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[p. 2f]

‘Man and the World’s Purpose. Dr. A. R. Wallace’s New Book. How the World Was Made for Man.’

Dr. Alfred Russell Wallace is a great scientist. The fact that he is a member of the Order of Merit is but a small tribute to his greatness of mind and heart.

Surveying the world of nature in all its variety and profusion, he has (says “Public Opinion”) not omitted to take note of that animal which some scientists ignore—man. To him the problem of “man’s place in the universe” is supreme. And now in the evening of his days he brings to a focus all that immense range of knowledge which eighty-eight long years of untiring industry and study have placed within his grasp, and of which he has given us instalments in many books.

THE WORLD OF LIFE.

In a new volume, “The “World of Life,” he probes the heavens that he may find out that great mystery—What is man? What is life? No wonder, the book has already entered a third edition. It is the supreme romance, a labyrinth of facts, a pool of wonder, a vindication of a scientist’s faith, a piercing glance into ultimate mysteries, and to all who love their fellows an extraordinary stimulus to be up and doing so that they at least may not hinder that triumph of spiritual perfection which was certain from the moment that man first breathed the breath of life. But which man, in his ignorance, has, does, and will delay for all too long.

THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE.

For Dr. Wallace seeks to prove that all the wonders of the world which he parades before us in their splendour imply “first, a Creative Power, which so constituted matter as to render these marvels possible; next, a directive mind which is demanded at every step of the process we term growth; and, lastly, an ultimate purpose in the very existence of the whole vast life-world in all its long course of evolution throughout the sons of geological time.

“This purpose, which alone throws light on many of the mysteries of its mode of evolution,” Dr. Wallace holds “to be the development of man, the one crowning product of the whole cosmic process of life development; the only being which can to some extent comprehend nature; which can perceive and trace out her modes of action; which can appreciate the hidden forces and motions everywhere at work, and can deduce from them all a supreme and overruling mind as their necessary cause.”

Is it any wonder that a scientist with that mighty perspective and belief should also be an ardent social reformer? How with such a vision should he fail to “follow the Gleam” and end those things which would end those things which would dim it for others?

WHERE DARWIN STOPPED.

We propose to call special attention to this point to-day, returning another time to consider the amazing facts of world-life which the book contains. Dr. Wallace states that in this book he has attempted to “summarise and complete my half-century of thought and work on the Darwinian theory of evolution. In several directions I have extended the scope and application of theory, and have shown that it is capable of explaining many of the phenomena of living things hitherto thought to be beyond its range.” These phenomena include the distribution of plants and animals, the geological record, bird migration, insect colouration, and marking.

“But,” adds Dr. Wallace, “besides the discussion of these and several other allied subjects, the most prominent feature of my book is that I enter into popular yet critical examination of those underlying fundamental problems which Darwin purposely excluded from his works as being beyond the scope of his inquiry. Such are the nature and causes of life itself, and more especially of its most fundamental and mysterious powers—growth and reproduction.”

Dr. Russel Wallace does not accept the assertion that everything exists because it is eternal. “A critical examination of the subject demonstrates,” he says, “that everything but the absolute unconditioned must have had a beginning.”

PURPOSE EVERYWHERE.

Face to face with his labyrinth of facts, Dr. Wallace is pursued with the endless query, Why? Why? Why? He sees purpose everywhere, and, looking down the long corridor of time which links together the eons and ages, he sees God within the shadow making straight the world’s paths, so that man and woman may pace them in peace.

Here is Dr. Wallace’s prose poem of the world’s great purpose:—

“The overwhelming complexity and diversity of this vast cosmos in its every part and detail is the great fundamental characteristic that our highest science has brought prominently to our notice; but neither science nor religion has given us the slightest clue as to why it should be so. Religion says:—“God made it so,” and sometimes adds, “It was God’s will; it is impious to seek any other reason.”

“In this present work I have endeavoured to suggest a reason which appeals to me as both a sufficient and an intelligible one: it is that this earth with its infinitude of life and beauty and mystery of the universe in the midst of which we are placed, with its overwhelming immensities of suns and nebulae, of light and motion, are as they are, firstly, for the development of life culminating in man; secondly, as a vast school house for the higher education of the human race in preparation for the enduring spiritual life to which it is destined.

“I have endeavoured to show that some portion at least of what seems a superfluity of elements in our earth-structure has served the purpose of aiding the gradual progress of man from barbarism to material civilisation, while another portion has furnished him with materials which have alone enabled him to penetrate into the two unknown worlds with which he was encompassed—those of the almost infinitely great and of the almost infinitely little; but both alike attractive and grand in their revelations; both offering ever fresh vistas of unfathomed mysteries; both impressing upon him the existence of immanent forces and controlling mind power as their only possible cause.

GOD IN NATURE.

“I suggest further, that these deeper and deeper mysteries which confront us everywhere as we advance farther in our knowledge of this universe, are now serving, and will serve in the future, so long as man exists upon the earth, to give him more and more adequate conceptions of the power, and perhaps to some extent of the nature of the author of that universe; will furnish him with the materials for a religion founded on knowledge, in the place of all existing religions, based largely on the wholly inadequate conceptions and beliefs of bygone ages.”

Herbert Spencer held the fundamental cause of the life-world to be “unknowable,” but the non-existence of it to be “unthinkable.” Darwin believed “that the universe could not have existed without an intelligent cause, but that any adequate conception of the nature of that cause was beyond the powers of the human mind to form.”

With these views Dr. Wallace says he is in sympathy. “But,” he adds, “I yet think that we can form some conceptions of the powers at work in nature which help us to overcome the insuperable difficulty as to the nature of the infinite and absolute Creator, not only of our world and our universe, but of all that exists or can exist in infinite space.”

THE ANGELIC HOST.

“The organising mind which actually carries out the development of the life-world need not be infinite in any of its attributes—need not be what is usually meant by the terms God or Deity. The main cause of the antagonism between religion and science seems to me to be the assumption by both that there are no existences capable of taking part in a work of creation other than blind forces on the one hand, and the infinite, eternal, omnipotent God on the other.

“If, as I contend, we are forced to the assumption of an infinite God by the fact that our earth has developed life and mind and ourselves, it seems only logical to assume that the vast, the infinite chasm between ourselves and the Deity is to some extent occupied by an almost infinite series of grades of beings, each successive grade having higher and higher powers in regard to the origination, the development, and the control of the universe.

“If the whole purport of the material universe (our universe) is the development of spiritual beings who in the infinite variety of their natures—what we term their characters—shall to some extent reflect that infinite variety of the whole inorganic and organic worlds through which they have been developed”—then says Dr. Wallace, “I can imagine the Supreme, the Infinite Being foreseeing and determining the broad outlines of a universe which would in due course and with efficient guidance produce the required result... We may imagine those hosts of angels to whom a thousand years ago are as one day, watching the development of this vast system of suns and planets until some one or more of them combined it, itself all these conditions of size, of elementary constitution, of atmosphere, of mass of water, and requisite distance from its source of heat, as to ensure a stability of constitution and uniformity of temperature for a given minimum of millions of years or of ages as would be required for the full development of a life-world from Amoeba to Man, with a surplus of a few hundred millions for his adequate development.

THE OBJECT OF OUR EARTH LIFE.

“It is when we look upon man as being here for the very purpose of developing diversity and individuality, to be further advanced in a future life, that we see more clearly the whole object of our earth-life as a preparation for it. In this world we have the maximum of diversity produced, with a potential capacity for individual educability, and inasmuch as every spirit has been derived from the Deity, only limited by the time at the disposal of each of us. In the spirit-world death will not cut short the period of educational advancement. The best conditions and opportunities will be afforded for continuous progress to a higher status, while all the diversities produced here will lead to an infinite variety, charm, and use, that could probably have been brought about in no other way.”

Such is the vision which this modern Moses sees standing on the Nebo of Science, which few have climbed with such clear sight. He bids us to see that—

Land of Light and Beauty
Where no bud of promise dies.

Life is one eternal progress: enter
then the Third Degree;
Ye who long for light and wisdom,
seek the Inner Mystery.

[\[Return\]](#)

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