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[p. 10]

## ‘The Mystery of Pain’

*The World of Life: A Manifestation of Creative Power, Directive Mind, and Ultimate Purpose.* By Alfred Russel Wallace, O.M., F.R.S., etc. (Chapman and Hall. 12s. 6d. net.).

In the eighty-eighth year of his wonderful life Alfred Russel Wallace has written a great lay sermon. Its appeal is made to the whole educated world, not merely to men of science. There is scarcely any technical language in the book, although the scientific information it contains is enormous. Out of the storehouse of his memory he selects a number of facts concerning living things, and marshals them into chapters, all bearing on his one great thesis, which is set forth in the second part of his title, namely, that the world of life is “a manifestation of creative power, directive mind, and ultimate purpose.” In the preface he states that his object has been an attempt to summarise and complete his half-century of thought and work on the Darwinian theory of evolution.

From the early days when Darwin and Wallace read their first joint paper before the Linnean Society, the two great naturalists have had their differences, and in the later days, since the death of his colleague, Wallace has been at perpetual variance with the German biologist, Ernst Haeckel. It would be difficult to imagine either Darwin or Haeckel placing such a quotation as this to face the title-page of one of their scientific works: —

For every atom is a living thought  
Dropped from the meditations of a God,  
Its every essence an immortal love  
Of the incarnate Deity; and all  
The inmost pulses of material things  
Are mediums for the pulses of His will.

Dr. Wallace is not satisfied with the extant definitions of life, so in the first chapter he supplies one of his own, thus forming a starting-point for his long but fascinating series of arguments:—

“Life,” he writes, “is that power which, primarily from air and water and the substances dissolved therein, builds up organised and highly complex structures possessing definite forms and functions. These are preserved in a continuous state of decay and repair by internal circulation of fluids and gases; they reproduce their like, go through various phases of youth, maturity, and age, die, and quickly decompose into their constituent elements. They thus form continuous series of similar individuals; and, so long as external conditions render their continuance possible, seem to possess a potential immortality.”

After giving his definition he explains Haeckel’s and Huxley’s ideas of the nature and origin of life. He will have nothing to do with Haeckel’s “unfounded dogmatism of combined negation and omniscience, more especially when this assumption of superior knowledge seems to be put forward to conceal his real ignorance of the nature of life itself.

“I am endeavouring,” he continues, “to arrive at a juster conclusion of the mystery of the life-world than that of Professor Haeckel, and by a very different method. I shall endeavour to give a kind of bird’s-eye sketch of one great life-drama in many of its broader and less known phases, showing how they all form parts of the grand system of evolution, through adaptation to continuous changes in the outer world. I shall also endeavour to penetrate into some of the less trodden paths of nature-study in order to exhibit the many indications that exist of the preparation of the earth for man from the remotest eons of geological time.”

As we read the chapters which follow with their intimate glimpses of plant and animal life in all parts of the world and the life of past ages, the predominating thought in our minds is the ruthlessness of Nature. This is evidently what we are intended to feel, although Dr. Wallace does not definitely say so. Everywhere we find the same story, the survival of one living thing by the destruction of another. When we have read vivid descriptions of Nature's wars until we are almost satiated with the contemplation of so much cruelty, there comes a chapter, by far the most fascinating in the book, entitled, "Is Nature cruel?" At first sight there would seem to be very little doubt about the matter. Huxley seems to have had none. He spoke and wrote of the myriads of generations of herbivorous animals which have been tormented and devoured by carnivores, of the carnivores and herbivores alike being subject to all the miseries incidental to old age, disease, and over-multiplication, and the more or less enduring suffering which is the meed of both vanquished and victor. Huxley concludes that "since thousands of times a minute, were our ears sharp enough, we should hear sighs and groans of pain like those heard by Dante at the Gate of Hell, the world cannot be governed by what we call benevolence."

Wallace takes up the challenge. He does not believe that Nature is cruel. Nor does he believe in the huge quantity of pain suggested by Huxley. He believes that neither theologian nor biologist has ever gone to the root of the problem "by considering the very existence of pain as being one of the essential factors in evolution; as having been developed in the animal world for a *purpose*; as being strictly subordinated to the law of *utility*; and, therefore, never developed beyond what was actually *needed* for the preservation of life."

He works out this argument of the usefulness of pain and its limitations according to necessity at considerable length. First he claims that the whole system of life development is that of the lower providing food for the higher in ever expanding circles of organic existence, and next that "that system succeeded marvellously, even gloriously, inasmuch as it has produced as its final outcome MAN. The one being who can utilise in an adequate manner the myriad products of its mechanics and its chemistry." This successful outcome he considers to be a proof that it is the only practicable method and:—

"If it is, as I urge, the fore-ordained method of a supreme mind, then it must with equal certainty be the best, and it most certainly the only method that could have subsisted through the immeasurable ages, and could have then produced a being capable in some degree of comprehending and appreciating it. For that is the glory and distinction of man." But how, one may ask, does all this apply to the question of pain and cruelty? The answer is given in a section on the evolution of pain, which, after giving many instances of the varying sensitiveness of animals, states: "One of the principles much insisted on by Darwin is that no organ, faculty, or sensation can have arisen in animals except through its utility to the species. The sensation of pain has been thus developed, and must therefore be proportionate in each species to its needs, not beyond those needs." . . . "No other animal needs the pain sensations that we need; it is therefore absolutely certain that no other possesses such sensations in more than a fractional degree of ours." . . . "Hitherto the problem has never been considered from this point of view, the only one for the evolutionist to adopt. Hence the ludicrously exaggerated view of men of such eminence, and usually of such calm judgment as Huxley—a view almost as far removed from fact or science as the purely imaginary and humanitarian dogma of the poet:—

The poor beetle, that we tread upon,  
In corporal sufferance finds a pang as great  
As when a giant dies.

"Whatever the giant may feel, if the theory of evolution is true, the 'poor beetle' certainly feels an almost irreducible minimum of pain, probably none at all."

The conclusion, then, at which Alfred Russel Wallace has arrived, after spending more than an ordinary lifetime in work and thought on nature, is that there are now in the universe infinite grades of power, infinite grades of knowledge and wisdom, infinite grades of influence of higher beings upon lower.

“Holding this opinion, I have suggested that vast and wonderful universe, with its almost infinite variety of forms, motions, and reactions of part upon part, from suns and systems up to plant life, animal life, and the living human soul, has ever required, and still requires, the continuous agency of myriads of each intelligences.” This, he says, is the best approximation he is able to formulate “as to the deeper, the more fundamental causes of matter and force, of life and consciousness, and of man himself; at his best, already a little lower than the angels, and, like them, destined to a permanent progressive existence in the spirit world.”

*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2023.