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Edward O. Wilson. The Meaning of Human Existence

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The Meaning of Human Existence. By EDWARD O. WILSON. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 2014 207 pp. \$14.95 (paperback).

So, what is the meaning of human existence? As it turns out, it is “the epic of the species” (p. 174). According to E. O. Wilson, in this new book, the meaning of existence is *the story itself*, the whole kit and caboodle, from our biological origins through prehistory and recorded history and on into the future.

But wait a minute, if we are dealing with physical laws, and what we can observe, measure, and test; if our guiding principle is a commitment to empirical evidence and scholarly methods; if science “is totally committed to fact without reference to religion or ideology” (p. 44); then how can the meaning of human existence derive from our understanding of the future about which we have no evidence whatsoever?

Wilson swats away this pesky problem by flattening out the meaning of “meaning” to fit his conclusions, while at the same time expecting anyone who reads the book of nature in a “scientific” manner to come to the exact same conclusions as this self-confessed “congenital optimist” (p. 102). As long as we pay close attention to the story, he asserts, and learn from the scientists, then naturally we will do the right thing—without recourse to religion. “The accidents of history are the source of meaning,” he assures us, and “the concept of meaning is the worldview of science” (p. 12).

When Stephen Colbert challenged the philosophical reach of the big history story by saying that the facts it lays out are “the events of life, not the *meaning* of life,” David Christian responded in the same way that Wilson does. “Meaning is in the map,” he explained. “If you have a map it tells you where you are, and if you know where you are, you know where you can go.”¹

“If you know what the key says in the corner,” Colbert replied.

Some would suggest, as Colbert went on to do, somewhat disingenuously I think, that the key to interpreting the map is to be found in the Bible or,

by extension, other religious texts. A more modern response might be that it is found in philosophy or art or psychology or indeed in history itself. Regardless of Colbert’s true personal beliefs, he framed the problem of meaning perfectly: Meaning as a concept only has validity in a metaphysical sense.² From this perspective, the meaning of human existence cannot be discovered using modern science.

If, as Wilson maintains, we are the product of “overlapping networks of physical cause and effect” (p. 13), by definition our existence is “meaning”-less. As Ian Hesketh puts it, “like any myth, big history’s deep meanings are not inherently derived from empirical observations but from its anthropomorphic projections of an idealized cosmic world.”³ Harvard historian David Armitage is equally succinct, “Big history, in all its guises, has been inhospitable to the questions of meaning and intention so central to intellectual history.”⁴

Then why would anyone go to all this trouble to reformulate a sweeping inquiry into the meaning of human existence? For two reasons, first, because not doing so cedes the field to the religiously-oriented, and second, because scientists and the scientifically-oriented *should* be addressing the moral concerns of our day—and big history in theory provides an excellent opportunity to address big moral and philosophical questions. In order to do so, however, the partnership between the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities has to be an equal one.

On some levels Wilson senses this. Following the same line of reasoning that he elaborated in *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998), he argues that the best way to facilitate the moral choices that he deem important is, in addition to accepting the truths revealed by science, to bridge the gap between the two cultures. Without question I believe this is correct, and it puts this book (along with Wilson’s other work) firmly in the tradition of what he calls the “evolutionary

epic,” a concept he first developed in *On Human Nature* (1978). Along with similar studies such as Jacques Monod’s *Chance and Necessity* (1971), Steven Weinberg’s *The First Three Minutes* (1979), Paul Davies’ *God and the New Physics* (1983), Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Strenger’s *Order out of Chaos* (1984), Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan’s *Microcosmos* (1986) and Eric Chaisson’s *Cosmic Evolution* (2001), the evolutionary epic is a genre that entails, first, the posing of a philosophical problem, as in the book under review, and typically, the need to unify the sciences and the humanities; second, a long tour through the exciting scientific discoveries the author has made, in this work, specifically, multilevel selection;⁵ and, finally, a philosophical conclusion that calls for a new morality, here, that we no longer need religion as a source of meaning or explanation.⁶ This book is the very definition of an evolutionary epic. It has all the elements in place—including the conflict between its stated methods (scientific/objective) and its conclusions (anthropocentric/moral).

The sticking point is that, while the notion of consilience as the way forward is brought home throughout, it feels more like an arranged marriage than an equal partnership. There is something condescending and patriarchal in the way Wilson offers science as guide to, and protector of, the humanities. “Would the humanities care to colonize the sciences? Maybe use a little help doing that? How about replacing science fiction, the imagining of fantasy by a single mind, with new worlds of far greater diversity based on real science from many minds? Might poets and visual artists consider searching in the real world outside the range of ordinary dreams for unexplored dimensions, depth, and meaning?” (p. 12).

The tone is reminiscent of a recent essay by another Harvard scientist, astrophysicist Chaisson, who imagines a few intrepid historians, some twenty years ago, discovering that “much good

and valid history extends far back in time, well prior to the ancient civilizations . . . even beyond the onset of hominins . . . It was as though, trekking up a mountain whose summit holds true knowledge, the big historians began realizing there’s much more to history than we had been led to believe. . . . Yet hardly a decade ago, those same big historians, much enthused by their new story-telling agenda, discovered a different breed of scholars on the other side of the mountain.”⁷ In Chaisson’s story, these hero-scholars are astronomers; in Wilson’s, they are biologists. In both versions they are most emphatically leading the way.

It could be worse. At least the big historians demonstrate some internal fortitude and climb the mountain. Chaisson leaves the shilly-shallying philosophers “wondering wearily from mountainous ledges how the latest findings might impact their thoughts and beliefs that require no tests.” For Wilson’s part, he finds that “the history of philosophy when boiled down consists mostly of failed models of the brain” (pp. 160-161).

And here I think is the crux of the matter: the only definition of meaning that these scientists are willing to accept is one that begs the question. Then science becomes the super-hero, science as savior, but this wishful viewpoint is philosophically uninformed. Wilson presents science as pure and testable and free from ideology, based only on the facts, and then wants it to do things that are well beyond its imperative. Consequently, he holds a decidedly romantic notion of what a grown-up relationship with the humanities might be like. “Exalted we are, risen to be the mind of the biosphere without a doubt, our spirits uniquely capable of awe and ever more breathtaking leaps of imagination” (p. 25).

The reality is that the humanities—along with the social sciences, which Wilson bypasses altogether—have far more to contribute to our understanding of the meaning of existence than

is here being supposed, first and foremost by examining the philosophy, history and psychology of science itself. For all his conciliatory rhetoric, it is clear that Wilson believes science to be the dominant partner and wants a relationship with the humanities only if it is going to be on science's terms; certainly not if it means taking seriously anything the humanities has to say vis-à-vis a philosophical critique of science, the history of science, or the implications of presenting this history in a narrative form. A real rapprochement will require scientists to admit that they do not actually have all the answers and that just because they are experts in entomology or astrophysics does not mean that they can be our guides to everything else as well.

Realigned somewhat from the meanings he found in nature in the 1970s (the potential for genetic engineering, human rights, diversity in the gene pool), now, in this book, Wilson finds the most meaningful issues to be *not* fooling around with genetic engineering, biodiversity (again), and two new items, environmentalism, and what he now sees as “the greatest goal of all time, the unity of the human race” (p. 174), by which he means bringing an end to all forms of “tribalism,” foremost among them sectarian conflict. Naturally, his main point is that the “prerequisite for attaining the goal [of human unity] is an accurate self-understanding. So, what is the meaning of human existence? I've suggested that it is the epic of the species, begun in biological evolution and prehistory, passed into recorded history, and urgently now, day by day, faster and faster into the indefinite future, it is also what we will choose to become” (p. 174). And there you have it.

The Meaning of Human Existence is a stimulating, anthropocentric tour through the thinking of one of the world's foremost entomologists. Wilson is an excellent writer and for those already familiar with his work this book contains some diverting anecdotes and observations unpublished elsewhere. “What can we learn of moral value

from the ants?” he quips (p. 95). “Here again I will answer definitively. Nothing.”

Wilson's tough on religion, more so than in his other books, describing religions as “impediments to the grasp of reality needed to solve most social problems in the world” (p. 150). And his tone of moral outrage has risen several degrees. We are bad at government; businessmen and political leaders believe in all sorts of crazy, superstitious stuff; we seem “unable to stabilize either economic policies or the means of governance higher than the level of a village” (pp. 176-177); the population is growing too fast (because it is taboo to talk about enforcing birth limits). As a result, we have made a mess of the environment. Worst of all, some people still do not believe in evolution.

All this because “*Homo sapiens* is an innately dysfunctional species” (p. 176). Wilson blames arts and humanities scholars for not spending enough time wondering about why human nature is the way it is and what that means. To my surprise, he doesn't spare his colleagues either: “Scientists who might contribute to a more realistic worldview are especially disappointing. Largely yeomen, they are intellectual dwarves content to stay within the narrow specialties for which they were trained and are paid” (p. 178). All in all, Wilson's journey through his own mind is a rather entertaining jaunt. Being a curmudgeon myself, I enjoyed going along for the ride.

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(Endnotes)

1 The Colbert Report, Season 10, Episode 22, November 12, 2013, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/91wur1/the-colbert-report-david-christian>.

2 This is what philosophers refer to as the analytic-synthetic distinction. See for example Stephen Anderson, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning,’” *Philosophy Now* Issue 88, January/February 2012, https://philosophynow.org/issues/88/The_Meaning_of_Meaning.

3 “The Story of Big History,” *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Fall 2014): 196.

4 “What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the *Longue Durée*,” *History of European Ideas* 38:4 (December 2012): 494.

5 In biology multilevel selection (as opposed to inclusive fitness) includes a consideration of the effect of individual *competition* within the group as well as *cooperation* among members of a group for the purpose of competing with opposing groups. It explains, among other things, altruism, and, most importantly for the present purposes, our propensity for religious behavior. Wilson goes over this in detail in an appendix (pp. 189-202).

6 On the evolutionary epic as a genre, see Martin Eger, “Hermeneutics and the New Epic of Science” in *The Literature of Science: Perspectives on Popular Scientific Writing*, ed. Murdo William McRae (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1993), pp. 186-209. On big history as evolutionary epic, see Ian Hesketh, “The Story of Big History” and “The Recurrence of the Evolutionary Epic,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 9 (2015): 196-219. My particular thanks to Dr. Hesketh for leading me to the seminal discussion of the evolutionary epic found in Eger.

7 “Big History’s Risk and Challenge,” *Expositions* 8:1 (2014): 85-95, https://www.cfa.harvard.edu/~ejchaisson/reprints/Expositions_BH.pdf.