

Evolutionism Combined with Spiritualism: A. R. Wallace's Approach

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Abstract:

A. R. Wallace was the co-founder of the theory of natural selection and a solid supporter of Darwin, but he combined evolutionism with spiritualism, and tried to understand human evolution and evolutionary ethics with a spiritualistic teleology. This teleological version is a typical example of non-Darwinian evolutionism, which was rooted in the ideology of Victorian progressivism, and was used to avoid the materialism implicated in Darwinism. Through investigating Wallace's approach, we may realize how progressivism had worked as the bridge between science and religion in Victorian Age.

Key Words: A. R. Wallace, evolutionism, spiritualism, Victorian progressivism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Robert Darwin independently discovered the principle of natural selection and their articles were announced to scientific community by a joint publication, on 1st July 1858. It's the starting point of the Darwinian revolution or as Peter Bowler put in his book, "the non-Darwinian revolution". Stimulated by Wallace, Darwin finally finished and then published his *Origin of Species*, and got "the whole credit for one of the most liberating advances in scientific thought", as Wallace "agreed of his own free will to play moon to Darwin's sun."¹ Considered as a Darwinist, Wallace positively defended Darwinism in his time, and published a book named *Darwinism* (1889). This book "did give the term a final endorsement."² However, Wallace is rather a heretic who is beyond the boundary of Darwin's Darwinism and naturalism. Wallace appealed to Overruling Intelligence for aid and saw it as the agency of natural selection to resolve the problem of human evolution. In his theory, evolutionism was combined with spiritualism.

It's curious for modern readers that Wallace, once proclaiming "more Darwinian than Darwin himself"³, in the end resorted to supernatural agency to discuss his evolutionism. However, in the 20th century, science expelled teleological progressionism from its materialistic kingdom, and to some extent, evolutionism has won victory in name of Darwinism. In our times, cultural context of Victorian science has been forgotten. It is true that Creationism was defeated by Darwinian revolution, but before the modern synthesis of evolutionism, on one hand, non-Darwinian mechanism of speciation such as inheritance of acquired characteristics and physiological selection eclipsed the natural selection; on the other hand, teleology was still active in evolutionism and continued to rebel radical materialism. Wallace, as "an elusive Victorian"⁴, did not follow Darwin and Huxley to remove the old bridge between science and religion, but tried to strengthen it by his reinterpretation of modern spiritualism.

2. WALLACE CONVERTED TO SPIRITUALISM

Wallace was born in Usk, Monmouth shire, Wales, 1823. His parents were both devout Anglicans. In his autobiography *My Life*, he wrote that there's only one short period of his early life during which he felt "something of religious fervour, derived chiefly from the more picturesque and impassioned of the hymns. As, however, there was no sufficient basis of

¹ Amabel Williams- Ellis, *Darwin's Moon: A Biography of Alfred Russel Wallace* (London and Glasgow: Blackie, 1966), ix.

² Charles H. Smith, The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Misinformation Alert.
<http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/index1.htm>.

³ Alfred Russel Wallace, *My Life: A Record of Events and Opinions*, Volume II (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1905), 22.

⁴ See Martin Fichman, *An Elusive Victorian, the Evolution of Alfred Russel Wallace*, Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 2004).

intelligible fact or connected reasoning to satisfy my intellect, this feeling soon left me, and has never returned”.⁵ It can be seen that he was not a religious fanatic, but deeply interested in knowing the cause of things intellectually.

With his family fortunes declining, Wallace had to leave off from a local grammar school when he was thirteen, and went to London to make a living. Boarding with his brother John, an apprentice carpenter, he acquainted himself with the living environment of the working class. In the Mechanics’ Institutes, he read Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason* and other infidel literatures, receiving “my first knowledge of the arguments of skeptics”, and got acquaintance with Owen’s secular and agnostic writings. He once felt stricken by the old dilemma about the origin of evil, and asked his father: “Is God able to prevent evil but not willing? Then he is not benevolent. Is he willing but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?” To his disappointment, his father “merely remarked that such problems were mysteries which the wisest cannot understand, and seemed disinclined to any discussion of the subject.”⁶ Craving for knowledge, caring for moral problems, and being disappointed with the ecclesiastical theories, Wallace was enthusiastic in mesmerism and phrenology, which are called pseudoscience now but at that time were the forerunners to research human mind in the name of science. Learned from Robert Chambers’ evolutionary theory to build his own one, Wallace was more or less romanticist, who will always prefer vitalism to mechanism, and he expected science could satisfy his curiosity and reveal meanings of morality as well. Mesmerism and phrenology are ideal for him, so is modern spiritualism. In his mind, spiritualism was a hopeful science, which would get credit in future. For indicating this “new science”, James Moore once compared Wallace’s view of science to Thomas Huxley’s:

To Huxley, being “scientific” meant investigating natural phenomena on naturalistic assumptions. Spiritualism violated these assumptions, so its phenomena could have no place in *his* science. To Wallace, being “scientific” meant investigating all alleged phenomena, even those deemed impossible or absurd. Spiritualism to him was proved by its phenomena, so they became integral to *his* science. This science included the super- or preternatural; Huxley’s denied its existence.⁷

Modern spiritualism, Wallace’s new science, originated from America in 1848, and then spread to Great Britain and the Continent, which was the first step of Modern Psychics Studies followed by the psychical research and parapsychology. Spiritualists believe that spirit is the essential part of living being, and they expect a spirit world where an afterlife following death will begin. It’s believed that the mediums, mostly young women, who have the unusual talents—the spirit powers, can communicate with spirits and create miracles at the séance. Wallace may be the most famous spiritualist scientist in the history of spiritualism.

⁵ Alfred Russel Wallace, *My Life: A Record of Events and Opinions*, Volume I (London: Chapman & Hall, LD, 1905), 78.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁷ James Moore, “Wallace in Wonderland”, in *Natural Selection and Beyond: The Intellectual Legacy of Alfred Russel Wallace*, Ed. Charles H. Smith and George Beccaloni (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 364.

1862, Wallace returned from Malay Archipelago, with the honor as the co-founder with Darwin. Living in London for three years, he was a successful man in natural history, but a loser of seeking a wife. In 1865, deserted by a “Miss L”, Wallace was very depressed, then his sister Fanny, an active spiritualist, introduced him to this new territory—the field of a “potential science”, and then he was attracted. The first time Wallace attended a séance was on July 22, 1865. As he wrote in his book, he saw the table vibrating and heard a soft tapping sound from somewhere. After approaching these phenomena patiently and “objectively”, he finally concluded that there was an unknown power acting when something strange happened. In September, Wallace visited Mary Marshall’s séance, the most famous one of the day, where he saw a table rise and remain suspend in midair, and a guitar slide itself onto a tabletop. On a Ouija, Marshall spelt out “Para” and “Herbert Edward Wallace”, the name of his younger brother died in Para when they were adventuring in south America. The next time, he put a piece of paper under the table and then took it out. Amazedly, he saw it’s signed with “William”, the name of his another dead brother.⁸ Besides, he studied literatures of occult, to know more testimony of the spiritualistic phenomena, and searched for the one with mediumistic power among his friends. In November 1866, there came this one. It was Agnes Nichol, Fanny’s new tenant, who owned the power he was looking for. From then on, he tried to persuade his scientist friends to join séance in his house and witness the psychic phenomenon. In Wallace’s opinion, spiritualists’ explanation is not necessarily exclusive; the most important thing is that the phenomenon itself may have the new laws discovered to science. Unfortunately, most of his Victorian colleagues he missionized gave a negative reaction, except for Chambers, the anonymous author of the *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), who agreed with Wallace on spiritualism, and believed that it could lead a revolution of thought in the future. Darwin didn’t say anything at first against Wallace’s public heresy, but some colleagues began to criticize him for being a “crank”. Wallace courageously fought for his truth. In 1866, he published a booklet entitled *The Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural*, which was included later into the book *Miracles and Modern Spiritualism*, in 1875. As Fanny wrote on the frontispiece in one copy of the booklets, something spiritual happened to these booklets, which confirmed his brother’s conviction.⁹ In his long life, besides the topics on natural history and social commentary, Wallace wrote a lot on spiritualism.

Wallace was not alone in the spiritualist campaign. In 1870s, he met his comrade: William Crookes, the discoverer of thallium and the inventor of cathode-ray tube. They collaborated to investigate spiritualism, earning praise from spiritualists. Wallace was the “spiritualism’s great philosopher”, and Crookes was the “spiritualism’s experimental scientist”.¹⁰ In the meeting of

⁸ Alfred Russel Wallace, *Miracles and Modern Spiritualism* (London: George Redway, 1896/1875) 132-138.

⁹ Michael Shermer, *In Darwin’s Shadow: the Life and Science of Alfred Russel Wallace—A Biographical Study on the Psychology of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 185-186.

¹⁰ Ross A. Slotten, *The Heretic in Darwin’s Court: the Life of Alfred Russel Wallace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 305.

the British Association for the Advancement of Science, September 1876, Wallace was elected as the president of the Biology Section. With the help of Crookes, he positively supported a paper referring spiritualist phenomenon, resulting in a quarrel among participants. Then, they two became the target of public criticism. Soon after, Wallace was involved in the war on spiritualism provoked by some scientists-the Slade Trial. Henry Slade was a famous spiritualist from America, whose séance was popular for its nominal fee and operating in daylight. He also invited scientists to investigate the spiritual miracle. During a séance, Edwin Lankester, the zoologist, exposed a fraud when Slade showed spirit's writing on a slate. Slade was publicly criticized in the *Times*, and then was brought before a judge on October 2. Risking "his reputation on behalf of liberty and justice",¹¹ Wallace stood beside Slade as a witness and defended him. In the courtroom, Wallace described his investigations and belief on spiritualism over the past eleven years. On November 1, Slade was convicted of using "subtle tricks and devices". He then appealed the conviction, and Wallace still supported him. At last, Slade won, but Wallace's scientific reputation was tainted. After that, Wallace phase out in the meetings of associations and lost more respects from the scientific community, until more than ten years later. From these, we can say that he may be a heretic in scientific community, but he is a hero in spiritualist community. He is a fearless spiritualistic scientist.

3. NATURAL SELECTION AND OVERRULING INTELLIGENCE

Now that psychic study is a part of Wallace's natural science, spiritualism is a part of evolutionism. The key is the origin of human. Wallace was one of the earliest biologists to study human evolution. On March 1, 1864, he presented a paper titled "The Origin of Human Races and the Antiquity of Man Deduced from the Theory of 'Natural Selection'" in a meeting of the Anthropological Society of London, stating that human being was once naturally selected, just like other animals. On one hand, human had developed so much capacity of clothing and using tools to protect himself that he stopped evolving physically. On the other hand, the mental and moral natures of man were enhanced in the struggle for existence. Therefore, for human being, natural evolution means evolution of mind. According to Wallace, in the future:

The world is again inhabited by a single homogeneous race, no individual of which will be inferior to the noblest specimens of existing humanity. Each one will then work out his own happiness in relation to that of his fellows...and mankind will have at length discovered that it was only required of them to developed the capacities of their higher nature, in order to convert this earth, which had so long been the theatre of their unbridled passions, and the scene of unimaginable misery, into as bright a paradise as ever haunted the dreams of seer or poet.¹²

¹¹ Ibid., 343.

¹² Alfred Russel Wallace, "The Origin of Human Races and the Antiquity of Man Deduced from the Theory of 'Natural Selection'", *Anthropological Review and Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, 2 (1864), clxix-clxx.

This utopian view was typically Victorian: the world is intrinsically an organism and has been evolved from the low level to the high level. People were given a promise by Victorian philosophers, such as Herbert Spencer and Carl Marx, that in a foreseeable future, everything would be naturally more advanced and superior. Darwinian evolutionism suggested that evolution might be based on a random starting point and the natural selection might be non-directional, but this potential threat to traditional religion was glossed over by a new teleology that there were some transcendental laws leading evolution to a lofty end. The weakest spot of the evolution-progression ally is the problem of human's morality. It's obvious that Wallace knew he must try to explain how natural selection could make human acquire emotional characters and how it could ensure moral progression. After 1865, spiritualism became the key for him to the questions. In the spring of 1869, Wallace published a surprising book review: "Sir Charles Lyell on Geological Climates and the Origin of Species", for the first time revealing his teleological and supernatural views on anthropology. Before publishing, Darwin was told by Wallace something new would be referred in this article, and responded worriedly in letter that "I hope you have not murdered too completely your own and my child."¹³ Anyway, Wallace stepped unhesitatingly towards his wonderland, with no fear of being "the heretic in Darwin's court". In this book view, Wallace mainly focused on the contribution of Lyell's geological theory in arguing against catastrophism and Lamarckism. He remarked the difference between Darwinism and Lamarckism, and praised Lyell's courage on the logical recognition that human being should originate from lower animals. Without interpreting Lyell's anthropology, Wallace turned his topic to "remark briefly on some aspects of the question which all who have hitherto written upon it seem to have neglected"¹⁴ and questioned the credo: survival of the fittest. First, the evolution of human should not be different from other animals in the whole animal kingdom, so human may be derived from the lower ones by the same laws. Second, geologists and anatomists' research could tell us that human's intellectual capacities and moral nature were not explicable "on the theory of variation and survival of the fittest":

Neither natural selection nor the more general theory of evolution can give any account whatever of the origin of sensational or conscious life. They may teach us how, by chemical, electrical, or higher natural laws, the organized body can be built up, can grow, can reproduce its like; but those laws and that growth cannot even be conceived as endowing the newly-arranged atoms with consciousness. But the moral and higher intellectual nature of man is as unique a phenomenon as was conscious life on its first appearance in the world, and the one is almost as difficult to conceive as originating by any law of evolution as the other.¹⁵

¹³ Alfred Russel Wallace, *Alfred Russel Wallace: Letters and Reminiscences*, Ed. James Marchant (New York: Harper, 1916), 197.

¹⁴ Alfred Russel Wallace, "Sir Charles Lyell on Geological Climates and the Origin of Species", *Quarterly Review* (April 1869), 391.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

For example, several physical characteristics of human were not adaptively utilitarian in a primitive environment:

a. The brain

The lower savages (such as the Australians or the Andaman islanders) have the same brain in size and complexity with Europeans (“the highest type” of human race), but living in a miniature of pre-historic world, they don’t need to use brain more fully and superiorly than other animals. Moreover, the faculties of higher morality, pure intellect and refined emotion are rarely useful to them.

b. The organs of speech

Savages’ organs of speech have the same arrangements of nerves and muscles delicate enough for communication by the voice, but this faculty should be physically useless in the struggle for existence before the formation of language.

c. The hand

Savages could have their hand trained to practice modern arts or science, but they hardly have such opportunities. Wallace thought it’s even more obvious that lower Quadrumana also possesses this organ “far beyond its needs”.

d. The external form of man

The external form-erect posture, expressive features, symmetry of body, and soft smooth skin are also the characteristic of savages and Europeans in common. They are meaningless for human to struggle with his environment in prehistoric nature, but mean a lot for people to live, aesthetically and emotionally, in a civilized society and “may have profoundly affected our moral nature”.¹⁶

From these above, the question can be asked that how natural selection alone could produce these non-adaptive faculties prepared to be utilized on a more advanced level of living. This time Wallace as usual loyally defended natural selection as the unique mechanism of natural evolution, but he assigned a supernatural agency for it. His answer was that we could see a Power as “the agency of the same great laws of organic development in the origin of the human race as in the origin of all organized beings”¹⁷ had sheltered and supported some intellectual or moral evolution. Because of this power, the law of natural selection has been guided to work “in definite directions and for special ends”.¹⁸ Wallace’s speculation was based on an analogy: in the development under natural selection, domestic plants and animals are guided by human race for certain utilitarian ends, and human race is guided by the level-higher power, a Higher

¹⁶ Ibid., 393.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Intelligence, “for nobler ends”. He pointed out this view was not only “harmony with the teaching of science”, but also “strictly uniformitarian in character”. Therefore:

Such, we believe, is the direction in which we shall find the true reconciliation of Science with Theology on this most momentous problem. Let us fearlessly admit that the mind of man (itself the living proof of a supreme mind) is able to trace, and to a considerable extent has traced, the laws by means of which the organic no less than the inorganic world has been developed. But let us not shut our eyes to the evidence that an Overruling Intelligence has watched over the action of those laws, so directing variations and so determining their accumulation, as finally to produce an organization sufficiently perfect to admit of, and even to aid in, the indefinite advancement of our mental and moral nature.¹⁹

It’s undoubted that Wallace had drawn inspiration from his study on spiritualism. The concept of Overruling Intelligence was rooted in the belief that the vitalism is the first principle and ultimate truth. According to Roger Smith, Wallace’s contemporary biologists avoided “venturing to propound an intelligible theory of how sensation may possibly be a product of organization”, “Wallace believed in a spiritual purpose behind the phenomenon of consciousness.”²⁰ In his first collected works: *Contributions to the Theory of Natural Selection* (1870), Wallace reprinted his anthropologic paper of 1864 “with a few important alterations and additions”,²¹ in which the supernatural Intelligence was additionally invoked. In “The Limits of Natural Selection as Applied to Man”, he iterated the difficulties of the preservation of human mental faculties and moral sense as useful variations in nature. If it’s insufficient of natural selection to account for the development of human race-especially the origin of consciousness, there must be some spiritual substratum in this universe determining human’s fate. From this point, Wallace, philosophically, drew a sublime conclusion: matter is force, and all force is probably will-force, which means that the nature of matter is life.²²

Wallace had embraced this belief to the end of his life, from which we can grasp the main clue of his evolutionism. During “the eclipse of Darwinism” in 1880s, when Darwinism had become synonymous with evolution itself but the mechanism of evolution, natural selection, was questioned by “an increasing number of biologists”,²³ Wallace with August Weisman stood in the forefront of fighting against the non-Darwinian mechanism of evolution, but his teleological theory of natural selection was non-Darwinian too. It’s much more convenient to build a popular evolutionary ethics in a teleological framework. In one lecture of his speaking tour in North America (1886-1887), he once publicly preached his ethical gospel:

¹⁹ Ibid., 393-394.

²⁰ Roger Smith, “Alfred Russel Wallace: Philosophy of Nature and Man”, *The British Journal for the History of Science*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Dec. 1972), 183.

²¹ Alfred Russel Wallace, *Contributions to the Theory of Natural Selection. A Series of Essays* (London & New York: Macmillan & Co., April 1870), viii.

²² Ibid., 365-366.

²³ Peter J. Bowler, *Evolution: the History of an Idea*, revised edition (University of California Press, 1989), 246.

I can not only believe that [the human] body has been derived, by gradual development, from a lower animal type, but that the very reason and purpose of the existence of the otherwise meaningless animal and vegetable kingdoms, and even of our whole material world, has been, the ultimate production of the noble and perfect human form by and through which the spirit of man-the man himself- might be developed, and be prepared, through struggle and effort, and by increasing warfare against physical and moral evil, for a higher and more permanent existence.²⁴

So, “higher and more permanent existence” is why we should and how we can struggle against physical and moral evil. The true meaning of life processes is the spiritual progression rather than the physical existence, so justice and morality should be and could be the ultimate goals and standards of our behaviors. In *Darwinism*, he invoked Weismann’s hereditism to verify the theory of natural selection, and summed up three special stages in the history of evolutionary progress during which new cause and power must come into action:

1. The change from inorganic to organic, when the earliest vegetable cell, or the living protoplasm out of which it arose, first appeared.
2. The introduction of sensation or consciousness, constituting the fundamental distinction between the animal and vegetable kingdoms.
3. The existence in man of a number of his most characteristic and noblest faculties, those which raise him furthest above the brutes and open up possibilities of almost indefinite advancement.²⁵

We can see here Wallace reactivated the final cause in his study of natural history, with the help of which he tried to keep teleology in his Darwinism. Actually, he need change or “upgrade” Darwinism in principle. However, it’s certainly not what Darwin himself would agree to. In a letter to the editor of *Nature*, Wallace formally replaced “the survival of the fittest” with “the perpetuation of the fittest” to explain his evolutionism:

As a matter of fact, the law of the survival of the fittest has almost entirely ceased to apply to civilised man, and the more civilised he is the less it applies. I have already shown (in the chapter on “Human Selection” in my “Studies”), how, under a higher civilisation and a truer social system, it will be superseded by another law, which may be termed “the perpetuation of the fittest,” and which will operate as automatically and as beneficially in improving the human race as natural selection has acted in improving the lower animals.²⁶

²⁴ Quotation from Ross A. Slotten, op. cit., 382.

²⁵ Alfred Russel Wallace, *Darwinism; An Exposition of the Theory of Natural Selection with Some of Its Applications* (London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1890/1889), 474-476.

²⁶ Alfred Russel Wallace, “Genius and the Struggle for Existence”, *Nature* (January 1903), 269.

In short, in the light of this promise: “perpetuation of the fittest”, in which the fittest surely means the morally fittest, Wallace described for us a wonderful world, where natural selection will finally produce an unseen universe—a “world of spirit”. Unfortunately, the Overruling Intelligence, which is most crucial for such a world, is too mysterious to be scientifically understood, after all.

4. PROGRESSION AND EVOLUTION IN VICTORIAN IDEOLOGY

On the background of Victorian ideology, Wallace’s strange drawing back from naturalistic science may be well explainable. In Victorian context, Darwinian revolution successfully helped the general idea of evolution widely accepted, but the materialism in Darwin’s theory of natural selection was ahead of his time. Without Darwin, other evolutionists might also have persuaded Victorians to question creationism, but their evolutionism would most likely be a teleological one, which was much more easily reconciled with religion. It’s well known that Darwinism potentially supports a thorough study of life on biological basis, on which natural selection is enough to materially explain almost everything in the whole process of evolution. This was the biggest challenge to Victorian thinkers, even to Wallace—the “cofounder” himself. Wallace did not follow Darwin and Huxley to be one of the first modern biologists. However, he decided to find a new way to harmonize science and religion. How and why Wallace ever did so deserve more attention. As Peter Bowler remarked:

He (Wallace) can be seen, not as an outsider, but as an original thinker who questioned many of the assumptions on which the ideologies of Victorian progressionism and scientific naturalism were based. His apparent eccentricities followed from his efforts to create an alternative philosophy of life, and we owe it to him to rediscover the core of his vision.²⁷

Wallace’s “alternative philosophy of life” may be called “spiritualistic progressionism”. Based on this, he combined his evolutionism with spiritualism. On one hand, just like some other Victorian scientists such as Crookes, Wallace converted to spiritualism because he did believe spiritualistic phenomenon was not beyond the boundaries of science and “will one day be brought within her domain”,²⁸ so this spiritualistic evolutionism was still scientific. On the other hand, if evolution is a progressive process guided by Overruling Intelligence, then this evolutionism could be compatible with religion. So Wallace’s approach kept teleological progressionism in scientific naturalism and build a bridge between science and religion. In this way, progress was identified with evolution, which might be the biggest secret of Victorian ideology.

5. CONCLUSION

²⁷ Peter Bowler, “Foreword”, in *Natural Selection and Beyond: The Intellectual Legacy of Alfred Russel Wallace*, Ed. Charles H. Smith and George Beccaloni (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), vii.

²⁸ Alfred Russel Wallace, *Contributions to the Theory of Natural Selection. A Series of Essays* (London & New York: Macmillan & Co., April 1870), v.iii.

Wallace's life as a mortal man was over in 1913, one year before the First World War. From then on, the British Empire, the empire on which the sun never sets, had declined and Victorian Age had gone. After two World Wars, people had a bitter lesson that the struggle for existence does not necessarily mean progression. As modern genetics and evolutionism got united, biologists and historians began to realize the validity of Darwin's theory. Dismissing teleology and non-Darwinian mechanism of evolution, "Darwinian revolution" finally completed. Nowadays, it's hard to imagine evolutionary biologists could resort to spiritualism to reconcile science with religion as Wallace did.