senses are identical with theirs and his organs of sense are the same in number and occupy the same relative position." He believes that every existing group of mammalia has descended from one common ancestral form; that each family, each order, has come from some more generalized type; that man has no distinct origin from this mammalian class. "As we seek in vain in our physical structure and the course of its development for any indication of an origin independent of the rest of the animal world, we are compelled to reject the idea of a special creation for man as being entirely unsupported by facts as well as in the highest degree improbable." He sees, by means of environment, adaptation to new surroundings and natural selection, the time when ancestral man first walked erect, with hands freed from any active part in locomotion, with brain-power sufficient to cause him to use the material world as his servant. This evolution he puts somewhere in the Miocene or early Pliocene age. Man's birthplace is somewhere in that enormous plateau "extending from Persia right across Thibet and Siberia to Manchouria." This is a most convenient portion of the globe for our ancestor to have stepped into manhood. There is a missing link somewhere, if our author's theory is right. To-day there exists an impassable gulf between the lowest type of man and the most highly developed animal, whether it be an orang-outang or any other creature. When Dr. Wallace's reasoning is objected to; when he is told that the conclusion reached is not sound; when he is reminded that theory and science will not unite to reach an unquestioned conclusion; when he is asked to point out the various stages of man's development; when the fact that no traces of the missing links or even of man's existence during late tertiary times are to be found, the Doctor calmly answers, "No part of the world is so entirely unexplored by the geologist as this very region," where I have put man's birthplace! Just here the most learned Doctor needs to be reminded that is theory and not science.

But what of man's moral and intellectual nature? Mr. Darwin (according to Dr. Wallace) thinks that, like his body, they are developed from the lower animals. Dr. Wallace does not agree with that statement. He takes the ground that the mathematical, musical and artistic faculties in man could not have been developed under the law of natural selection. There are certain mental faculties which either do not exist at all or exist in a very rudimentary condition in savages, which appear almost suddenly and in perfect development in the higher civilized races. These faculties are further characterized by their sporadic character. They are well developed [p. 164] in a small proportion of the community. The amount of variation in their development is enormous. "Each of these characteristics is totally inconsistent with any action of the law of natural selection in the production of the faculties referred to; and the facts, taken in their entirety, compel us to recognize some origin for them wholly distinct from that which has served to account for the animal characteristics—whether bodily or mental—of man."

These faculties, then, are not derived. They are of a spiritual essence or nature. Dr. Wallace believes that the animal man, a higher development of all other animals—all having a common origin—has had a spiritual nature superadded to the animal nature. "On the hypothesis of this spiritual nature superadded to the animal nature of man, we are able to understand much that is otherwise mysterious or unintelligible in regard to him, especially the enormous influence of ideas, principles and beliefs over his whole life and actions." If it is objected that the admitted continuity of man's progress from the brute does not admit of the introduction of new causes, Dr. Wallace answers that there must at least have been three stages in the development of the organic world when some new cause or power must necessarily have come in to action.

1. The changes from inorganic to organic, when the earliest vegetable cell, or the living protoplasm out of which it arose, first appeared. Will not the increase of complexity of chemical compounds account for the change? No. Increase of complexity can never produce living protoplasm. Here a new power, which is not the result of chemical changes, comes into view. Call it vitality, "since it gives to certain forms of matter all those characters and properties which constitute life."

2. The next stage introduces us to sensation and consciousness—characteristics of the animal world. Here one meets with an ego, a thing that feels, that is conscious of existence. Did this ego start into existence at a certain stage "of complexity of atomic constitution?" Preposterous! Something new has arisen. A new, outside Power is at work. "No verbal explanation or attempt at explanation—such as the statement that life is the result of the molecular forces of the protoplasm, or that the whole existing organic universe, from the amoeba up to man, was latent in the fire-mist from which the solar system was developed—can afford any mental satisfaction, or help us in any way to a solution of the mystery."

3. The characteristic and nobler faculties of man, those that rise him furthest above brutes, those that are capable of indefinite advancement—whence are they? No theory of development by the same laws which have determined the progressive development of the organic world in general will account for them.

These stages of progress from inorganic matter to man point to an unseen universe—a world of spirit to which the world of matter is altogether subordinate.

[p. 165] Our author does not believe in the materialistic theory, though discarding special creation for man's body. He thinks we are not products of the blind, eternal forces of the universe. The world has a *raison d'être*—the ultimate appearance of man under laws of development. "Evil" on the earth is one of

the most efficient forms of growth. “For we know that the noblest faculties of man are strengthened and perfected by struggle and effort; it is by unceasing warfare against existing evils, and in the midst of difficulty and danger that energy, courage, self-reliance and industry have become the common qualities of the Northern races; it is by the battle with moral evil in all its hydra-headed forms that the still nobler qualities of justice and mercy and humanity and self-sacrifice have been steadily increasing in the world.”

What then is the “Darwinian Theory?” According to Dr. Wallace, when carried to its logical conclusion, it ends in the belief in the spiritual nature of man. It shows man’s body developed from a lower animal, under the law of natural selection. It points to intellectual and moral faculties not developed. For the origin of these faculties an adequate cause must be sought in the “unseen universe of spirit.”

Note

*Winwood Read.

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2017.