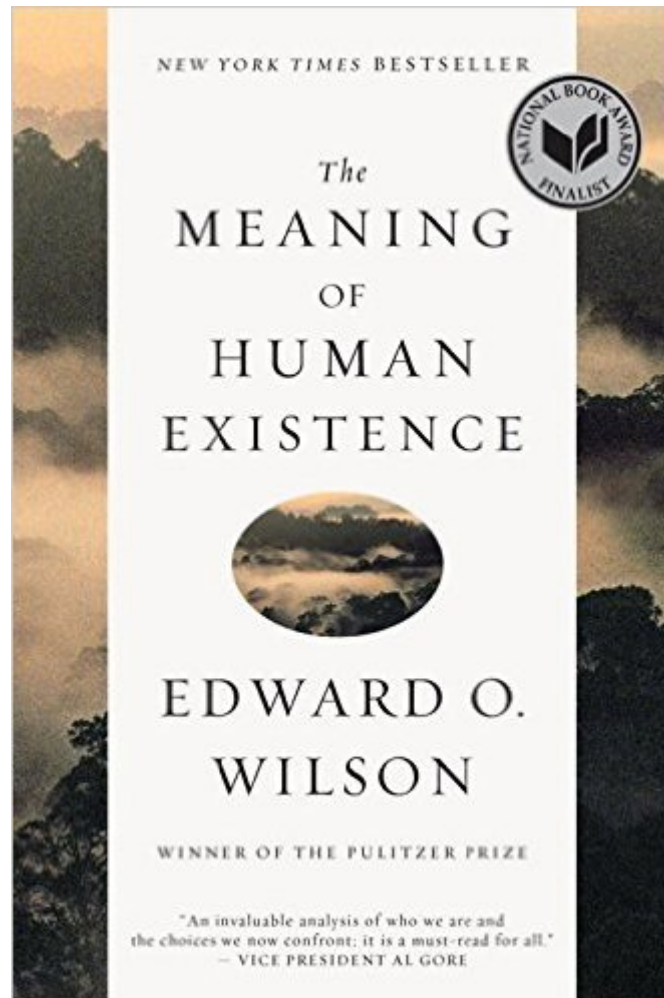


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The Meaning Of Human Existence



Synopsis

National Book Award Finalist. How did humanity originate and why does a species like ours exist on this planet? Do we have a special place, even a destiny in the universe? Where are we going, and perhaps, the most difficult question of all, "Why?" In *The Meaning of Human Existence*, his most philosophical work to date, Pulitzer Prize-winning biologist Edward O. Wilson grapples with these and other existential questions, examining what makes human beings supremely different from all other species. Searching for meaning in what Nietzsche once called "the rainbow colors" around the outer edges of knowledge and imagination, Wilson takes his readers on a journey, in the process bridging science and philosophy to create a twenty-first-century treatise on human existence—from our earliest inception to a provocative look at what the future of mankind portends. Continuing his groundbreaking examination of our "Anthropocene Epoch," which he began with *The Social Conquest of Earth*, described by the *New York Times* as "a sweeping account of the human rise to domination of the biosphere," here Wilson posits that we, as a species, now know enough about the universe and ourselves that we can begin to approach questions about our place in the cosmos and the meaning of intelligent life in a systematic, indeed, in a testable way. Once criticized for a purely mechanistic view of human life and an overreliance on genetic predetermination, Wilson presents in *The Meaning of Human Existence* his most expansive and advanced theories on the sovereignty of human life, recognizing that, even though the human and the spider evolved similarly, the poet's sonnet is wholly different from the spider's web. Whether attempting to explicate "The Riddle of the Human Species," "Free Will," or "Religion"; warning of "The Collapse of Biodiversity"; or even creating a plausible "Portrait of E.T.," Wilson does indeed believe that humanity holds a special position in the known universe. The human epoch that began in biological evolution and passed into pre-, then recorded, history is now more than ever before in our hands. Yet alarmed that we are about to abandon natural selection by redesigning biology and human nature as we wish them, Wilson soberly concludes that advances in science and technology bring us our greatest moral dilemma since God stayed the hand of Abraham.

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Customer Reviews

"The Meaning of Human Existence," by Edward O. Wilson, is an extraordinary book: audacious, illuminating--and in the end, oddly comforting. How could it not be with a subject and title so outrageously brazen? Written by one of the most honored and preeminent living biologists, and at the pinnacle of his life, this is an exceptionally personal book. It is a synthesis and distillation of all the big who-are-we ideas he's put together from a lifetime of scientific research and personal experience. You might call it a highly personal philosophical anthropology. But more accurately, it's a scientific creation narrative about how we came to be what we are, what makes us special in the cosmos, and how we can use that specialness to improve our future. I downloaded this book the day it was published and devoured it over the course of the next two days. Now, a few days later, I am still basking in the satisfying glow and deep comfort of that extraordinary experience. The book pleased me not because it offered any major new scientific concepts or ideas. In fact, I found I was already quite familiar with nearly all of the science presented in the book. If you've read Wilson's other bestselling books, and you're reasonably well-read in the fields of prehistory, evolutionary biology, cultural anthropology, cognitive science, neuroscience, and comparative religions, then you, too, will find little new here. What was beautiful and remarkable was how the author was able to weave these many big concepts together to form a stunning tapestry of truth, a new science-based creation narrative. In this book, Wilson recounts his personal scientific take on the epic journey of human evolution. Wilson focuses that journey heavily on his recent groundbreaking thesis about the importance of human eusociality (see his "The Social Conquest of Earth"). The book also touches briefly on the latest scientific knowledge concerning instinct, the biology of religion, free will, and consciousness. As an important side note--yet given a whole chapter of its own--the author makes it clear that in the greater scheme of things, it is "microbes that rule the Galaxy." For me, the most entertaining and enlightening chapter was the one entitled, "Portrait of E. T." In that chapter, the author speculates--based on scientific theory--about the characteristics he would expect from any "human-grade aliens on Earth-like planets." He gives us eight

characteristics; taken together, they form a startling and eye-opening portrait, one significantly different from that we currently see in most science fiction. Finally, the book celebrates the dual importance of the humanities in addition to the sciences as the joint hallmarks of human achievement. He makes a point that if intelligent aliens were ever to contact earth, they would probably be far less interested in our science than our arts and humanities. After all, if they were to contact us, it is obvious that we would have little knowledge about science that they would not already know. It is our amazing accumulation of cultural heritage that would fascinate and thrill them. In closing, it would be an enormous oversight if I failed to note what a sublime pleasure it always is to read Wilson's clear, thoughtful, eloquent and exquisite prose. I will be deeply saddened if this turns out to be his last book.

I've read many of E.O. Wilson's books. None have stunned me in the same way as when I first read 'On Human Nature' but 'The Meaning of Human Existence' boasts a big title for what is, essentially, an echo of many of his past works. When Wilson sticks to science, he's as sharp and eloquent as ever. When he veers to philosophical guesswork, as in his chapter on Extraterrestrial Life, he's a lot less convincing. While I liked the idea of visiting ETs being more concerned with the humanities than our scientific discoveries (they'd have reached the same scientific conclusions independent of human input) I wasn't convinced by Wilson's projections of what they might look like. I'm not sure there was any point in including such a chapter. In a book that should have been marshaling facts and arguments it felt like a less than amusing detour. One of Wilson's main points remains that the internal conflict in human conscience is a result of thousands of years of trying to balance individual selection against group selection. In other words, selfishness is (to an extent) natural for each of us. But at the point it affects the group you belong to, it weakens that group. If it weakens it too much, adios to your entire group and goodbye to your gene pool. The rallying cry he concludes with, for humans to share enough knowledge to remember that they are part of life on earth rather than the point of life on earth, is a vital one. Fight ignorance, ask the right questions, catalog the answers - it's vintage Wilson. There are no breadcrumbs here thrown to the religious and Wilson's punches still hit home after all these years.

The most ambitious thing about this relatively short book seems to be its title. Wilson fans will quickly discover that there is nothing really new here. On the contrary, it struck me to be a collection of set pieces that are not even carefully edited (as can be seen by the fact that several explanations and descriptions occur--almost verbatim--in several places). Wilson, one of the founding fathers of

sociobiology, sees not only the biological make up of mankind but also its cultural creativity shaped by the accidental developments of its evolutionary history. Thus our morality arose out of the conflicting pressures of individual selection (sin) versus group selection (virtue), our love of stories and literature, our delight in music, our sense of religious awe all exist because they provided evolving man with advantages in his existence as successful hunter-gatherer. For Wilson a phenomenon (be it biological or cultural) is explained in its meaning as soon as its evolutionary advantage for mankind has been explained, a view shared by few proponents or practitioners of the humanities. Where he seems to run into problems, however, is when it comes to deciding whether what was advantageous to hunter-gatherers can still be considered to be advantageous to the evolutionary future of mankind. Here Wilson decides to have it both ways. On the one hand, he firmly believes that it would be a mistake to fiddle with the biological make up of man's nature (p.60)--though he is quite willing to consider some drastic social engineering, which he himself admits "sounds 'fascist'" but "can be deferred for another generation or two" (p.137). Small comfort! When he comes to the evolutionary advantages of man's culture, on the other hand, he is quite eager to pick and choose right now. Religion he considers evolutionary baggage (a form of antiquated, blood-shedding cultural tribalism) that should be tossed sooner rather than later. (But how about the intra- and inter-tribal blood-letting Darwin in his "The Descent of Man" considers so beneficial for the human evolution of the fittest? Nothing wrong with that? Nietzsche in fact blames the Christian religion for trying to stifle this beneficial blood-letting with its unnatural morality of love. Who occupies the high ground here?) But let's go on: Philosophy (excluding Daniel Dennett!) is not far behind in the general house cleaning: "The history of philosophy when boiled down consists mostly of failed models of the brain" (p. 161). Our belief in free will is of course also an illusion but "necessary for sanity and thereby for the perpetuation of the human species" (170). That illusion can stay! Other cultural activities are viewed favorably. Their creativity is admired as long as it does not interfere with the progress of a rational world view. The book ends with Wilson's fervent hope that we can, with the help of "technoscientific" progress emerge from our human "childhood" (does this include our playmates Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Mozart et al.?) into an age of peace, mutual understanding and preserved biodiversity. All of this sounds so awfully pat, so depressingly reductionist. Is this the wisdom for the future? It seems such awfully pale, one-dimensional stuff. Is it really so reasonable to toss out the wisdom of our past cultural experiences for this kind of rationalistic fundamentalism? The best chapters, in my opinion, are those (in the middle section of the book) where Wilson can show with his usual mastery of detail the complexities of non-human life forms (his favorite ants, animal and plant lives in their dependence on smells, the rule of microbes in

the galaxy.) I wish he would have gone on and on! The realities he describes seem so much richer, more fertile, more complex, more mysterious than the seemingly "enlightened" conclusions he establishes for the meaning of human existence. These seem to belong--as the author Marilynne Robinson phrased it in another context--to "a new upsurge of that famous Western rationalism, old enemy of reasonableness, always so right at the time, always so shocking in retrospect."

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