

Transcription (from *Trove*), July 2014:

The Register (Adelaide, Australia) 69(18121) (10 Dec. 1904): 10c-10d (anon.). [review of 4th ed.]

[p. 10c]

‘A Great Problem.’

“Man’s Place in the Universe,” by Alfred Russel Wallace; G. Bell & Sons, London.—It seems only yesterday—in reality it was last year—when a sensation was caused by Dr. Wallace in scientific circles through the issue of the first edition of the volume now before the reviewer. The book was entitled, besides the name given above, “A Study of the Results of Scientific Research in Relation to the Unity or Plurality of Worlds.” It has now gone into a fourth edition, with a new chapter upon “The Additional Argument Dependent upon the Theory of Evolution.” The spirit of the author in attacking his immensely difficult but fascinating theme was indicated in the suggestive stanza with which he introduced the book on its initial publication:—

O, glittering host! O, golden line!
I would I had an angel’s ken,
Your deepest secrets to divine,
And read your mysteries to men.

That quotation, indeed, represents the purpose of the learned doctor in all his literary productions, not one of which can be safely neglected by the student of science. Though some of the books of biography refer to Dr. Wallace as “an occasional author,” he has produced 15 works, mostly of great importance, besides innumerable pamphlets and papers on almost every variety of topic. It is hard to realize that a new generation has arisen since the appearance of “The Malay Archipelago” caused so much controversy; but Dr. Wallace is now nearly 82 years old. Yet, though he has been toiling hard practically all his life, his writing hand has clearly not forgotten its cunning, his mind maintains its strength, his insight is as keen as ever, and his literary style was never more terse or vigorous or luminous. In a preface to the fourth edition of “Man’s Place in the Universe” he briefly alludes to the criticisms of the earlier issues. While he is pleased with the general tone of them—regards them, in fact, as flattering—he complains that nearly all are by literary rather than scientific men. He had been hopeful that the latter would have assailed his theory, and would have marshalled the evidence upon which they determined it to be unsound. In the absence of such criticism he was able to reproduce the work with no substantial alteration; but in the new chapter already mentioned he has attempted to supply one deficiency:—

Partly through pressure of time while completing the volume, I omitted altogether the argument from the general theory of organic evolution—an argument which is itself as strong as, or—as I am inclined to think—even stronger than, the purely physical argument set forth in my first edition.

Briefly summarized, the conclusions of the modern astronomers regarding the matter under consideration are:—

1. That the stellar universe forms one connected whole, and, though of enormous extent, is yet finite, and its extent determinable.
2. That the solar system is situated in the plane of the Milky Way, and not far removed from the centre of that plane. The earth is, therefore, nearly in the centre of the stellar universe.

3. That this universe consists throughout of the same kinds of matter, and is subjected to the same physical and chemical laws.

The belief at which Dr. Wallace has arrived, and to which the argument in this book tends, is that there are “enormous probabilities” in favour of these following conclusions:—

1. That no other planet in the solar system than our earth is inhabited, or habitable.
2. That the probabilities are almost as great against any other sun possessing inhabited planets.
3. That the nearly central position of our sun is probably a permanent one, and has been specially favourable—perhaps absolutely essential—to life development on the earth.

Throughout the touch is reverent, and the closing paragraph betrays an almost wistful and yearning solicitude for “more light.”

Of infinity in any of its aspects we can really know nothing—nothing but that it exists and is inconceivable. It is a thought that oppresses and overwhelms; yet many speak of it glibly as if they know what it contains and even use that assumed knowledge as an argument against views that are unacceptable to themselves. To me its existence is absolute, but unthinkable. That way madness lies.

As a means of conveying to the reader a proper sense of his absence of dogmatism and of his truly scientific spirit of enquiry, Dr. Wallace lays special stress on two verses from the poems of the late Poet Laureate. First, the question—

Will my tiny spark of being
Wholly vanish in your deeps and heights?
Must my day be dark by reason,
O ye Heavens, of your boundless nights,
Rush of suns and roll of systems,
And your fiery clash of meteorites?

And then the answer—

Spirit, nearing yon dark portal,
At the limit of thy human state,
Fear not thou the hidden purpose
Of that Power which alone is great,
Nor the myriad world, His shadow,
Nor the silent Opener of the Gate.

From this expression the writer passes to his additional argument relative to the theory of evolution, and first of all indulges in stupendous calculations with reference to the laws of coincidences and probabilities. The theory which he finally adduces from the mass of evidence handled is that “the improbabilities of the independent development of man even in one other world—and far more in thousands of millions of worlds (as usually supposed)—are now shown to be so great as to approach very closely, if not to attain, the actually impossible. This argument is applied only to those who believe that the entire material universe, inclusive of man himself, is the product of the immutable laws and forces of nature—the view of pure science—the monistic view.

But to those who believe that the universe is the product of mind, that it shows proofs of design, and that man is the designed outcome of it, and who yet urge that other worlds in unknown numbers have also been designed to produce man, and have actually produced him—to these I reply that such a view assumes a knowledge of the Creator's purpose and mode of action which we do not possess; that we have no guide to His purposes but the facts we actually know; that we do know that here, on our earth, man is the culmination of one line of evolution, not of many, and that the presumption therefore is that no line of evolution in other worlds under other conditions could produce him. But, further, we have no reason to suppose that the purpose of man's existence in the universe requires him to exist in infinite numbers, or that the number of human beings that have been, or will be, produced here is insufficient. On a moderate estimate of the antiquity of man there must already have been produced many millions of millions of human souls, and these millions may yet be enormously increased by such a course of development of the stellar universe as may keep up the needful supply of light and heat for a few more millions of centuries—a thing far more probable, far easier to conceive, and far more in accordance with the working of natural law, than the independent application of a whole series of almost identical animal forms up to man in many other worlds.

The value of this book is greatly enhanced by a copious and well-arranged index, which, is in itself almost an epitome of the volume.

[\[Return\]](#)

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2014.