

**Book Review**

The Ants Go Marching On; So Do We

Edward O. Wilson Explains ‘The Meaning of Human Existence’

The best natural scientists, when they aren’t busy filling us with awe, are busy reminding us how small and pointless we are.

Stephen Hawking has called humankind “just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star.” The biologist and naturalist Edward O. Wilson, in his new book, which is modestly titled “The Meaning of Human Existence,” puts our pygmy planet in a different context.

“Let me offer a metaphor,” he says. “Earth relates to the universe as the second segment of the left antenna of an aphid sitting on a flower petal in a garden in Teaneck, N.J., for a few hours this afternoon.” The Jersey aspect of that put-down really drives in the nail.

Edward O. Wilson

Photo Credit Jerry Bauer

Mr. Wilson’s slim new book is a valedictory work. The author, now 85 and retired from Harvard for nearly two decades, chews over issues that have long concentrated his mind: the environment; the biological basis of our behavior; the necessity of science and humanities finding common cause; the way religion poisons almost everything; and the things we can learn from ants, about which Mr. Wilson is the world’s leading expert.

Mr. Wilson remains very clever on ants. Among the questions he is most asked, he says, is: “What can we learn of moral value from the ants?” His response is pretty direct: “Nothing. Nothing at all can be learned from ants that our species should even consider imitating.”

He explains that while female ants do all the work, the pitiful males are merely “robot flying sexual missiles” with huge genitalia. (This is not worth imitating?) During battle, they eat their injured. “Where we send our young men to war,” Mr. Wilson writes, “ants send their old ladies.” Ants: moral idiots.

The sections about ants remind you what a lively writer Mr. Wilson can be. This two time winner of the Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction stands above the crowd of biology writers the way John le Carré stands above spy writers. He’s wise, learned, wicked, vivid, oracular.

Another writer might explain how ants cooperate. Mr. Wilson puts it this way, on how leaf-cutter ants fend off killer flies: “The problem is solved, mostly, by tiny sister ant workers that ride on their backs, like mahouts on elephants, and chase the flies away with flicks of their hind legs.” He can make the dribble of ants that snakes through your pantry sound like something out of “Lawrence of Arabia.”

“The Meaning of Human Existence” is not always this good. At times, it sounds like a commencement speech or a lesser Bill Moyers special. (“In this part of our journey, I propose to come full circle....”) Mr. Wilson’s prose has, over time, lost a bit of its elastic snap.

This book contains more than its share of sentences that take multiple readings to form in the mind, such as, “Human nature is the ensemble of hereditary regularities in mental development that bias cultural evolution in one direction as opposed to others and thus connect genes to culture in the brain of every person.”

But Mr. Wilson remains a warmly skeptical and provocative figure on the page. He bores down especially on religion, in his strongest terms to date.

He out-Hitchens Hitchens, likening creationism to a virulent parasite. He suggests we ask the leaders of each religion and sect to “publicly defend the supernatural details of their faiths.” He wishes to “charge with blasphemy any religious or political leader who claims to speak with or on behalf of God.”

“The great religions are,” he writes, “sources of ceaseless and unnecessary suffering. They are impediments to the grasp of reality needed to solve most social problems in the real world.”

Mr. Wilson, who was born in Birmingham, Ala., and who was raised as a Southern Baptist, puts it baldly about humanity’s future: “Faith is the one thing that makes otherwise good people do bad things.”

Throughout “The Meaning of Human Existence,” he has generous things to say about each of those squabbling siblings, science and the humanities. Yet he is clearly exasperated that we dote so much on the latter.

“Even the best-educated live on an ad libitum diet of novels, movies, concerts, sports events and gossip all designed to stir one or more of the relatively small range of emotions that diagnose Homo sapiens,” he writes. The sword of science, he says, “cuts paths through the fever swamp of human existence.”

Mr. Wilson, in this walkabout of his mind, gingerly broaches the possibility that intelligent life exists on other planets. (“Please don’t leave me at this point”; “I wince a bit just bringing it up.”)

The good news he brings is that, should the aliens arrive, they probably won’t be taking over our lease. “In order to colonize a habitable planet, the aliens would first have to destroy all life on it, down to the last microbe,” he suggests. “Better to stay at home, for a few more billion years anyway.”

The book to read, to get the full story on Mr. Wilson’s eventful life, is his memoir “Naturalist,” published in 1994. But he tells good stories about himself in his new book.

When the Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction went to Carl Sagan in 1978, he says, “I dismissed it as a minor achievement for a scientist, scarcely worth listing.” Yet when Mr. Wilson won the same prize the following year, “it wondrously became a major literary award of which scientists should take special note.”

The point of this story is, in a way, the point of this entire book: “We are all genetic chimeras, at once saints and sinners, champions of the truth and hypocrites — not because humanity has failed to reach some foreordained religious or ideological ideal, but because of the way our species originated across millions of years of biological evolution.”

We may be sitting here on the left antenna of some aphid in Teaneck, in other words, but we are complicated as hell.

**THE MEANING OF HUMAN EXISTENCE**

By Edward O. Wilson

207 pages. Liveright.