

# Conservation ethics based on evolution?

A review of  
***The Future of Life***  
 by Edward O. Wilson  
 Vintage Books, New York,  
 2002

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*The Future of Life* is an attempt to promote conservation ethics, but is replete with evolution and ‘evolutionary ethics’. It was eloquently composed by a Pulitzer Prize winner with a knack for summarizing complex issues and interrelated topics at a layperson’s level. E.O. Wilson has a keen ability to synthesize data from varying disciplines and deduce relevant big-picture conclusions. Unfortunately, his big picture is naturalistic. Nevertheless, he offers wise, practical ideas for solving certain ecological problems.

It is sad to have to wade through such thick evolutionary bias to get to his useful suggestions and wonderful descriptions of the interrelated complexity between living things. The author even attempts to interpret his inherent ethical precepts and moral feelings in the limited context of naturalism. Not surprisingly, he comes up with either ambiguity or illogical conclusions. Here is one attempt to justify his pro-environment ethic:

‘For reasons difficult to understand and express, there is no way to make a full and final evaluation of the ivorybill [an extinct American woodpecker]. The measures we use ... rise from scattered unconnected facts and elusive emotions ...’ (p. 105).

### The problem: people

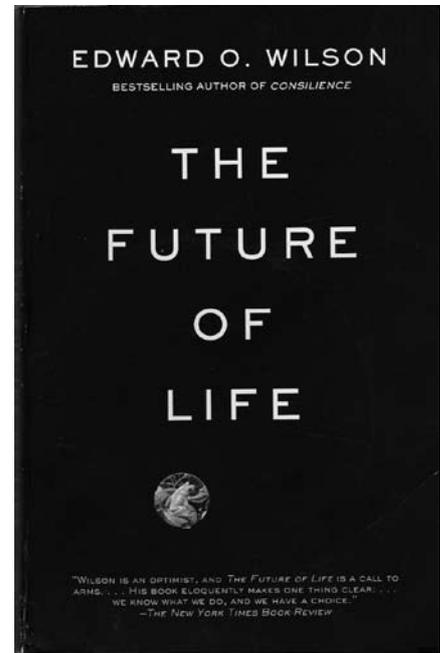
The author describes population growth as a problem and cites China,

where water traditionally used for agriculture is now being used for industrial production to meet the greedy Western appetite for goods: ‘The fundamental problem is that China has too many people’ (p. 37). It is suggested that we may eventually have to use some new nuclear technology to sustain a population grossly beyond what the earth could support. But ‘surely these are not frontiers we will wish to explore in order simply to continue our reproductive folly’ (p. 36). Perhaps Wilson did not read what Roger Revelle, former director of the Center for Population Studies, had to say:

‘Here we are faced with a paradox: attainment of the earth’s maximum carrying capacity for human beings would require a high level of agricultural technology, which in turn calls for a high level of social and economic development. Such developments, however, would be likely to lead to a cessation of population growth long before the maximum carrying capacity is reached.’<sup>1</sup>

Revelle estimated that with current technology the earth could support 50 billion people. Perhaps the fundamental problem in China is not sheer numbers of people, but rather how those people (mis)manage their vast resources. Perhaps their poor management is a manifestation of a faulty worldview in which evolutionary-based anti-God communism has corrupted the people and their use of land. If there is no God, then there is no accountability for wrongs done. Nor is there reason to conserve the environment or think of any generation than the one at present, for this world and this mortal life is all there is.

Consider Israel. This theistic culture has but a smidgeon of global real estate yet is replete with greenhouses, irrigation, and other technologies which maximize the efficiency of their land’s

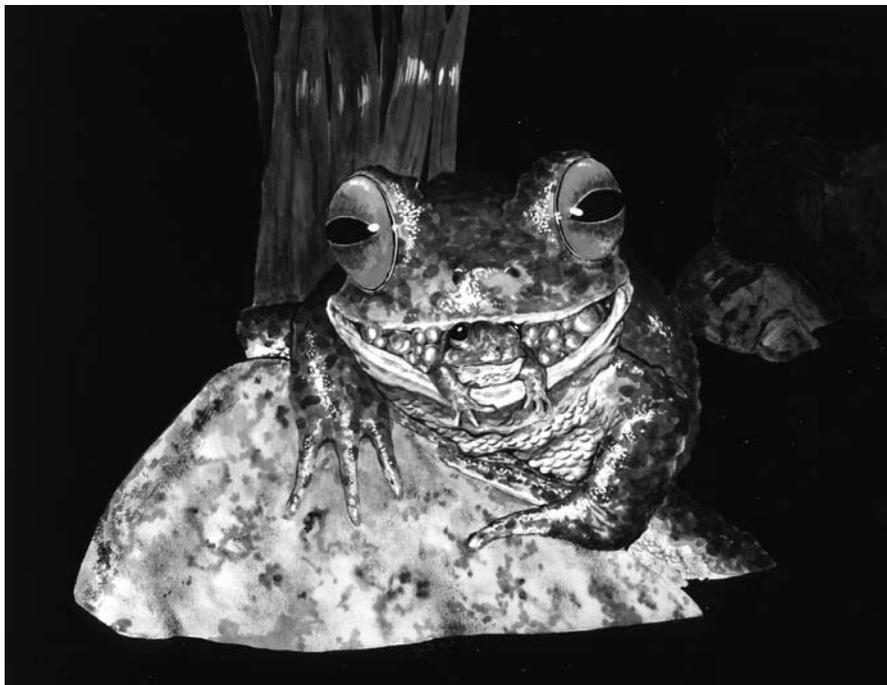


production. In 2004 the population density of China was 136/km<sup>2</sup> and that of Israel was 298/km<sup>2</sup>, yet very few decry Israeli population issues.<sup>2</sup> It is not necessarily ‘folly’ to reproduce, but rather folly to mandate atheistic lies on a national level. Incidentally, if reproduction is inherently folly, then so is the Scripture which mandates us to ‘fill the earth’ (Gen 1:28).

Wilson would contend that the destruction of the Sumatran rhino is an evil that man has wrought. But what universal moral code does Wilson use to make such judgments? In Chapter 4, ‘The Planetary Killer’ is humanity, or ‘*Homo sapiens*, serial killer of the biosphere’ (p. 94). ‘Should we therefore just let it [the Sumatran rhino] slip away? No, absolutely not ...’ (p. 83). Notice his use of a prescriptive moral term, ‘should’. If there is no real universal law to back up his moral prescription, then his utterance is void. Further, if ‘survival and reproduction of the fitter’ were to be consistently applied, then what reason is there to conserve a poorly fit rhino?

### Evolutionary ethics

Materialistic evolution provides no place for a universal moral lawgiver. Nor does evolution allow for legal knowledge to adjudicate between the



Australia's gastric brooding frog, *Rheobatrachus silus*, stunned the world of science when it was found in 1973 in south-east Queensland. The female gave birth to live young through her mouth. This species is now thought to be extinct.

relative offensiveness of 'serial killing' of rhinos versus serial killing of people. The Bible commands us to procreate and to manage the biosphere wisely in the Dominion Mandate of Genesis 1:28. Biblically, we know that while the loss of a species is tragic, it is not murderous. The value of man has been granted by his Creator, who made man in the image of God. Ironically, that special image includes conscience, which gives E.O. Wilson, not rhinos, the awareness of morality that he falsely applies.

'Ethics evolve through discrete steps: from self-image to purpose to value to ethical precepts to moral reasoning' (p. 131). There is no evidence for the evolution of morality. Evolutionists presuppose evolution in order to argue that ethics evolved. Further, one could argue that morality contains interdependent parts that are irreducibly complex. The universal moral law, knowledge of that law, and ability to comprehend and variously apply the law must all exist simultaneously. What selective advantage would any of those solitary components have conferred before the

whole moral apparatus was assembled? Also, since evolution only works on material, then these immaterial components must reside on genes, but there is no evidence for genes that code for morals.

Francis Beckwith and Gregory Koukl give cogent arguments against the idea that evolution somehow spawned morality in their book *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Thin Air*. In their chapter titled 'Monkey Morality', it is explained that morality cannot be reduced to mere conduct or simply behaviour. Morality includes *intent* and *motive*. If this were not so, then we would commonly and justly punish people for just accidentally hurting others. Evolution is incapable of explaining the origins of intent and motive, for evolution (supposedly) acts on matter, and motives are immaterial. Only an immaterial cause can produce an immaterial effect. Intent and motive could not have originated from DNA any more than something can come from nothing:

'When morality is reduced to patterns of behavior chosen by natural selection for the survival

value, then morality is not explained; it is denied.'<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, evolutionists maintain, morality is an illusion brought on by genes which trick us into behaviours which increase our survivability. If morality is an illusion, then there is no morality. Therefore, we can kill Sumatran rhinos without qualms!

Wilson admits 'stewardship ... appears to arise from emotions programmed in the very genes of human social behavior' (p. 132). So, stewardship (taking care of others on the planet like Genesis 1 teaches) comes from emotions? These emotions originate from genes? It only 'appears' this way to a methodological naturalist.

Emotions are no basis for morality. What if one's emotions are different? What if someone cannot stand the way the ivorybill looks, and hates the holes it pounds in trees? They could then be just in their removal of the ugly, pesky birds. On one hand, the author provides an indefensible foundation for ethics which assumes evolution *a priori*. On the other hand, he frequently appeals to a universal code obviously not built on fictitious, genetically determined emotions.

His conclusion is, 'Thus, our place in nature is to think about the creation and to protect the living planet' (p. 132). Though this sentiment follows logically from a biblical worldview, it does not follow from evolutionary premises. He violates causality by having a material cause produce an immaterial effect. Biblically, though, it *is* our place to protect the planet. Evolutionarily, it is not! As Harvard's Irvan DeVore summarizes, 'I look at evolution and I see indifference and capriciousness.'<sup>4</sup> Yet evolution cannot tell DeVore how he has knowledge of such immaterial qualities as indifference and capriciousness.

### Evolution of the biosphere

'If *Homo sapiens* ... must have a creation myth ... none is more solid and unifying than evolutionary

Image by Robert Jensen, <www.bobjensenphotography.com>



*The exquisite swallowtail butterfly (Heraclides aristodemus ponceanus) would be extinct in the wild were it not for captive breeding programs.*

history' (p. 133). Creation is not a myth and evolution is not solid. No new genetic information has been observed to appear in creatures. Cell biologists have run into an impasse for biological evolution: the alleged chance formation of irreducibly complex, immensely interdependent, mind-bogglingly efficient molecular-sized machines in living cells. A fossil record which should be replete with transitional forms has only a small handful of disputed candidates. Fossils overwhelmingly show no transition, only the abrupt appearance of fully-formed kinds. Evolution is not solid because it denies what must necessarily exist: the intelligent *cause* of very highly ordered systems.

Evolution is not unifying. After Hitler built his view of ethics on Darwinian principles, the Jews did not feel unified as they were removed for 'racial hygiene' purposes.<sup>5</sup> The author himself admits something similar though in a different context: 'In most places where the socialist experiment was tried, its record was even worse than capitalist countries' (p. 156). When antitheistic evolution formed

an ideological basis of government in Communist Russia and China, did the millions who were (and are) starved to death in mass genocide feel 'unified' with their brutal Darwinist oppressors?

Former US Vice-President Al Gore, amazingly a professing Baptist, adds this: '... Violence has that capacity because of our evolutionary heritage, because of the laws of nature—tooth and fang.'<sup>6</sup> When an 'explanation' of violence is needed, evolution provides it. When an 'explanation' of good morals is needed, evolution provides it. Evolution must now be seen as no explanation at all, but rather a philosophical assumption which violates causality and has no objective historical or scientific support.

Biblical history *is* unifying if read as written. Genesis links all men together to one family (Noah's), and into one man (Adam). Acts 17:26 records that God has made every nation from one blood. As God's creation, all share unity of origin and of accountability to the Creator and Redeemer. Christians are unified and consistent in thinking about the

creation as a purposeful design, and men as stewards of it.

Wilson is astounded by the interdependence of ecological systems, which apparently

'evolved over hundreds of millions of years to their present condition by the activity of the biosphere, a stupendously complex layer of living creatures ...' (p. 39).

If we had to artificially manufacture all the benefits that the biosphere gives, including water purification, oxygen maintenance, atmospheric gas levels, formation and enrichment of soil, nutrient cycling, detoxification and pollination, it would be 'an economic and even physical impossibility, and we would certainly die ...' (p. 106). He explains that the evolution of biospheres has produced

'antibiotics, fungicides, antimalarial drugs, anesthetics, analgesics, blood thinners, blood-clotting agents ... cardiac stimulants and regulators, immunosuppressive agents, hormone mimics, hormone inhibitors, anticancer drugs, fever suppressants, inflammation controls, contraceptives, diuretics and antidiuretics, antidepressants, muscle relaxants, rubefacients, anticongestants, sedatives ... now at our disposal, complements of wild biodiversity. Revolutionary new drugs have rarely been developed by the pure insights of molecular and cellular biology ...' (120).

So, whereas intelligent, purposeful, powerful man only rarely develops new drugs, non-intelligent, blind evolution created all these biopharmaceuticals? Their development can be explained by

'an evolutionary logic ... All kinds of organisms have evolved chemicals needed to control cancer in their own bodies, kill parasites, and fight off predators. Mutations and natural selection, which invent this armamentarium, are processes of endless trial and error' (p. 119).

This evolutionary logic is faulty because Wilson invokes a

material cause (evolution) to produce an immaterial effect (the information contained in the highly ordered biopharmaceuticals). This violates the principle of causality, a 'first principle' that is undeniable.<sup>7</sup> Causality demands that complex information only come from intelligence. What amazing faith Wilson has in what he calls the 'Darwinian lottery!' (p. 105), especially because mutations have never been observed inventing any new biochemicals, let alone the interrelated, irreducibly complex biochemical systems in the biosphere. It is much more reasonable that the complex systems that Wilson marvels at are products of a designer consistent with the God of the Bible; not products of a lottery.

### Ecological solutions

Wilson laments throughout this book about biological losses. For example, 50% of Hawaii's native snail species are gone (p. 53), Australia's gastric brooding frog is gone, Costa Rica's golden toad is presumed extinct, Shaus' swallowtail butterfly has been held only in captivity, and freshwater mussel species in the United States have been reduced by 10% (p. 58). In the context of a biblical worldview, the loss of all members of a kind is lamentable because of that kind's value as a creation of God. The tiny mysteries of that kind, revealing new insights into its creator, would be lost forever.

Wilson concedes:

'For the Abrahamic religions ... the environmental ethic is compatible with ... the perception of nature as God's handiwork' (p. 157).

Evolution provides no reason to care about the environment, yet Wilson does anyway. Putting aside his twisted view of origins, we see that Wilson has thought of some practical conservation ideas, especially in Chapter 7, entitled 'The Solution'. What he proposes in the realms of politics and public policy is practical because Wilson recognizes the balance necessary between meeting people's needs now and conserving the environment for later discoveries,

technologies and appreciation.

Wilson proposes Step one: to 'turn away from claims of inherent moral superiority based on political ideology and religious dogma' (p. 151). Perhaps he could apply some of his own advice. Step two is to disarm stereotypes of those in the other camp so dialogue can begin toward a workable compromise. Certainly, finding common ground, like Paul did in order to communicate with Athenians as recorded in Acts 17, is necessary if we are to work together to increase our planetary management skills. However, this must not be at the expense of biblical doctrine.

Step three offers good advice on reaching a workable compromise between what has become too dichotomous and gladiatorial a controversy: those who believe that all 'eco-wackos' are just out for political power should

'diagnose and disconnect extraneous political ideology, then shed it in order to move toward the common ground where economic progress and conservation are ... the same goal' (p. 155).

Depending on what Wilson defines as extraneous, his sentiment could be seen to reflect the Dominion Mandate to be fruitful and subdue the earth. Those who believe the 'right-wingers' are only out for unbridled exploitation should shed such notions to work to a common ground. Also, immediately salvage 'hotspots', 'those habitats that are both at the greatest risk and shelter the largest concentration of species found nowhere else' (p. 160).

He lists specific rainforests and scrublands, combining for a total of 1.4% of the earth's land surface, yet containing '43.8 percent of all vascular plants and 35.6 percent of mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians' (p. 161). If we could replace 'salvage' with 'keep from destruction', his idea makes sense. Regarding those who live inside biodiverse areas that are in danger of being destroyed, Wilson admits that 'their needs cannot be met by purely preservationist policy' (p. 168). Find creative ways to make conservation profitable, like mining for pharmaceuticals in the

tropics, or employing ecotourism. Such attempts are being made in Cameroon, where organizations have developed 'a strategic mix of support and development to turn the reserve in to an economic asset' (p. 168). Finally, these three entities, the private sector, government, and science and technology, must cooperate soon.

### Conclusion

With a moral tone, Wilson comments: 'We, winners of the Darwinian lottery, bulge-headed paragons of organic evolution ... are chipping away the ivorybills and other miracles around us' (p. 105). If we are nothing more than lottery winners, and the ivorybills are not, then they have no special or miraculous value! 'If we are all rearranged pond scum, then talk of moral obligation is meaningless.'<sup>8</sup> However, a consistent outworking of even just the Dominion Mandate to fill the earth and subdue it would engender a superior and truer conservation ethic.

### References

1. Revelle, R., as quoted in: Morris, J. and Morris, H., *The Modern Creation Trilogy, V. 3*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, p. 142, 1996.
2. Online almanac; <[www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0107411.html](http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0107411.html)>.
3. Beckwith, F. and Koukl, G., *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Midair*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 151, 1998.
4. DeVore, I., Astronomy might be refashioning images of God, *Times-News Weekender*, p. 9A, 1999.
5. This is convincingly argued in: Wiekart, R., *From Darwin to Hitler*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004.
6. Gore, A., Interview with Larry King Live, aired 6 May 1999, 9:00 pm, ET.
7. See, for example, Sarfati, J., *Refuting Compromise*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, pp. 179 ff., 2004.
8. Sarfati, J., *Refuting Evolution 2*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, pp. 144 ff., 2002.