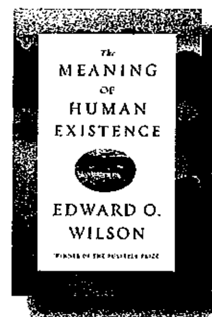

The Unmeaning of Unmeaning

by Allen Mendenhall

The Meaning of Human Existence
by Edward O. Wilson
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A COMPUTER WAS THE VICTOR on a popular television game show, easily defeating its human competitors; an arms race is under way involving militarized robots that can take the battlefield in the place of inferior humans; in Japan, artificial-intelligence software has outperformed college applicants on a standardized college-entrance examination.

Our machines are becoming a part of us, one of us. Manufactured retinas have restored sight to the blind; the maimed and the crippled have regained their limbs and appendages in the form of robotic prosthetics; brain implants have alleviated problems associated with Parkinson's disease; a company called EmoShape manufactures robots that display human emotions, including anger and fear and sadness.

But where there is human flesh, even a simulacrum of human flesh, there is the potential for eros. The 2013 film *Her* explored the possibility that humans will attempt romantic congress with computer operating systems, reducing love to an algorithm and human sex acts to masturbatory exchanges with disembodied, computerized voices.

We have created our own reproductive anatomy—lab-engineered penises and vaginas—that soon will be tested on men and women with congenital defects. Men may now visit virtual-reality brothels. A baby recently was born out of a transplanted womb.

We are building more robots and killing more human fetuses than ever before. Luminaries like Stephen Hawking warn of the dangers of artificial intelligence; futurists, on the other hand, celebrate the rise of cyborgs and the arrival of transhumanism and even posthumanism. Synthetic biologists are learning, they claim, to direct natural selection through gene therapy and cell manipulation. Silicon Valley's brightest have announced that they are seeking "cures" for human aging.

In light of all this, the question of the meaning of human existence seems more urgent than ever before.

EDWARD O. WILSON PURPORTS to answer this question in *The Meaning of Human Existence*, his 30th book. Wilson is one of the world's most renowned scientists. He is by all accounts a gentleman who enunciates his words in a soft, Southern drawl. Raised in Alabama, blind in one eye, he developed a boyhood fascination with insects that eventually led him to Harvard, where he took his Ph.D. in biology. He earned his reputation by studying ants and by writing popular books that are accessible to laymen. *On Human Nature*, his fourth book, won the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction in 1979. He has, despite his atheism, drawn praise from conservative intellectuals. In 1989, for instance, The Rockford Institute, which publishes this magazine, gave him the Richard M. Weaver Award for Scholarly Letters.

As titles go, Wilson's *The Meaning of Human Existence* is bold if not presumptuous. Works that set out to establish definitively the "meaning" of human life promise more than they can deliver. First, there is the problem of meaning itself. Thus, Wilson begins with a short chapter titled "The Meaning of Meaning," which, not surprisingly, raises more questions than it answers. The meaning of *meaning*, according to Wilson, resides in the blurry overlap between two worldviews: the theological and religious worldview that locates meaning in the design and intention of an omnipotent creator, and the scientific worldview that locates meaning in the random accidents of history and in the nondesigned, adaptive, spontaneously ordered laws of nature. These worldviews are tenuously linked, Wilson suggests, in their treatment of human free will and intentionality.

Wilson claims, for example, that intelligent organisms evolve associatively to combine their intents and purposes for their mutual benefit; their behavior grows more alike over time as together they respond to environmental imperatives and learn to commiserate and to cooperate as a social unit. What was once merely the mechanical firing of brain activity in individual persons has become a behavioral trait among groups of humans. Wilson provides an arthropodic example:

> A spider spinning its web in-

> tends, whether conscious of the outcome or not, to catch a fly. That is the meaning of the web. The human brain evolved under the same regimen as the spider's web. Every decision made by a human being has meaning in the first, intentional sense. But the capacity to decide, and how and why the capacity came into being, and the consequences that followed, are the broader, science-based meaning of human existence.

Meaning itself is not identified in this illustration: Wilson does not tell us what it is, only where we might find it. It's up to us to do the searching.

Despite his prefatory lip service to theology and religion, Wilson adopts a materialist worldview, which seems, the more he describes it, less and less compatible with the theological and religious worldview, until at last there is no overlap at all. Wilson tells us that there "is no predestination, no unfathomed mystery of life. Demons and gods do not vie for our allegiance." He assures us that the "eternal conflict" between groups of people "is not God's test of humanity" or "a machination of Satan." "It is," he says, "just the way things worked out."

Wilson is convinced that humans are for the first time in their history ("not just the six millennia of civilization but very much further back, across hundreds of millennia") leaving behind the process that, he claims, produced us—namely, natural selection—and entering into a new age of choice in which we have available to us a genetic "shopping list" to "direct our own evolution." He proposes that we understand our biological and evolutionary past in order wisely to shape our future.

One would think that a grounding in history or tradition would aid in satisfying this ambition, but Wilson makes clear that he is rejecting this kind of history and promoting a secular and scientific history that is not only stripped of providence, angelic intercession, heavenly statutes, and divine intervention but also antecedent to all written records. "Humanity," he avers to this end,

> arose entirely on its own through an accumulated series of events during evolution. We are not predestined to reach any goal, nor are we answerable to any power but our own. Only wisdom based on self-understanding, not piety, will save us.

Tellingly, Wilson does not define what it means to "save" or what we need to be saved by or from if there is no God, Hell, sin, Satan, or transcendental moral order to the universe. He is apparently content in his belief that "[t]here will be no redemption or second chance vouchsafed to us from above." "We have," he adds, "only this one planet to inhabit and this one meaning to unfold."

To seek answers to the meaning of human existence from this secular perspective in which man isn't begotten by Adam but descended from *Homo habilis* and improved from organism to superorganism, Wilson could have turned to the ideas of Emerson or Nietzsche or Bertrand Russell or Einstein or Ayn Rand, philosophers enthralled by the awesome powers of the human mind and dismissive of the doctrinal claims of religion in general and of traditional Christianity in particular—but he doesn't. Nor, thank goodness, does he turn to the close-minded, militant atheists such as Richard Dawkins (who is mentioned in the book) and Sam Harris. He instead turns to "the biological evolution of a species and the circumstances that led to its prehistory," professing that both our altruism and our instinctive, selfish urge to cooperate are explainable by science, which, therefore, is necessarily antecedent to, although participatory with, the humanities. Wilson's problem with the humanities seems to be that they retain the residue of theology, which was once the queen of the liberal arts.

Because in Wilson's view human creativity and collaboration are the inevitable products of the impersonal forces of raw nature, he considers the "task of understanding humanity" to be "too important and too daunting to leave to the humanities." He maintains that "the humanities have not achieved nor will they ever achieve a full understanding of the meaning of our species' existence" if they do not account for the "biological origins of human nature." He reasons that, since human nature has biological origins, and since creativity arises through competition and natural selection, we ought to embrace the ideals of the Enlightenment in which the humanities and the sciences were unified enterprises rather than distinct fields of operation.

Wilson blames Romanticism for the divorce of the humanities from science; rather than irreconcilable differences, he sees in this former marriage a powerful synergy that has since grown weak as experts in their respective fields have become hyperspecialized, the division of their labor increasingly alienated from the Big Picture. The fact of the matter, he submits, is that the "explosive growth of scientific knowledge" has "everything" to do with the humanities, because "[s]cience and technology reveal with increasing precision the place of humanity, here on Earth and beyond in the cosmos as a whole."

The meaning of human existence according to Wilson is found not in what we have created but in what has created us: a self-perpetuating, unthinking process of biological production shaped by genetic variety and the instinct for survival, not by a benevolent Creator. The dust jacket informs us that this is Wilson's "most philosophical work to date." But what we have here is a meandering series of essays that display with exceptional style an accre-

tive learning arrayed from scientific theory. And we also have a man, however gentle and unassuming, making grandiose claims based on mere supposition—not a call to arms but a triumphalist celebration that the war is already over. Science has won; religion has lost. Any seeming contradiction between religion and science must, he insists, be resolved in favor of the latter; any potential overlap between the two fields must, he reiterates, be dismissed. He thinks that religion hinders knowledge, holds us back, and distracts us from real truths by enslaving us to fancy and superstition. And he's wrong.

His secular perspective isn't unique, and it isn't philosophical, either—at least not without some analytical backing or historical context. Wilson supplies neither; he submits as fact what is open to interpretation. When Wilson informs us that there is no God, as if that "reality" were as established as the laws of gravity, he undermines his credibility and throws philosophy out the window. No need for proofs, second guesses, theological nuances, or even doubt. His scientific faith in the unprovable—although politely conveyed—is on equal footing with religious faith in the unprovable. Wilson doesn't reject faith; he embraces it. His faith is evident in his speculations that are unsupported by hard data—for example, that "[b]eyond the solar system there is life of some kind" (he admits that he lacks "[d]irect evidence" for this proposition but suggests that the evidence "may come soon, perhaps within a decade or two"), or that "life may have originated somewhere with molecular elements different from those in DNA and energy sources used by organisms on Earth." These claims aren't provable, yet he believes them. This is faith in the most rudimentary sense.

One would think Wilson would be more cautious after relying for so many years on "kin selection and its extensive inclusive fitness," only to learn that "inclusive fitness was not just wrong, but fundamentally wrong." Wilson nevertheless evinces not even a modicum of doubt regarding the possibility of a Creator. He seems blithely unconcerned that, having been wrong about one major premise, he might be wrong about another. What standing should we assign to someone who faces Pascal's wager and refuses even to hedge a bet in his own favor? He is either heroically bold or foolishly proud.

His faith is more rudimentary than that he decries in theism, which recognizes an infinite, sovereign God, eternal and unchanging, Who permeates and controls everything and from Whom all material substance derives. Wilson's faith comes across as plain hope about what we'll learn if the sciences can accomplish this or that. His diversionary hypothetical speculations about extraterrestrial visitors and about how the humanities (to him, "the natural history of culture") rather than the sciences would help us explain ourselves to these saucer-flying aliens might seem as radical or absurd to Christians as the doctrine of the Trinity or the nature of the Holy Spirit might seem to an atheist like him. When Wilson states that the "interval between habitable and inhabited may seem like an eternity to the human mind, but it is scarcely a night and a day in the nearly 14-billion-year history of the Milky Way galaxy as a whole," he doesn't seem to realize there's a scriptural equivalent to this dictum: that "one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."

Wilson's hope about the knowledge-creating possibilities enabled by science sometimes collapses into optimistic but unprovable conclusions about what is real or actual; the distinction between what might be known and what is known remains, too often in his book, fuzzy. He asserts without qualification that,

> [i]n time, likely no more than several decades, we will be able to explain the dark matter of the Universe, the origin of life on Earth, and the physical basis of human consciousness during changes of mood and thought. The invisible is seen, the vanishingly small weighed.

This is pep-rally speak for scientists, and one has to admit, whether he is an atheist or a theist, that such talk is exhilarating. Who doesn't want more answers to these vexing elements of our phenomenal existence? But when the stakes are so high, and the need for resolution and purpose so urgent, should we believe without hesitation a scientist who refuses to doubt his own suppositions, who goes far beyond rejecting the Genesis account of Creation to deny the possibility of any sort of creator altogether?

By the end of Wilson's argument, readers are left wondering what, exactly, the title of his book refers to. Wilson can teach us interesting facts—that some ant species enslave other ant species, for instance, or that the warrior ants are really a bunch of old ladies—but he can't tell us the meaning of human existence because, in his paradigm, there can't be any beyond the mechanical, chance desire to be altruistic in order to preserve and protect our "nests." Therefore, he reduces the meaning of human existence to this:

> [I]t is the epic of the species, begun in biological evolution and prehistory, passed into recorded history, and urgently now, day by day, faster and faster into the indefinite future, it is also what we will choose to become.

Our meaning, then, is a sequence of biological accidents aided or offset by our own deliberate choices—and nothing else, nothing at all, according to Wilson.

The mark of a good scientist is curiosity and imagination; when those cease, so do reliable answers to tough questions. Wil-

son foregoes any discussion of aseity and fails or refuses to account for how the cosmos could arise out of nothing. Certainly, there's the Big Bang, but what caused that? And what caused the things that caused that? And why couldn't there be a God Who created us to evolve? The fact that this is but a short book is no excuse: If you're predicating the meaning of human existence on the nonexistence of God, you must at least address or acknowledge the weaknesses of your argument.

Wilson wants to explicate the complex niceties of biology and then, having gained our attention, demands that we take him at his word that God is irrelevant to the meaning of our astounding, sometimes joyous, sometimes agonizing, and always confusing presence on this one small planet in this apparently enormous cosmos. Follow him at your own risk.

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What the Editors Are Reading

Having read and reviewed John Hardman's superb *Life of Louis XVI* (*Books in Brief*, August), I was encouraged recently to pick up a copy of *Louis XIV: The Other Side of the Sun*, by Prince Michael of Greece (a descendant of the Sun King's on the maternal side), first published in the United States in translation by Alan Sheridan. It is a beautifully realized book written with a novelist's narrative technique and fullness of characterization, and an historian's feel for fact and historical context.

Louis, as the prince portrays him, was a strikingly intelligent boy, with a royal poise, composure, self-assurance, and physical and moral courage even before he reached the age of ten, though also an astonishingly lonely and neglected child left to wander the palace during the day as he cadged food wherever he could find it. His mother, Anne of Austria (a Spaniard), became queen regent after the death of her husband when in a *lit de justice* the Parlement abrogated the will of Louis XIII to allow her to succeed him until their son attained his majority. In those years the French monarchy was in dire need of revenue (as it was to be in 1789, with fatal consequences), and the royal household, if not impoverished, led a far less lavish existence than the great families of France. A quarter of the way through the book's 447 pages, I'm most struck by the degree to which the court intrigues that gave rise to the Fronde also produced events that eerily anticipated the terrible events of the 1790's: risings of the Paris mob, the flight of the queen and the young king together with her ladies, near starvation in the capital city. The French Revolution had historical precedents, and Prince Michael makes the most of these in shaping his dramatic narrative. (CW)

I have always liked the idea of Stephen King more than I have cared for any of his books. At a meeting of the John Randolph Club here in Rockford many years ago, Tom Sheeley, in the midst of a lunchtime performance of classical guitar, asked, "What is creativity without editing?" His question was meant to be rhetorical, yet had someone answered "Stephen King" even Tom, more of an admirer of King's writing than I, would have been hard pressed to deny that to be true.

Since the release of Brian De Palma's adaptation of *Carrie* in 1976, filmmakers and TV producers have acted as King's *de facto* editors, with mixed success. While many film and TV adaptations of King's work have flopped, either by adhering too slavishly to the source material or, conversely, excising the truly brilliant parts, the best directors and producers have used King's genius as inspiration for their own works of art. Among the successes I would count *Stand by Me*, *Needful Things*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, and *The Mist*. (Don't ask me about *The Shining*; I do not share the general belief in Stanley Kubrick's genius.)

So when I greatly enjoyed the Hulu original miniseries *11.22.63*, I naturally assumed this to be another case in which the visual adaptation rose above the written source. Yet I was fascinated enough to pick up the 1,100-plus-page book—and was delighted to discover that I was wrong.

This story of a high-school teacher who spends five years in the past in an attempt to stop the assassination of John F. Kennedy never drags (though it could have benefited, as usual, from a good editor). Unlike the miniseries, which largely portrays the first few years of the 1960's in golden tones, King's work realizes the world of nearly 60 years ago in its fullness, letting the reader sense what has been lost, both for ill and for good. And while there are obvious anachronisms (including a ridiculously frequent use of profanity), the sense of entering another time is as palpable as in Jack Finney's *Time and Again*, which King himself acknowledges as "*The* great time-travel story."

That said, I recommend both watching the miniseries and reading the book, because there are ways in which the former rises above the latter, including the change in the character of Miz Mimi (more true to the state of race relations in small-town Texas at the time) and the very ending, when Jake Epping (the high-school teacher) and Sadie Dunhill (his love from 1963) are reunited. This scene—more fully realized in the miniseries—was not King's idea; he included it as an epilogue in the book at the suggestion of his son, Joe Hill, who, as a novelist, may more fully approach the Platonic ideal of Stephen King than King himself has ever been able to do. (SPR)