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[p. 4d]

‘Man’s Place in the Universe. Dr. Russel Wallace’s New Book. Reviewed by the Bishop of Ripon.’<sup>1</sup>

This is a book which cannot fail to command attention, for it is the work of a man eminent in science on a subject of entrancing interest. Everybody will wish to know all that can be known on man’s place in the universe, and everybody will wish to know what Dr. Wallace has to say about it.

The main interest of the book centres in the unique position which Dr. Wallace claims for man and his home. Two facts, for which Dr. Wallace claims at least high probability, contribute to this uniqueness: (1) our solar system holds a central position in the stellar universe, and (2) our earth possesses the distinction of being the only habitable planet in our solar system.

Dr. Wallace commences his book with a survey of early ideas. In spite of errors, certain striking approximations to the truth were made by the observations of early times. Posidonius, a century before the Christian Era, determined the circumference of the earth to be about 28,600 miles, “a wonderfully close approximation, considering the very imperfect data at his command.” The earth, however, was held to be the centre, and the universe was believed to exist “solely for the earth and its inhabitants.”

#### THE ONLY INHABITED PLANET.

The discovery of the position of the earth in relation to other planets suggested the idea that these planets, like the earth, might be inhabited. Dr. Wallace points out that religious rather than scientific considerations led to this belief. In his judgment “the probabilities and the weight of direct evidence tend to an exactly opposite conclusion” (p. 9). He points out that writers who have advocated the view that the planets are inhabited have been content to show that it is possible. This, however, was to ignore the crux of the whole problem, which is the question: Could life have been “developed from its earliest rudiments up to the production of the highest vertebrates and man?” (p. 19). The answer to this question is, according to Dr. Wallace, fatal to these interesting speculations. A careful consideration of “the problem of geological time and of the mild climates and generally uniform conditions that had prevailed throughout all geological epochs” convinced Dr. Wallace that the weight of evidence was strong against the probability or possibility of any other planet being inhabited.

The evidence for this conclusion is presented to us in the central and later chapters of his book. We are first reminded of the essential characteristics of organic life; the physical conditions required by that life are set forth. The earth provides for us the conditions which are indispensable for life as we know it: the prevalence of mild climactic conditions; the distribution of land and water; the equalising influence of water on temperature are shown to play important parts in providing these conditions. The value of the atmosphere is pointed out; few of us understand the clouds and the function they fulfil in rendering our world “a habitable and enjoyable one.”

The great ocean of air in which we live is “a wonderful piece of machinery, as it were, which in its various component bases, its action and reaction upon the water and the land, its production of electrical discharges, and its furnishing the elements from which the whole fabric of organic life is composed and perpetually renewed, may be truly considered to be the very source and foundation of life itself.” From this survey of the conditions requisite for life as we know it, and of the marvellous and delicately adjusted arrangements which supply those conditions on our globe, Dr. Wallace reaches the strong probability that our earth is the only inhabited planet.

#### MIND AND MATTER.

And what is the position which our earth holds in the stellar universe, which is one connected whole of vast but finite extent? The universe of stars is in itself approximately a sphere—spherical or spheroidal; the Milky Way is a vast moving belt into which the greater portion of the matter of the whole stellar universe has been drawn; in the plane of this great Milky Way, which may be regarded as the equator of the stellar universe, our solar system is placed; and the position it holds is near, very near, the centre of this plane. Thus our solar system holds a very unique place in the stellar universe, and our earth, as probably the only inhabited planet, a very unique distinction in our solar system.

Some will no doubt view these conclusions as having little bearing upon the question of the intelligence which guides the universe. Such thinkers will say that somehow and somewhere man, or some being like man, would have appeared, if not on this planet yet other where in the course of a fortunate coincidence such as that which produced man. Others, however, will, according to Dr. Wallace, reach a happier conclusion than this haphazard one. Believing that mind is essentially superior to matter, they will refuse to think that life, consciousness, and mind are mere products of matter (p. 319); they will see in the unique facts and features which characterise the development of the earth and its fitness as the abode of man an additional proof of the supremacy of mind:

“Looking at the long and slow and complex growth of nature that preceded his (man’s) appearance, the immensity of the stellar universe with its thousand million suns, and the vast æons of time during which it has been developing—all these seem only the appropriate and harmonious surroundings, the necessary supply of material, the sufficiently spacious workshop for the production of that planet which was to produce first the organic world, and then man.”

#### THE GREAT ESSENTIAL.

Throughout the book are scattered facts of untold interest, but these I pass by to fasten on one word of earnest appeal on a practical matter—the importance of fresh air.

“The huge and ever-increasing cities, the vast manufacturing towns belching forth smoke and poisonous gases, with the crowded dwellings, where millions are forced to live under the most terrible insanitary conditions, are witnesses to this criminal apathy, this incredible recklessness and inhumanity... Yet this is the one great and primary essential of a people's health and well-being, to which everything should for the time be subordinate... This is the gospel that should be preached, in season and out of season, till the nation listens and is convinced. Let this be our claim: Pure air and pure water for every inhabitant of the British Isles...”

“Remember! we claim to be a people of high civilisation, of advanced science, of great humanity and of enormous wealth! For very shame, do not let us say, ‘We cannot arrange matters so that our people may all breathe unpolluted, unpoisoned air!’” (Pp. 260, 261.)

Thousands will welcome this cry which makes for the physical fitness and well-being of the people.

#### A WORD TO THE RELIGIOUS WORLD.

Such is a brief account of Dr. Wallace’s latest work. As the veteran man of science, who has a right to share with Darwin the laurels of a great discovery, his work will be read with respect and attention, and there will be multitudes who will be fascinated with the unique and dramatic position which it assigns to man and his home. It is not for me to express an opinion as to the weight of the arguments which Dr. Wallace has marshalled; the verdict on these must be given by experts and not by laymen. One thing, however, I venture to hope, and that is that the religious world will not set up a hasty cry of exultation. I am sure that Dr. Wallace is the last person who would wish that his work should be greeted in this fashion. I hope that all, whether their special interests be scientific or theological, will receive Dr. Wallace’s book with respect, candour, and quietness. Whether his conclusions will be finally accepted or not, man is still man, and his position in stellar spaces can add but little to his real dignity or worth. It would be quite harmonious to that dignity that we should occupy some unique position in the universe of matter, but the reality and reach of his powers, the undeniable, undecipherable facts of his consciousness and of his belief in righteousness, would not be impaired were it not so. It is the feeling of vastness, as J. S. Mill said long ago, which impresses us and imposes on us when we interrogate the starry universe; but magnanimity, fidelity, truth, and love are more than whole realms of measureless space, and the power to think and to do right in scorn of consequence is a nobler heritage than a conspicuous place in the Milky Way, or a central position in the stellar universe.

<sup>1</sup>“Man’s Place in the Universe.” By Alfred Russel Wallace. (Chapman and Hall.) 12s. 6d. net.

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