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978-1-108-00021-5 - On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism: Three Essays

Alfred Russel Wallace

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On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism

The nineteenth-century British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace was a major influence on Darwin's theory of natural selection. He was later moved by a variety of personal experiences to examine the concept of spirituality, but his exploration into the potential for compatibility between spiritualism and natural selection alienated him from the scientific community. The three controversial essays in this 1875 book attempt to reinforce his beliefs and validate his claims. The first, written in 1871 and read before The Dialectic Society, reconsiders the credibility or incredibility of miracles. The second, 'The Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural', had been published in a secularist periodical several years earlier, and 'A Defence of Modern Spiritualism' appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* shortly before this book was published. Wallace's book takes the modern reader to the heart of the raging debates engendered by Darwin, many of which continue over a century later.

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ON MIRACLES
AND
MODERN SPIRITUALISM.

Three Essays.

BY

ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE,

AUTHOR OF

“THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO,” “CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE THEORY
OF NATURAL SELECTION,” ETC., ETC.

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“A presumptuous scepticism that rejects facts without examination of their truth, is, in some respects, more injurious than unquestioning credulity.”—HUMBOLDT.

“One good experiment is of more value than the ingenuity of a brain like Newton’s. Facts are more useful when they contradict, than when they support, received theories.”—Sir HUMPHRY DAVY.

“The perfect observer in any department of science will have his eyes, as it were, opened, that they may be struck at once by any occurrence which, *according to received theories, ought not to happen*, for these are the facts which serve as clues to new discoveries.”—Sir JOHN HERSCHELL.

“Before experience itself can be used with advantage, there is one preliminary step to make which depends wholly on ourselves: it is, the absolute dismissal and clearing the mind of all prejudice, and the determination to stand or fall by the result of a direct appeal to facts in the first instance, and of strict logical deduction from them afterwards.”—Sir JOHN HERSCHELL.

“With regard to the miracle question, I can only say that the word ‘impossible’ is not, to my mind, applicable to matters of philosophy. That the possibilities of nature are infinite is an aphorism with which I am wont to worry my friends.”—Professor HUXLEY.

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P R E F A C E.



THE Essays which form this volume were written at different times and for different purposes. The first in order (though not the earliest in date) was read before the Dialectical Society, with the intention of inducing sceptics to reconsider the fundamental question of the inherent credibility or incredibility of Miracles. The second was written more than eight years ago for the pages of a Secularist periodical, and a very limited number of copies printed, chiefly for private circulation. The third is the article which recently appeared in the *Fortnightly Review*. All have been carefully revised, and considerable additions have been made of illustrative fact, argument, and personal experience, together with a few critical remarks on Dr. Carpenter's latest work.

As the two latter Essays were each intended to give a general view of the same subject, there is necessarily some repetition in the matters treated of, and the same authorities are in many cases quoted; but it is believed that no actual repetition of details will be found, care having been taken to introduce new facts and fresh illustrations, so that the one Essay will be found to supplement and support the other.

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I must now say a few words on a somewhat personal matter.

I am well aware that my scientific friends are somewhat puzzled to account for what they consider to be my delusion, and believe that it has injuriously affected whatever power I may have once possessed of dealing with the philosophy of Natural History. One of them—Mr. Anton Dohrn—has expressed this plainly. I am informed that, in an article entitled “Englische Kritiker und Anti-Kritiker des Darwinismus,” published in 1861, he has put forth the opinion that Spiritualism and Natural Selection are incompatible, and that my divergence from the views of Mr. Darwin arises from my belief in Spiritualism. He also supposes that in accepting the spiritual doctrines I have been to some extent influenced by clerical and religious prejudice. As Mr. Dohrn’s views may be those of other scientific friends, I may perhaps be excused for entering into some personal details in reply.

From the age of fourteen I lived with an elder brother, of advanced liberal and philosophical opinions, and I soon lost (and have never since regained) all capacity of being affected in my judgments, either by clerical influence or religious prejudice. Up to the time when I first became acquainted with the facts of Spiritualism, I was a confirmed philosophical sceptic, rejoicing in the works of Voltaire, Strauss, and Carl Vogt, and an ardent admirer (as I am still) of Herbert Spencer. I was so thorough and confirmed a materialist that I could not at that time find a place in my mind for the conception of spiritual

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existence, or for any other agencies in the universe than matter and force. Facts, however, are stubborn things. My curiosity was at first excited by some slight but inexplicable phenomena occurring in a friend's family, and my desire for knowledge and love of truth forced me to continue the inquiry. The facts became more and more assured, more and more varied, more and more removed from anything that modern science taught or modern philosophy speculated on. The facts beat me. They compelled me to accept them, *as facts*, long before I could accept the spiritual explanation of them: there was at that time "no place in my fabric of thought into which it could be fitted." By slow degrees a place was made; but it was made, not by any preconceived or theoretical opinions, but by the continuous action of fact after fact, which could not be got rid of in any other way. So much for Mr. Anton Dohrn's theory of the causes which led me to accept Spiritualism. Let us now consider the statement as to its incompatibility with Natural Selection.

Having, as above indicated, been led, by a strict induction from facts, to a belief—1stly, In the existence of a number of preterhuman intelligences of various grades; and, 2ndly, That some of these intelligences, although usually invisible and intangible to us, can and do act on matter, and do influence our minds,—I am surely following a strictly logical and scientific course, in seeing how far this doctrine will enable us to account for some of those residual phenomena which Natural Selection alone will not explain. In the 10th chapter of my *Contributions*

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to the Theory of Natural Selection I have pointed out what I consider to be some of these residual phenomena; and I have suggested that they may be due to the action of some of the various intelligences above referred to. This view was, however, put forward with hesitation, and I myself suggested difficulties in the way of its acceptance; but I maintained, and still maintain, that it is one which is logically tenable, and is in no way inconsistent with a thorough acceptance of the grand doctrine of Evolution, through Natural Selection, although implying (as indeed many of the chief supporters of that doctrine admit) that it is not the all-powerful, all-sufficient, and only cause of the development of organic forms.

GRAYS, ESSEX, Dec. 1, 1874.