

Transcription, January 2015:

Daily Mail (London) No. 2355 (4 Nov. 1903): 4e.

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‘Other Worlds. Is Earth the Only Peopled Planet?’

Sir William Ramsay, Professor of Chemistry at University College, London, writes:

I do not see the use of arguments where facts, the only possible premises, are wholly lacking.

But perhaps the following considerations may interest your readers: Animal organisms consist mostly of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus, calcium, and sulphur; the compounds which these elements build up in living matter are conditioned so as to be moderately stable in a moist atmosphere—that is, in presence of oxygen and water.

The spectroscope tells us that the sun consists, generally speaking, of the same elements as those of which the planets are built; and we have also spectroscopic evidence that some stars other than the sun consist of nearly the same elements.

It may be inferred that their planets are more or less like our earth; it is also likely that many of them among the legions which doubtless exist have a temperature comparable with that of our earth, and, if so, they may well be inhabited by organisms like our animals and man. On the whole, the probability is in favour of this notion; it is by no means absurd.

Again, we know of consciousness only in association with carbon compounds such as we and our fellow-creatures (in the widest sense of that word) consist of; but is there anything to hinder consciousness from being associated with beings constructed of compounds of other elements, capable of existing at temperatures at which we should cease to exist?

And, again, is there anything absurd in supposing that consciousness may exist associated with forms of matter the existence of which we are just beginning to suspect? The fact is, we know next to nothing; moreover, all we know is necessarily related to ourselves, in so far as it is a formation of our own minds, as well as of objects external to us. Whether objects would appear the same to minds differently constructed, with sense channels which we do not possess, is a question which may well be raised.

Imagine a being with senses capable of recognising and interpreting longer or shorter ethereal waves than those which we react to; what would the world and nature appear to such a one? Totally different. Yet it is quite within the bounds of possibility that organisms formed of elements other than those we are made of might be capable of existence, with different sense-channels.

I should have thought that Dr. Wallace, whose belief in an “unseen universe” is well known, would have been the last man to write such a book as “Man’s Place in the Universe.”

William Ramsay.

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The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2015.