

A THEOLOGIAN'S RESPONSE TO WILSON'S "ON HUMAN NATURE"

by J. Robert Nelson

Sitting at my typewriter, surrounded by books and papers on genetics and sociobiology, pondering what to say about the religious and ethical implications of Edward O. Wilson's remarkable theories, I see a spider. At first, though, I cannot even tell it is a spider. It is so small. Half the size of a pinhead. It floats below the lampshade, resembling a speck of dust. But it does not blow away as dust would. It seems to be suspended. Of course there is a filament. But where is it? Even though I am wearing strong reading glasses, I cannot see it. I twist the light against a dark background. Still invisible. So I slowly pass my ballpoint pen between the lamp and the floating speck of life. Now, although the filament is still too thin to be seen, I can wind it around and thus raise the tiny creature toward the lamp. But in a split second it drops five inches. I calculate that this movement, if done to a distance proportionate to my own height, would mean that I would instantaneously drop twelve hundred feet. But almost as quickly its minuscule body takes up the slack, and it is near enough to the lamp so that for the first time I can see the movement of legs. It is a spider, for sure. So within that semipinhead organism is a nervous system, a digestive tract, and a reproductive mechanism. My eyes can tell my mind nothing about this; only the entomologists can.

But what does "small" mean in the even finer realm of microbiology? Somehow my untrained mind must think below the level of visibility in the lens of the standard microscope, down into the regions where only the prodigious magnification of the electron microscope can distinguish variations of light and dark. Here are the cells, molecules, viruses, chromosomes, and genes that we have learned to analyze with facility.

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In recent years the word "boggle" has had to be used to express the effect of macro- and microscientific data upon our minds. They may or may not induce wonder, awe, or even reverence, but they invariably make us uncomfortably aware of the limits of our mental powers of ordinary commonsense conceptualization.

More mind-boggling than matter measured in angstroms and millimicrons is the effect that the genes have upon our human organisms and behavior. Geneticists have made prodigious strides in their ability to demonstrate how physiological characteristics and mental competence are determined by those minute and countless bits of coding which are strung along the double twist of DNA molecules. Thus they have led us to the brink of the abyss of nonempirical and nondemonstrable knowledge about human life. Are the interactions of the brain's billions of cells with the rest of the body's cells, tissues, and organs the sole cause of behavior? As stimuli, both external and internal to the body, excite the entire neural system to respond by thoughts, words, feelings, and movements, is it sufficient to say that the ultimate explanation can be sought solely in terms of chemistry and electrical energy? The words "sole" and "solely" need to be stressed because they point to what alone is problematical about claims for the biological explanations of human behavior. Relatively few educated persons wish to dismiss or reject the scientific descriptions of genetic influence. Nor do they doubt that environmental factors, both natural and cultural, shape people's phenotypes and personal responses by the mediation of the neural and sensory systems. Knowledge of human life has been greatly expanded and the mystery of life further illuminated by science. What is questioned by many is whether such explanations are all that we confidently may accept. Must metaphysical thought about human life be jettisoned along with much monotheistic theology in order to reach an intelligent and reliably scientific understanding of humanity?

This last question appears to be answered affirmatively by Wilson in several chapters of *On Human Nature*.¹ His assertions in this respect are neither new nor unusually vehement; but they arise from the new context of the study of sociobiology. They merit the response of persons who have respect for that field of study and for those who propound its truth and advertise its useful implications for the natural and social sciences as well as for certain of the humanities.

This critique is written by one whose profession, according to Wilson, is on the way to early extinction, namely, theology.² It is hardly possible to write on behalf of "religion" in general; Wilson does not hesitate to deal with religion as a single phenomenon, even though he

cites with approval the thesis of the anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace that there have been one hundred thousand religions.³ Moreover, this critique is submitted from the standpoint of a Christian theology which is posited upon three premises: the significance for our present time of traditional faith and theology, the validity of the *historical-critical method of evaluating texts*, and the necessity somehow to come to terms with contemporary scientific knowledge. The specificity of this kind of Christian theology needs to be emphasized in contrast to the generalities of Wilson's category of "religion" or even "traditional religion." Because he thus generalizes, it is rather easy for someone to say that "my particular religion" or theology is exempt from the generalized arrows from Wilson's bow which miss not only the bull's eye but also the whole target. Such evasion is not intended here, for if, as he writes, religion is the greatest challenge to sociobiology, it may be stated inversely that sociobiology poses a serious challenge to Christian faith and theology.⁴

Response to that challenge need not take the form of defending the faith against all critics or of devising casuistic apologies for doctrine. Christian faith does not pit Genesis against genetics. It has no need for presenting Yahweh/God as *deus ex machina*, a cosmic superman flying into the scene of human distress and perplexity to relieve troubles. Neither does theology need a "god of the gaps" who fills the lacunae in scientific knowledge. And while asserting the integrity of their faith and respect for rationality, theologians may not be excused from admitting all the instances of hypocrisy, ignorance, bigotry, injustice, and brutality which have been manifested by persons and churches in the name of God or of Jesus Christ, one who stood resolutely against all such ills.

The implications of sociobiology, as suggested by Wilson, challenge Christian theology at several points, four of which I consider of primary importance. These are the soul, free will, altruism, and the hope of human community.

THE SOUL

No religious or philosophical tradition presents an entirely satisfying and unambiguous concept of the meaning of "soul." Since the beginnings of civilization it has been the subject of speculation, whether as the Hebrew *nēpēs*, Greek *psuchē*, Sanskrit *atman*, or Latin *anima*. While still the concern of philosophers and theologians, it has been in modern times on the agenda of psychologists (many of whom reject the very idea of *psuchē* = soul) and recently of sociobiologists.⁵

The common assumption of many people is the dualism of body and soul: The body is made of chemically constituted cells, and the soul of some indefinable, invisible, immortal power. Hindu and Platonic philosophy have bequeathed this concept to the present generation in numerous cultures. Since the second century it often has been welcomed into the realm of Christian anthropology in spite of the fact that it is plainly contrary to the Semitic insight of the Scriptures. The Hebrew anthropology is unitary, not dualistic. It is literally psychosomatic: Body and soul are one life. Indeed the Hebrew language lacks any word for "body" and is content to speak of *basar* (flesh). Christian faith presupposes the older Hebrew understanding of unitary life, even though the New Testament, as written in Greek, introduces the deceptive word *soma* (body), suggesting a dualism. Thus when Jesus' words spoken in Aramaic at the Last Supper are presented in Greek as "This is my body," the meaning is "This is my self, the power of my whole life."

We might say today then that the "soul" is an essential but not separable dimension of a person's whole life. It is real enough; but it is not some external vitalizing force which serves to animate the flesh or body. Dualism is a Hellenistic philosophical intrusion into late Jewish and early Christian concepts of humanity.

Wilson rejects a "vitalistic metaphysics, in which properties are postulated that cannot be translated into neurons, circuits or any other physical units."⁶ In this rejection he seems to be approximating the biblical view with respect to the infused soul. But he raises a difficult question of theology by suggesting that the "soul," or better the "self," must be contained somehow within the neurophysiological structure of a human being.

From a quite different direction the British philosopher-theologian John Hick seems to come close to agreeing with Wilson. Hick is not disposed to accept any of three traditional Christian theories of the soul: its eternal preexistence, traducianism through the act of procreation, and creationism. He writes: "If soul-language expresses a valuation of mankind . . . then we must renounce the idea that whereas the body has been produced by natural processes the soul has been produced by a special act of divine creation. We have to say that the soul is a divine creation in the same sense as the body—namely, through the instrumentality of the entire evolution of the universe and within this of the development of life on our planet."⁷ In other words, for Hick the "soul" or "valued self" is genetically determined altogether.

Because of its anthropological monism, Christian theology can be friendly to this line of thought as it tries to come to terms with modern

understandings of human life. For example, theologians have to struggle intellectually along with psychologists and jurists and others to decide what a "person" is and when a human entity becomes one. But two barriers stand in the way of agreement. One is the implication that there is no reality to the dimension of spirit which cannot be reduced to the aforementioned neurophysiological categories. The other is the belief that soulhood, selfhood, or personhood can be adequately and fully discussed without reference to the transcendent Self, the Creator God. Therefore Hick's thesis hardly commends itself even to many liberal theologians, and Wilson's not at all.

THE FREE WILL

The selfhood and the will of an individual person are so closely related that questions applied to the former are similar to those raised about the latter. Behavioral causation and the free expression of each person's will are problems as old, and as much contested, as those of the soul. Crude ideas of determinism have attributed to God or the gods the power to cause and control every act or event. These ideas are the logical deductions from unambiguous notions of divine omniscience and omnipotence. But they involve the double affront of, first, depriving persons of freedom and, second, making the deity responsible for all evil.

Some religious theories have gained credence and support because they seem to resolve those two difficulties. One is the Hindu law of *karma*. Another is the Muslim confession that "it is written." A third is the idea held by some Christians of irresistible grace as the corollary of predestination. None of these impresses either the sociobiologist or the liberal Christian theologian.

The liberal theologian wants to perceive freedom of the will as inherent in and indeed definitive of each human life that has not been deprived of normal rationality by genetic disease or other accident. A belief in humanity as the creation of God thus implies the correlation between the God who wills divinely and the person who wills humanly, however great the gap between these two.

On the other hand Wilson as sociobiologist believes that "the paradox of determinism and free will appears not only resolvable in theory, [but] it might even be reduced in status to an empirical problem in physics and biology."⁸ To be sure, Wilson writes with reserve and caution on this profound question. Twice he says that "for the moment" we may think it "possible" that the human will "might" be explained according to "physiological mechanisms." Now that is hardly a dogmatic statement. But it indicates his intention and hope to

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find eventually the compelling evidence for a physiobiological explanation of what we call free will. If such should be found, it would be theoretically possible to anticipate, determine, and control all behavior just by controlling the physical conditions under which people's lives develop. Then indeed human freedom would consist only of such thought and action as escaped the manipulation and supervision of genetic and environmental conditions.

However, sociobiology does not limit such conditioning to the one direction from genes to social behavior. It favors reciprocity: The feedback loop of social experience and of culture can modify the future distribution of genes in evolution. Such genetic changes can take place, it is suggested, after about ten generations.

If this be admitted and believed, it raises an obvious question about free will, namely, what is it besides the genes that conditions the shaping of culture? Must not such an influential factor be the arbitrarily elected behavior of people in making and modifying their own culture? Social behavior includes choosing and developing political and economic systems, conducting educational programs, devoting energies to technological advances, favoring some styles of artistic expression over others, adopting certain culinary and nutritional patterns, and opting for some religious or ideological commitments rather than others. To the extent that these and other aspects of culture are free from genetic conditioning, they can become the causes of reciprocal effects upon that particular gene pool.

Biblical religion teaches an admittedly paradoxical truth about human freedom. It is freedom to choose obligation and service rather than license. "Make me a captive, Lord, and then I will be free," goes a hymn. The freest person, said Martin Luther, is in bondage to God and is the servant of others in love.

This freedom is considered to be inherent in each person. It is a given capacity, intrinsic to humanity itself. Freedom to choose can be impaired, crippled, suppressed, and distorted in individual persons according to their conditions of existence. But the vestige always remains. Without it there is no meaning to our serious use of such good terms as "moral agent," "responsible self," or "authentically human person."

ALTRUISM

One of the unexpected results of the study of sociobiology is its theories about altruism. This may be called the gentler side of scientific materialism, which otherwise either has described the primal behavior of humans as aggressively brutal or has maintained a neu-

trality in respect to morality. In Wilson's description of human behavior the causes may be either "selfish genes" or "altruistic genes." But this does not mean that some people are therefore always self-serving while others are self-sacrificing.⁹ Indeed he sees the "ambivalence" of altruism to lie in the perception that the intention and expected consequence of self-sacrifice are often the serving of one's selfish ends. In Wilson's lexicon this is called "soft-core" altruism.¹⁰ In Christianity it is called hypocrisy and sin.

There is another form of altruism which is expressed toward the other without prior design of effect or desire for reciprocal reward. For Wilson it is "hard-core" altruism. For Christianity it is love, or the Greek *agapē*. There is nothing unusual, said Jesus, about doing good to those who do good to you. But the greatest act of altruistic love is to lay down one's life for the other, for a friend.¹¹

Since Wilson sees altruism prefigured in the social behavior of termites and in the sharing of food by chimpanzees, he is persuaded that it arises from strictly genetic dictation in human beings. Any divine or transcendental impulse is thus ruled out.¹² Even so remarkable a Christian altruist as Mother Teresa of Calcutta can be explained in ultimately selfish terms, he alleges, because after all she serves her Christ and her Church rather than the destitute and dying for their own sake.¹³

Moreover, Wilson attributes to Jesus a most bigoted word—threatening damnation to anyone who does not believe the Gospel—and comments that this is "the fountainhead of religious altruism."¹⁴ Presumably this is the soft-core type, which is self-serving for Jesus and his followers, the Church. But there is a most serious question here: Did Jesus really say such words? Since Wilson hangs a heavy dark cloak of condemnation upon this biblical peg, it is necessary to point out that most contemporary scholars of the Bible regard this word from the last chapter of Saint Mark's Gospel to be a spurious, apocryphal later addition to the text. (It is the same passage on which the snake-handling sects of Appalachia based their lethal practice!) Now, if science is truly the search for objective truth via accurate means, it applies to the use of religious texts as much as to genetic research. If sociobiologists can strip bare the meaning of altruism for human experience, they will need to take account of so well accepted a statement of New Testament faith as the following: "He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifest the love of God toward us, because God sent his only son into the world that we might live through him."¹⁵

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JUSTICE, COMMUNITY, AND THE HUMAN HOPE

The driving power of Christianity is not a theory about the creation of the world but a hope for the future. Thus, if scientists should concede that the initial moment of the cosmic explosion that brought the universe into being had been made possible by some unknown power, which might as well be called "God," this concession would have little or no effect upon Christian faith.

The doctrine of creation is much more concerned with the purpose of human history than with the origin of matter or of life. Recent discoveries of hominid remains by paleontologists working in East Africa have been exciting and informative. They show in a factual way that our ancestors could scarcely imagine how the human race arose from its predecessors. We also can reflect upon the mystery of our individual places in the great chain of evolution and speculate on the sheer quantity of our genetic ancestors and the forceful effect of their ancient cultures upon our genotypes. But religious faith that is both Christian and educated does not stand or fall on the recognition of human evolution.

For the relatively short time of two thousand years Christian faith has been for millions an arrow of hope for the future rather than an explanation of origins (although ignorance and perversity often have distorted this purpose). The New Testament is evolutionary in outlook. There is almost no reference to earthly origins. Creation is not referred to as a past event. It is regarded as a world that already has fallen, along with humanity, into corruption and is in need of re-creation. What is of primary importance is the new creation. In Jesus' metaphor it is the new reign of God. For men and women it is the new life, lived in the potential fulfillment of love. For society it means a genuine community.

Myths were used of course and still are used to symbolize this hope for life as God intended it to be. But it was, and is, neither an escape of the immortal soul from the material body nor a blithe, unambiguous utopia easily built. Rather the hope involved, and still involves, our revealed destiny. What is that revealed destiny? Without elaboration it must be said that Christians see it in Jesus of Nazareth: in his person, in the event of his death, and in his overcoming death. These, and not theological theories, are the authentic bases of faith.

Wilson ends his provocative book on the theme of hope also. He too is concerned with the purpose of life and history, which he calls "the deepest needs of human nature." He also speaks confidently of "a new age" to replace "the one just completed." And he proposes a

mythology of the evolutionary epic, though understood and corrected as needed by scientific method.¹⁶

Both Christian faith and sociobiological faith thus have an eschatology: a drive toward "the last things," wherein whatever we mean by "value" finds fulfilled expression.

Are these two visions contradictory? Are they complementary? Or are both of them, as many people believe, illusory?

The comparisons are a matter of differing judgments. But the question of reality or illusion about the nature and destiny of man is finally settled, in both cases, by faith alone.

NOTES

1. Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

5. More detailed discussion is found in my "On Life and Living: The Semitic Insight," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 3 (1978): 129-43.

6. Wilson, p. 75.

7. John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 47.

8. Wilson, p. 77.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

11. Matt. 5:46; John 15:13.

12. Wilson, p. 152.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

14. *Ibid.*

15. 1 John 4:8-9.

16. Wilson, pp. 201, 209.