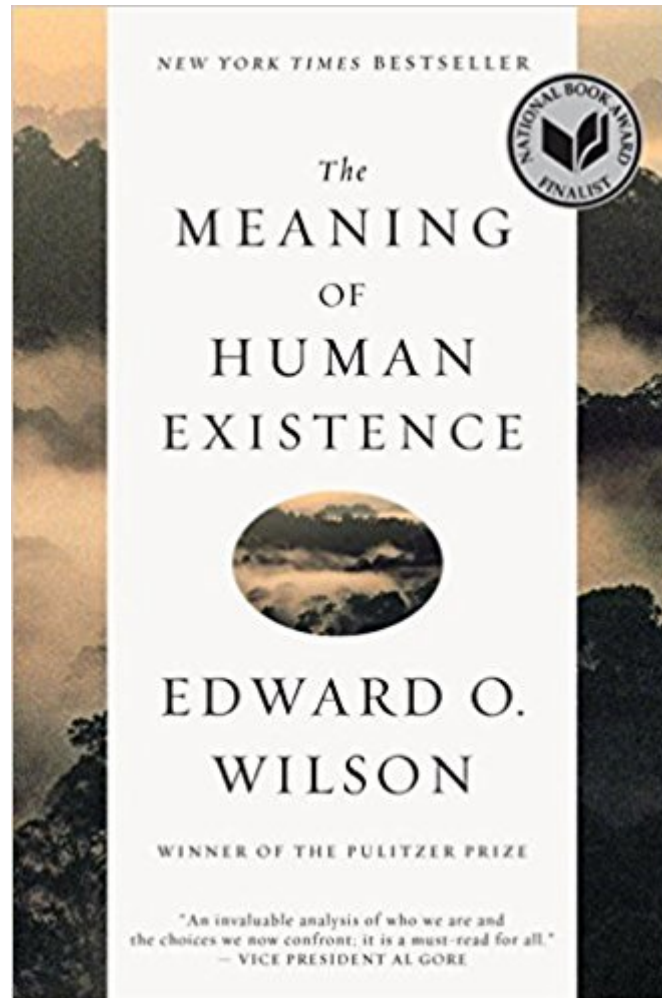




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The Meaning Of Human Existence



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

“A valedictory work” 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. - Dwight Garner, New York Times Book Review

“In his typically elegant style, two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner Wilson (Letters to a Young Scientist) cannily and candidly probes the nature of human existence. - Publishers Weekly

“This illustrious book collects all 160 photographs of renowned abolitionist Frederick Douglass and astutely places Douglass’s personal interest in photography into the context of his career and legacy. This study provides a multifaceted, unique look at one of the most influential figures of American history. - Publishers Weekly

“This stunning volume presents 160 photographs, some for the first time, and they not only follow Douglass throughout his life but also place him within the times he lived. Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier point out that Douglass saw the truth-telling aspects of photography and how it could be used as a tool in the fight against slavery, as photos both humanized African Americans and revealed the horrors of their enslavement. This tour de force is a must-have that will enhance history and reference collections. - Patricia Ann Owens, Library Journal, Starred review

“E. O. Wilson is Darwin’s great successor, a scientist of such astounding breadth, depth, experience, and brilliance that he offers us nothing less than a new understanding of humanity. You will see the beauty, mystery, and possibilities of human existence through the eyes of one of humanity’s greatest and most intrepid explorers. - Jeffrey D. Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University

“[A] tough-minded little primer-cum-manifesto. Compact and readable. - Dan Cryer, Boston Globe

“There can be few better guides through our species’ past journey and potential for the future. A provocative and beautifully written collection of essays. - Tim Lenton, Nature

“No biologist has been more persistent or eloquent in correcting our misapprehensions about human origins than Edward O.

Wilson – We should be grateful that Wilson, so late in his illustrious career, still appeals to reason and imagination in hopes of enlightening us about our nature and inspiring us to change our destructive ways. – Scott Russell Sanders, Washington Post

“Wilson asks: Does humanity have a special place in the universe? Where are we going, and why? He answers by telling science’s latest creation stories, and presenting a vision of the future both inspiring and plausible, not an easy feat to pull off – Wilson is both a wild-eyed optimist and a hard-nosed realist. What more can we ask of a prophet? – John Horgan, Scientific American

Edward O. Wilson is widely recognized as one of the world’s preeminent biologists and naturalists. The author of more than thirty books, including *The Social Conquest of Earth*, *The Meaning of Human Existence*, and *Letters to a Young Scientist*, Wilson is a professor emeritus at Harvard University. The winner of two Pulitzer Prizes, he lives with his wife, Irene Wilson, in Lexington, Massachusetts.

"*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 quiet 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 musings of a famous scientist at the end of his career, Wilson wishes to integrate the sciences and the humanities--and dump religion--for the sake of humanity's beneficial future. Optimistic, often amusing, and always humane, Wilson provides a sweeping vision of what it means to be human. Unfortunately, he doesn't sufficiently appreciate the humanities, which means that its integration with science is reduced to doing propaganda for science. And he seriously misunderstands religion, ignoring or ignorant of the thinking of leading theologians. His brief comments on Niebuhr and Kierkegaard display inadequate engagement with his subject. Nothing outside the methods of science is allowed to be considered. Wilson is at his best when he's talking about his specialty--insects, especially ants. But overall the book is repetitive and merely skims the surface of its topics. At least it's easy to read and short.

Suppose you had the opportunity to spend an afternoon in the shade by the river with one of the smartest most accomplished people you will ever know. After a few beers he begins to tell you what his long lifetime of science and deep thought has taught him and what he thinks could happen in the future. He addresses the BIG questions. As an added bonus he happens to be a great imaginative story teller and funny, too. If you recorded it all this might be the transcript. This is the plain vanilla straight scientific view right from the lecture halls of Harvard [!] no less. Human origins and our ultimate destiny and much more... No hint of mysticism or meaning beyond the 'what you see is what you get' variety. Well, all right, every point of view deserves to be heard in my opinion. Whether or not one agrees totally with this pure existential humanistic point of view, it is clear the scientist who wrote it believes it. He makes his case in a clear and interesting way that is fun and enlightening reading. Great book!

This is a highly stimulating book but Wilson could have given more detail about how precisely the liberal arts can contribute to a world in which the sciences are developing so rapidly. Additionally, there are some inconsistencies in the time periods stated that should have been identified and eliminated by an editor.

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