

REVIEW

This View of Life: Completing the Darwinian Revolution

by David Sloan Wilson

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There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst the planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

The title of David Sloan Wilson's book comes, of course, from this famous final sentence in Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Wilson wants to bring a better understanding of this view of life to everyone, and he wants to show how this view can help us to live better lives and develop better societies. In this he is only partially successful due, in no small part, to the fact that his interpretive lens is not in fact completely grounded in evolutionary science. I say this with the acknowledgement that nobody's interpretive frame is or could ever be completely "scientific." Especially when it comes to the human mind and our social systems and institutions, we have a strong tendency to view the world through an ideological lens, which can distort the way one views the world. If you know Wilson's ideology is that of a moderate left-liberal, you can actually see him struggling in this book to reconcile his desire for that world view to be correct and what evolutionary theory, biology in general, and ecology in particular seem to be telling him about economics.

There is much to admire in *This View of Life*. Wilson first provides us with a short history of Darwinian thought, and throughout the book he continues to bring us back to Nico Tinbergen's four questions every evolutionary biologist must ask about any given trait:

What is its function?

What is its history?

What is its physical mechanism?

How does it develop over the organism's lifetime?

Wilson argues that these four questions are also questions we must always ask when it comes to the social sciences. To do so makes one an evolutionary thinker. On this I think he is absolutely correct. After showing the relevance of these question to the evolution of the eye, the immune system, and Pacific chorus frog tadpoles, Wilson goes on to apply these four questions to a wide range of topics, from why we have so much myopia and autoimmune diseases, to how we should avoid developmentally inappropriate learning in young children, and from the structure of businesses to the management of the commons. In the latter case, Wilson turns to the work of Elinor Ostrom and her core design principles (CDPs).

Indeed, Wilson makes Ostrom's CDPs a central part of his set of recommendations as to how to best integrate evolutionary thinking into our thinking about communities and organizations. In fact, the list of CDPs is in almost the very center of the book. The fact that he concentrates on these elements shows both this book's strengths and weaknesses. If we view this work as a set of evolution-based suggestions for developing stronger communities and organizations—systems small enough that we can keep track of all the people involved—then I cannot recommend this book strongly enough. However, if Wilson intends this work to be a recommendation for how to "consciously evolve" the economy, there are many, many flaws.

Many of the topics of this book have already been covered. Wilson wants to argue against the "blank slate" view of the human mind, but Steven Pinker has already done so in his book of the same name. Wilson also wants to apply evolutionary thinking more broadly, but Matt Ridley has already done this in *The Evolution of Everything*, which I previously reviewed in these pages. In fact, Ridley does a more thorough job of applying evolutionary thinking to all levels of complexity in the cosmos, and he does a better

job of applying it to understanding large-scale social systems like the global economy. While Ridley's book is recent enough that Wilson may have been finishing his own book when it came out, it seems odd that Pinker's works along these lines would garner no mention. Indeed, there are a number of topics that are strangely short on references, including the evolutionary psychology of morals (Chapter 4), a topic which has had more than its fair share of popular books. That being said, Ridley's book may actually make for a fine companion piece to Wilson's, since Ridley's focus is primarily on *cosmos*, while Wilson's is primarily on *taxis*, with each mostly ignoring the other aspect. The two together provide a much more complete, complex picture.

An aspect of this book all social scientists should take seriously is in the chapter on the evolution of morals, where Wilson discusses multilevel selection—meaning, both individuals and groups—as the source of our morals. He notes that if there were only individual selection, morals as we know them would not have evolved. From an individual standpoint, it makes a lot of sense to steal, cheat, rape, and murder. However, such behavior is bad for developing trust among groups, and groups are going to outlast individuals, and protect those individuals, if the groups can stay cohesive. To create trust and other beliefs and behaviors that improve social coherence, moral rules against theft, cheating, rape, and murder—and in favor of gift-giving, fairness, altruism, and loving-kindness—would evolve, as would a tendency to punish those who violate those moral rules. The evolution of goodness makes sense if you are doing your analysis at the right level of selection: the tribal group.

Indeed, Wilson dedicates chapters to small group evolution, the evolution of individuals, and the evolution of large groups, in that order, because we are each born into small groups—families, tribes, communities, cultures, etc.—which in turn develop each of our personalities and world views, which then in turn affects the ways in which we interact in large-scale groups. This would come to no surprise to Nona Martin and Virgil Storr (2008), who argued that culture affects the people's attitudes toward business and markets, and can prevent people in those cultures from creating healthy economic or other social orders. Oddly, Wilson does not spend a great deal of time discussing culture, which also evolves according to the small group—individual—large group formula, with the larger culture in turn affecting the small group (and, of course, individuals). Or, perhaps it's not all that odd. After all, while Wilson seems pretty sure of himself on economic issues, I somehow doubt he would be so sure about applying his formulas to the var-

ious aspect of culture, including artistic production. Wilson's weakness lies precisely in his inability to understand the larger-scale group dynamics of, say, a national or global economy. His idea work well in small groups with strong bonds, but he completely neglects weak-bond large groups.

While small groups—individual—large group analysis is important for explaining certain motives (or the lack of them), personality, family structures, social psychology, and so forth, the things generally studied by economists don't typically need this analysis. No matter how you were raised, the second unit of something has less value to you than the first at that particular time. Marginalism and the law of supply and demand apply to all human beings, regardless of the way they were raised.

Part of the problem is that Wilson does not seem to understand that there is a difference between organizations and the social ecological systems in which they survive—which is to say, he doesn't seem to understand that there is a difference between *cosmos* and *taxis*. This is a problem for his overall world view, because he seems to think that what will work in organizations will also work for the economy at large. While he fortunately explicitly rejects central planning, he also rejects "laissez-faire" because he cannot imagine how that would work out in a firm—and because he seems to think that "laissez-faire" means that we should all just leave each other alone and never help each other. If that last sentence was confusing, that's because Wilson's thinking on the economy and especially laissez-faire is confused. He dismisses the idea of the invisible hand, yet affirms that nature is full of examples of groups doing well despite the fact that the individuals don't have the wellbeing of the group in mind—thus affirming what he denies! In another example of this confusion, Wilson several times mistakenly applies Schumpeter's idea of "creative destruction" to the internal workings of a firm.

This being said, the book is actually full of good advice for business management. For example, Wilson points out that too many people think failure should be avoided rather than used as a learning experience. The result is that if you make a mistake nowadays, it's all too common to get canned right away. There are no second chances anymore in business or politics. Yet, without failures, we cannot learn. More, a culture which primarily punishes any sort of failure will find people concealing those failures. This creates a more corrupt culture overall.

He also recommends creating artificial emergency situations to keep people working at peak performance, and creating a business culture in which constant evolution is

always expected. Businesses should, like Toyota, encourage employees to find and report problems—this would create a culture in which “no problems” means there’s a problem. At the same time, Wilson laments the fact that people don’t readily adopt these ways to run a business, though they have been wildly successful where they have been correctly adopted. He finds the same problem in people’s failure to adopt successful CDPs. Part of the problem in the past, no doubt, has been that people have had to reinvent the wheel each time. Should these methods become more widely known and understood, perhaps many of our businesses would be more successful, more efficiently run, and better places for people to work. That is one of the benefits this book could bring.

In other words, *This View of Life* is probably a wonderful business book, but it’s a less than impressive economics book. In this sense it very much reflects the fact that knowing how to run a business in no way translates to understanding how an entire economy works. Business leaders’ proclamations on the economy cause a great deal of eye-rolling among economists precisely because knowledge and understanding about business does not necessarily translate to knowledge and understanding about the economy—or vice versa. The same, it seems, is true of understanding biological evolution. In the realm of economics, Wilson seems to have confused individual organisms with the ecosystem in which they live. While there may be some superficial similarities at certain scales (see Camplin 2011, where I explain the differences between hierarchical organizations and scale-free spontaneous orders), the fact of the matter is that there are very important differences between the two such that it’s vital you do not mistake one for the other. As Hayek observed, we cannot apply organizational structures to spontaneous orders, nor spontaneous order structures to organizations:

If we were to apply the unmodified, uncurbed, rules of the micro-cosmos (i.e., of the small band or troop, or of, say, families) to the macro-cosmos (our wider civilization), as our instincts and sentimental yearnings often make us wish to do, *we would destroy it*. Yet if we were always to apply the rules of the extended order to our more intimate groupings, *we would crush them*. So we must learn to live in two sorts of worlds at once. (Hayek 1991, emphasis in original)

Ludwig von Bertalanffy also warns us in *General Systems Theory* that equating human social systems to biological

systems would lead to tyranny. This is due to the fact that the biological molecules that make up each cell are completely subordinated to the *telos* (purpose) of the cell. To equate society to a cell, and humans to the biochemicals, is to say that the individual humans involved are not important, are in fact replaceable, but that the society as a whole, its goals and purpose, is what matters. I have little doubt that Wilson would not want such an outcome; yet, such is the danger of his equating our social systems to organisms rather than to ecosystems. His focus on the small group unfortunately makes him blind to the different dynamics of the larger group.

You may have noted a curious phrase above: “conscious evolution.” Wilson uses this term to argue that we should try our best to guide our social orders using our understanding of evolution. Somehow, evolution occurred just fine for billions of years, but now we have to take our own social evolution into our own hands—we cannot trust it to the same kinds of forces which worked to create us and to get us here. The very idea of “conscious evolution” smacks of intelligent design—a theory I know Wilson would dismiss out of hand. Yet, somehow, intelligent design seems sensible to him at the human level—though, of course, his intelligent design is absent a divine designer. He argues that if engineers can design complex systems, then we should be able to do the same with complex social systems. To this end, one wishes he would read his Hayek (whom he cites several times) more carefully. The fact that engineers can seemingly perform miracles with physics doesn’t mean people can accomplish the same things at two magnitudes of complexity beyond physics. Even the most complex physical systems come nowhere near the complexity of social systems.

Wilson’s world view works well with small social units—firms, communities, families, churches, and so on—but would be impractical and impracticable at larger scales. Of course, he may be right that we would all be happier in smaller-scale communities—but then we would lose all of the benefits of living in the Great Society, including such benefits as reduced racism, reduced sexism, increased wealth, and increased mobility. These are all things Wilson would no doubt celebrate, but which are made possible through the weak-bond, large-scale spontaneous orders that make up the Great Society. That being said, his observation that we need more competition in order to find better ways of living is something with which I could definitely agree. Does this mean that Wilson would favor charter cities, seasteading, and the breakup of large political units like the United States and China into smaller city-states? These

are all ways, after all, of using evolution to find better solutions for living.

Whatever Wilson's answers to such questions, and regardless of the serious flaws I find in his economic analyses, I highly recommend this book. There are many insights regarding evolution—especially multilevel selection—which social scientists would do well to integrate into their understanding. Fortunately, many of the scholars most influenced by Hayek already engage in such analyses, even if they don't explicitly say that is what they're doing. I think it would benefit them to know that that is indeed what they're doing. And while Wilson is still fighting battles in economics from 50 years ago (who still believes in *Homo economicus*?), his insights for creating healthier businesses and other organizations is quite valuable. Economists who can stop their eyes from rolling over what he says about laissez-faire, Hayek, and Schumpeter will see that there is much to gain from *This View of Life*.

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