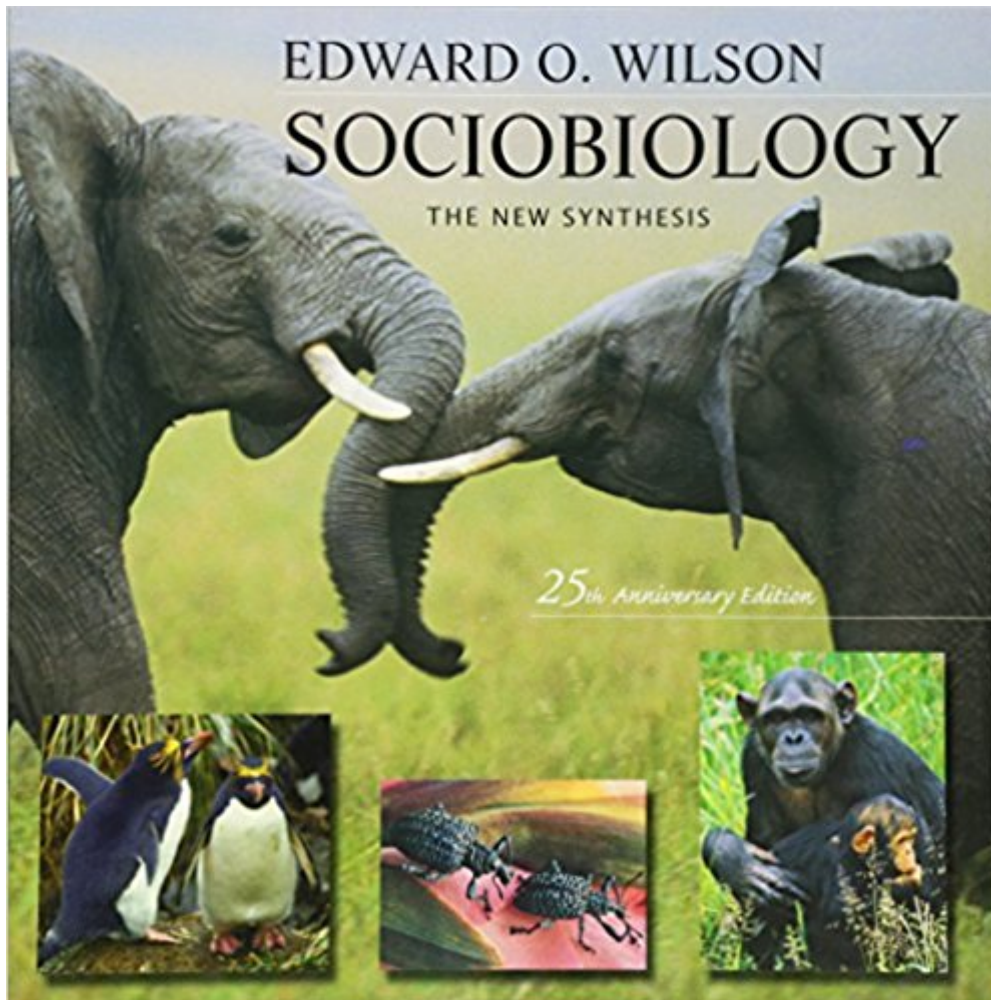




Ebook Directory
the best source of ebook

The book was found

Sociobiology: The New Synthesis, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition



Synopsis

View a collection of videos on Professor Wilson entitled "On the Relation of Science and the Humanities" Harvard University Press is proud to announce the re-release of the complete original version of *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*--now available in paperback for the first time. When this classic work was first published in 1975, it created a new discipline and started a tumultuous round in the age-old nature versus nurture debate. Although voted by officers and fellows of the international Animal Behavior Society the most important book on animal behavior of all time, *Sociobiology* is probably more widely known as the object of bitter attacks by social scientists and other scholars who opposed its claim that human social behavior, indeed human nature, has a biological foundation. The controversy surrounding the publication of the book reverberates to the present day. In the introduction to this Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition, Edward O. Wilson shows how research in human genetics and neuroscience has strengthened the case for a biological understanding of human nature. Human sociobiology, now often called evolutionary psychology, has in the last quarter of a century emerged as its own field of study, drawing on theory and data from both biology and the social sciences. For its still fresh and beautifully illustrated descriptions of animal societies, and its importance as a crucial step forward in the understanding of human beings, this anniversary edition of *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* will be welcomed by a new generation of students and scholars in all branches of learning.

Book Information

Paperback: 720 pages

Publisher: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press; 2 edition (March 4, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674002350

ISBN-13: 978-0674002357

Product Dimensions: 9.7 x 1.5 x 9.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 3.5 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars 39 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #167,435 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #47 in Books > Science & Math >

Biological Sciences > Zoology > Animal Behavior & Communication #148 in Books > Textbooks

> Science & Mathematics > Biology & Life Sciences > Zoology #868 in Books > Textbooks >

Science & Mathematics > Biology & Life Sciences > Biology

Customer Reviews

E.O. Wilson defines sociobiology as "the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behavior," the central theoretical problem of which is the question of how behaviors that seemingly contradict the principles of natural selection, such as altruism, can develop. *Sociobiology: A New Synthesis*, Wilson's first attempt to outline the new field of study, was first published in 1975 and called for a fairly revolutionary update to the so-called Modern Synthesis of evolutionary biology. Sociobiology as a new field of study demanded the active inclusion of sociology, the social sciences, and the humanities in evolutionary theory. Often criticized for its apparent message of "biological destiny," Sociobiology set the stage for such controversial works as Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene* and Wilson's own *Consilience*. Sociobiology defines such concepts as society, individual, population, communication, and regulation. It attempts to explain, biologically, why groups of animals behave the way they do when finding food or shelter, confronting enemies, or getting along with one another. Wilson seeks to explain how group selection, altruism, hierarchies, and sexual selection work in populations of animals, and to identify evolutionary trends and sociobiological characteristics of all animal groups, up to and including man. The insect sections of the book are particularly interesting, given Wilson's status as the world's most famous entomologist. It is fair to say that as an ecological strategy eusociality has been overwhelmingly successful. It is useful to think of an insect colony as a diffuse organism, weighing anywhere from less than a gram to as much as a kilogram and possessing from about a hundred to a million or more tiny mouths. It's when Wilson starts talking about human beings that the furor starts. Feminists have been among the strongest critics of the work, arguing that humans are not slaves to a biological destiny, forever locked in "primitive" behavior patterns without the ability to reason past our biochemical nature. Like *The Origin of Species*, *Sociobiology* has forced many biologists and social scientists to reassess their most cherished notions of how life works. --Therese Littleton

It's been 25 years since E. O. Wilson wrote *Sociobiology*, naming a new science and starting it off with a bang--and a firestorm of protest. "Nurture!" and "Nature!" came the cries from every corner of the academic world, as the book became a *causus belli* for sociologists, feminists, human geneticists, and psychologists. (Mary Ellen Curtin .com) This book enthralls and enchants...If you have this book...you can begin getting your mind ready for the illuminations about human society. (Lewis Thomas Harper's) Rarely has the world been provided with such a splendid stepping stone for an exciting future of a new science. (John Tyler Bonner *Scientific American*) Its contents do indeed provide a new synthesis, of wide perspective and great authority...Wilson's plain uncluttered prose is a treat to read, his logic is rigorous, his arguments are lucid. (V. C. Wynne-Edwards

Nature) This book will stand as a landmark in the comparative study of social behavior. (Quarterly Review of Biology) Sociobiology is an excellent book, full of extraordinary insights, and replete with the beauty and poetry of the animal kingdom. (Times Literary Supplement) It is impossible to leave Wilson's book without having one's sense of life permanently and dramatically widened. (Fred Hapgood The Atlantic) Sociobiology explores the possibility that animal social behaviour--group living, kinship, attraction and mating, reciprocity and sharing, cooperation, conflict, and cheating, to name just the most familiar--has a genetic basis and can be shaped by natural selection: genes can be shaped by natural selection: genes can code for social behaviours in the same way that they code for body parts such as hands, hooves, eyes, antlers and ears. But, in an audacious final chapter, Wilson extended the analysis to humans: biology had grabbed our kinship, cooperation, mate preferences and the rest. Some branded Wilson and his ideas fascist, others as racist or guilty of genetic determinism. They are none of these things and, two Pulitzer Prizes later, Wilson has been vindicated... Wilson's Sociobiology laid the foundations for a lifetime of meditations. (Mark Pagel Times Higher Education Supplement) Sociobiology, a new concept, is one with extraordinary potential value for understanding and explaining human behavior. (Practical Psychology) A towering theoretical achievement of exceptional elegance... Like most great books, Sociobiology is unpedantic, lucid, and eminently accessible. (Pierre L. van den Berghe Contemporary Sociology)

Sociobiology "The Field That Dare Not Speak its Name"™? The reception of Edward O. Wilson's 'Sociobiology: the New Synthesis'™ has, since its first publication, been divided. Among researchers in animal behaviour and related areas of biology, the reception was almost unanimously laudatory. Indeed, my '25th anniversary edition'™ proudly proclaims on the back-cover that it was voted by officers and fellows of the Animal Behaviour Society as the most important ever book on animal behaviour, supplanting even Darwin's 'The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Other Animals'™. Meanwhile, on the other side of the university campus, in social science departments, the reception was almost unanimously hostile. Indeed, 'sociobiology'™ became something of a dirty word in the social sciences, and, indeed, ultimately, throughout the academy, to such an extent that the word fell into disuse (save as a term of abuse) and was replaced by largely synonymous euphemisms such as 'Behavioural Ecology'™ and 'evolutionary psychology'™. Sociobiology thus became 'the field that dare not speak its name'™. Similarly, within the social sciences, even those researchers whose work carried on sociobiological approach in all but name (i.e. the self-styled 'evolutionary psychologists' and 'human behavioural ecologists'™) almost invariably played down the

extent of their debt to Wilson himself. Thus, works on evolutionary psychology as often as not begin with disclaimers acknowledging that the sociobiology of Wilson was, of course, crude and simplistic, and that their own approach is, of course, infinitely more sophisticated. Indeed, reading some recent works on evolutionary psychology, one could be forgiven for thinking that Darwinian approaches to understanding human behaviour began around 1989 with Tooby and Cosmides. Defining Sociobiology What then does the word sociobiology mean? The task of defining the term 'sociobiology' is made more difficult by the fact that, as we have seen, the term has largely been abandoned by sociobiologists themselves. To the extent the term is still widely used today, it is usually employed by some social scientists as a derisive (and rather indiscriminate) term of abuse for any theory of human behaviour which is perceived as placing too great a weight on hereditary factors, including many areas of research only tangentially connected with sociobiology in its original sense (e.g. behaviour genetics). The term sociobiology was not Wilson's coinage. However, Wilson was responsible for popularising it (or, perhaps, in the long-term, 'un-popularising' it, given that, as we have seen, the term has largely fallen into disuse). Wilson himself defined 'sociobiology' as 'the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behaviour' (p4; p595). However, as the term was understood by others, and indeed applied by Wilson himself, sociobiology came to be associated in particular with evolutionary/functional explanations for behaviour (i.e. one of Tinbergen's famed 'Four Questions') rather than 'the biological basis' of behaviour more generally. Thus, the hormonal, neuroscientific, or genetic causes of behaviour are just as surely part of 'the biological basis of behaviour' as are evolutionary explanations for behaviours. However, these lie outside the scope of 'sociobiology' as it is usually conceived. Instead, 'sociobiology' focuses on the question of why certain behaviours evolved, and the evolutionary function they serve in maximising the inclusive fitness or reproductive success of the organism. The study of the proximate causes of behaviour (whether hormonal, neuroscientific, or genetic) are usually studied by different researchers, although in recent years there has been something of a synthesis. Indeed, even Wilson recognised this division when he observed that 'behavioral biology' is now emerging as two distinct disciplines centered on neurophysiology and on sociobiology (p6). In another sense, however, Wilson's definition of the field was too narrow. Behavioural ecologists have come to study all forms of behaviour, not just 'social behaviour' and there is no real division between those researchers studying the evolutionary function of social behaviours and those studying the evolutionary function of non-social behaviours. Thus, 'optimal foraging theory' is a major subfield within behavioural ecology (the successor field to sociobiology), yet feeding

behaviour is not always social in nature. Indeed, not just behaviour, but even some aspects of an organism's physiology came to be regarded as within the purview of 'sociobiology' (e.g. the evolution of the peacock's tail). A Book Much Read About, But Rarely Actually Read' Sociobiology: The New Synthesis was a massive tome, numbering almost 700 pages. As Wilson proudly proclaims in his glossary, 'Sociobiology: The New Synthesis' was 'written with the broadest possible audience in mind and most of it can be read with full understanding by any intelligent person whether or not he or she has had any formal training in science' (p577). Unfortunately however, one suspects that the size of the work alone was enough to put off most such readers long before they reached p577 where these words appear. Indeed, I suspect that the size of the book was a factor in explaining the almost universally hostile reception sociobiology received among social scientists. Since the book was so mammoth, the vast majority of social scientists had neither the time nor the inclination to actually read it for themselves. Instead, their entire knowledge of the field was filtered through to them via the critiques of other social scientists, themselves overwhelmingly hostile to sociobiology, who presented a straw man caricature of what sociobiology actually represented. Indeed, reading these critiques, one often suspects that those not bothering to read the work for themselves included most of the social scientists nevertheless taking it upon themselves to write critiques of it. Meanwhile, the fact that the field was so obviously misguided (as indeed it often was in the caricatured form presented in the critiques) gave them a further reason not to bother wading through its 700 or so pages, especially since the vast majority seemed to be concerned with the behaviour of species other than humans, and hence, as they saw it, of little relevance to their own work. It is thus a fair bet that the vast majority of social scientists, including some of those who criticised the field, and certainly the vast majority of the social scientists who read these critiques and accepted their conclusions uncritically, never actually got around to reading the book for themselves, at least not in its entirety. As a result, 'Sociobiology: The New Synthesis' became (at least among social scientists and the educated public) a book much read about, but rarely actually read – and, like other books that fall into this category (e.g. the Bible and 'The Bell Curve'), various myths have emerged regarding its contents that are quite contradicted when one actually takes the time to read it for oneself. The Many Myths of Sociobiology Perhaps the foremost myth is that sociobiology was primarily a theory of human behaviour. In fact, Sociobiology was, first and foremost, a theoretical approach to understanding animal behaviour. Applying sociobiological theory to humans was something of an afterthought. This is connected to the second myth – namely, that sociobiology was Wilson's own theory. In fact, rather than a single theory, sociobiology is better viewed as a

particular approach to a field of study, the field in question being animal behaviour. Moreover, far from being Wilson's own theory, the major advances in the understanding of animal behaviour that gave rise to what came to be referred to as 'sociobiology' were made in the main by figures other than Wilson himself. It was William Hamilton who first formulated 'inclusive fitness theory' (which came to be known as 'kin selection'); John Maynard Smith who introduced economic models and game theory into behavioural biology; George C Williams who was responsible for the displacement of group-selection in favour of a new focus on the gene as the unit of selection; while Robert Trivers was responsible for such theories such as reciprocal altruism, parent-offspring conflict and differential parental investment theory. Instead, Wilson's key role was to bring the various strands of the emerging field together, give it a name and, in the process, take more than his fair share of the resulting flak. Thus, far from being a maverick theory of a single individual, what came to be known as 'sociobiology' was, if not based on accepted biological theory at the time of publication, then at least based on biological theory that came to be recognised as mainstream within a few years of its publication. Controversy attached almost exclusively to the application of these same principles to explain human behaviour. Here, again, misconceptions abound. Firstly, it is not true that Wilson only extended his analysis to humans in his final chapter. In fact, he discussed the possible application of sociobiological theory to humans several times in earlier chapters. Often this was at the end of a chapter. For example, his chapter on 'Roles and Castes' closes with a discussion of 'Roles in Human Societies'. Similarly, the final subsection of his chapter on 'Aggression' is entitled 'Human Aggression'. Other times, humans get a mention in mid-chapter, as in chapter fifteen on 'Sex and Society', where Wilson discusses the association between adultery, cuckoldry and violent retribution in human societies, and rightly prophesizes that 'the implications for the study of humans of Trivers' theory of differential parental investment are potentially great' (p327). Another misconception is that, while he may not have founded the approach that came to be known as sociobiology, it was Wilson who courted controversy, and bore most of the flak, because he was the first biologist brave, foolish, ambitious, farsighted or naïve enough to apply sociobiological theory to humans. Actually, this is untrue. For example, a large part of Robert Trivers' seminal paper on reciprocal altruism published in 1971 dealt with specifically human moral emotions, such as guilt, gratitude and moralistic anger (Trivers 1971). [It is curious that, although in his chapter dealing with humans, Wilson includes a subsection on reciprocal altruism, this focuses exclusively on exchanges of the sort studied by economists, rather than the subtler reciprocity underlying relationships such as friendship with which

Trivers seems to have been concerned: p551-3.] However, Trivers's work was published in the Journal of Theoretical Biology and therefore presumably never came to the attention of any of the social scientists largely responsible for the furore over sociobiology. This is perhaps unfortunate since Trivers, unlike the unfortunate Wilson, had impeccable left-wing credentials, which may have deflected some of the overtly politicized criticism (and pitchers of water) later directed at Wilson.

Reductionism vs Holism

Among the most familiar charges levelled against Wilson by his opponents within academia, and by contemporary opponents of Darwinian approaches to understanding human behaviour, alongside the familiar and time-worn charges of 'biological determinism' and 'genetic determinism', is that sociobiology is inherently 'reductionist'. It is therefore something of a surprise to find among the first pages of 'Sociobiology' Wilson defending an "holism", as represented by sociobiology itself, against what he terms 'the triumphant reductionism of molecular biology' (p7). This passage is particularly surprising for anyone who has read Wilson's more recent work 'Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge', where he launches a trenchant, unapologetic and wholly convincing defence of reductionism as, not only 'the cutting edge of science' breaking down nature into its constituent components but moreover 'the primary and essential activity of science' and hence at the very heart of the scientific method (Consilience: p59). Thus, Wilson concludes, 'the love of complexity without reductionism makes art; the love of complexity with reductionism makes science' (Ibid.). Of course, this is all a matter of how one defines one's terms, and reductionism, however defined, is a matter of degree. Philosopher Daniel Dennett distinguishes what he calls 'greedy reductionism', which attempts to oversimplify the world (e.g. Skinnerian behaviourism), from 'good reductionism', which attempts to understand it in all its complexity (i.e. good science). Conversely, many defenders of an holistic approach within the humanities, social sciences and among public intellectuals seem, in my experience, to be defending a vague wishy-washy, untestable and frankly anti-scientific obscurantism, whereby any attempt to explain behaviour in terms of causes and effects is dismissed as 'reductionism' and 'determinism'.

Wilson's writing with regard to these topics must be understood as responses, not to the controversies engendered by the works in which these words appeared, but rather the controversies that preceded them. Thus, just as Wilson's defence of reductionism in 'Consilience' was a belated response to the 'sociobiology debates' of the 70s and 80s in which the charge of 'reductionism' was wielded indiscriminately by the opponents of sociobiology, so Wilson's defence of holism in 'Sociobiology: The New Synthesis' itself must be understood in the context, not of the

controversies that followed publication of this work (which Wilson was unable to foresee) but rather those which preceded it. Thus Wilson's defence of holism in 'Sociobiology: The New Synthesis' must be seen in the context of an earlier academic controversy, albeit one that never spread beyond academia itself in the same way that the so-called 'sociobiology debates' were to do and which may therefore be less familiar to the educated public, but which was, in some respects, at least within the walls of Harvard itself, just as fiercely fought over. In particular, certain molecular biologists at Harvard, and perhaps elsewhere, led by the brilliant yet belligerent molecular biologist James Watson, had come to the opinion that molecular biology was to be the only biology, and that traditional biology, fieldwork and experiments were positively passé. This controversy also had a personal element, with Wilson and Watson having an intense personal rivalry and dislike for one another (see Wilson's autobiography, *A Naturalist*). Thus, in his follow-up book, Wilson contends, 'reduction is only half the scientific process | the remainder consist[ing] of the reconstruction of complexity by an expanding synthesis under the control of laws newly demonstrated by analysis | reveal[ing] the existence of novel emergent phenomena' (On Human Nature: p11). It is in this sense, and in contrast to the reductionism of molecular biology, that Wilson saw sociobiology as holistic.

Group Selectionist? One of the key theoretical breakthroughs that formed the basis for what came to be known as sociobiology was the discrediting of group-selectionism, at least in its cruder forms. A focus on the individual, or even the gene, as the primary or only unit of selection, came to be viewed as an integral component of the sociobiological worldview. Indeed, it was once debated on the pages of the newsletter of the European Sociobiological Society whether one could truly be both a 'sociobiologist' and a 'group-selectionist' (Price 1996). It is therefore something of a surprise to discover that the author of 'Sociobiology', responsible for christening the emerging field, was himself something of a group-selectionist. Wilson has recently 'come out' as a group-selectionist in a paper concerning the evolution of eusociality in ants (Nowak et al 2010). However, reading 'Sociobiology: The New Synthesis' leads one to suspect that Wilson had been a closet, or indeed a semi-out, group-selectionist all along. Certainly, Wilson repeats the familiar arguments against group-selectionism first articulated by George C Williams, and later popularised by Richard Dawkins. However, although he offers no rebuttal, this does not prevent him from invoking, or at least proposing, group-selectionist explanations for behaviours in the remainder of the book. At any rate, it is clear that, unlike, say, Richard Dawkins, Wilson did not view group-selectionism as a terminally discredited theory.

Vaunting Ambition? Much of 'Sociobiology: the New Synthesis' reads like a textbook. I see some other reviewers/commenters on have said that this is because it

is a textbook. However, Wilson's intention was far more ambitious than simply to author an undergraduate textbook on animal behaviour that would be out of date within a few years of publication, and which certainly wouldn't be worth reading (or reviewing) by anyone some forty years later as I sit down to write this review. This is apparent from the very first paragraphs of the book, where, in a chapter provocatively entitled 'The Morality of the Gene', he challenges the assertion of philosopher Albert Camus that the only serious philosophical question is suicide, and in the process proposes to found the entire field of moral philosophy, and possibly epistemology too, on the foundation of evolutionary biology. Indeed, the scale of Wilson's ambition can hardly be exaggerated. He sought nothing less than to synthesize the entire field of animal behaviour under the rubric of 'sociobiology' and in the process produce a 'New Synthesis', by analogy with the so-called 'modern synthesis' of Darwinian evolution and Mendelian genetics which laid the basis for the entire modern science of biology. Then, having done no less than redefine and place on a new basis the entire field known as animal behaviour, he also decided, in a final chapter "and apparently as something of an afterthought" to add human behaviour to this synthesis. This meant not just providing a new theoretical foundation for a single subfield within biology (i.e. animal behaviour), but for several whole disciplines, from psychology to anthropology, sociology and economics. Oh yeah, and moral philosophy and perhaps epistemology too. I forgot to mention that. In a sense, therefore, the academic furore that greeted the publication of was hardly surprising and reflected nothing less than an academic 'turf-war' between social scientists and biologists, in view of the 'vaulting ambition' of the latter. Humans - From Sociobiology to Evolutionary Psychology It was the final chapter of 'Sociobiology' that was to attract a disproportionate share of the controversy. Returning to Wilson's final chapter a few decades after it was first penned, it is, I feel, disappointing. One wants to like it. After all, so much of the criticism directed at it was unfair, the harassment targeted at its author bordered on persecution (e.g. the famous pitcher of water incident; exhortations from student groups to "bring noisemakers" to deliberately disrupt his speaking engagements: 'The Moral Animal: illustration p341), and the theoretical approach that followed in its stead, namely evolutionary psychology, is well on the way to revolutionizing the social sciences. Inevitably, any scientific textbook will be outdated when read some forty years later. However, while this is true for the book as a whole, it seems to be especially true of this last chapter, the substance of which bears little similarity to the contents of modern textbooks on evolutionary psychology. This is perhaps inevitable. While the application of sociobiological theory to the behaviour of non-human animals was well under way several years before Wilson published 'Sociobiology: The New Synthesis',

the application of sociobiological theory to humans remained very much in its infancy, the pioneering work of Robert Trivers notwithstanding. However, while the specific substance of Wilson's final chapter is dated, the general approach seems spot on. Indeed, even some of the theoretical advances claimed by evolutionary psychologists as their own were anticipated by Wilson. Thus, he recognises 'one of the key questions' in human sociobiology as 'to what extent the biogram represents an adaptation to modern cultural life and to what extent it is a phylogenetic vestige' (p458), hence anticipating the key evolutionary psychological concept of the 'Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness' or 'EEA'. In his final chapter, Wilson proposes to look at human behaviour from the detached and disinterested perspective of a 'zoologist' from another planet, and concludes, 'in this macroscopic view the humanities and social sciences shrink to specialized branches of biology' (p547). Thus, for Wilson 'sociology and the other social sciences, as well as the humanities, are the last branches of biology waiting to be included in the Modern Synthesis' (p4). After all, the idea that the behaviour of a single species, namely humans, is somehow alone exempt from the forces of natural selection and principles of general biology, to such an extent that it must be studied in entirely different university faculties and by entirely different researchers, the vast majority with little or no knowledge of the principles employed by, nor the findings of, researchers specializing in the study of the behaviour and social structures in every other species on the planet, reflects an indefensible anthropocentrism. If humans are a product of natural selection, then human behaviour and psychology, just as much as human physiology and the physiology and behaviour of all non-human species must also be a product of natural selection, and, like them, bear the hallmarks of adaptive design. The so-called 'Standard Social Science Model' of human nature is simply untenable. Not only does research not support it, but, purely on theoretical grounds, such a human nature would never have evolved in the first place. Nevertheless, his reputation for outspokenness notwithstanding, Wilson himself urges caution, admitting 'whether the social sciences can be truly biologicized in this fashion remains to be seen' (p4). The evidence of the ensuing forty years suggests, in my view, that the social sciences can indeed be, and are well on the way to being, 'biologicized'. The only stumbling block has proven to be social scientists themselves, who have, in many cases, proven resistant. From Sociobiology to Philosophy Even more controversial than Wilson's forays into the domain of the social sciences were his forays into philosophy. These are limited to a few paragraphs in his opening and closing chapters. However, these paragraphs were among the most widely quoted, and criticised, in the entire book. Here, not only were philosophers and opponents of

sociobiology indignant, but even the few biologists, psychologists and anthropologists to courageously take up the gauntlet of applying sociobiological theory to humans were nevertheless keen to disassociate themselves from these in particular of Wilson's words. In proposing to reconstruct moral philosophy on the basis of biology, Wilson was widely accused of violating the so-called 'naturalistic fallacy', whereby values are derived from facts. Far from making common cause with Wilson, most modern evolutionary psychologists are only too keen to recognise the sacrosanct inviolability of the 'is-ought divide', not least because it provided them with carte blanche to investigate the possible evolutionary functions of such morally questionable (or indeed morally repugnant) behaviours as infidelity, promiscuity, rape, warfare, child abuse, and aggression, without laying themselves open to the charge that they were thereby presenting a moral defence of the behaviours in question. Certainly, if a behaviour is natural, this does not mean it is right, any more than the fact that dying of tuberculosis is 'natural' means that it is morally wrong to treat smallpox with such 'unnatural' interventions as vaccination or antibiotics. However, if it is inappropriate to derive moral values from facts, this begs the question of whence moral values can legitimately be derived. If moral injunctions cannot be derived from facts, then it appears they can only be derived from other moral statements. How then are our ultimate moral principles, from which other moral principles are derived, to be justified? Are they simply to be taken on faith? Wilson has therefore recently controversially concluded, 'the posing of the naturalistic fallacy is itself a fallacy' ('Consilience': p273). His point in 'Sociobiology' is narrower, namely that, in arguing about the appropriateness of different moral codes (e.g. utilitarianism vs Kantianism), moral philosophers, whether they are aware of it or not, consult the emotional control centers in the hypothalamus and limbic system of the brain (p3). Yet these same moral philosophers largely take these moral intuitions for granted and seem unaware of where they have come from. They therefore treat the brain as a 'black box' rather than as a biological entity and product of evolution the nature of which is the subject of scientific study (p562). The philosophical implications of recognising that moral intuitions are themselves a product of the evolutionary process have subsequently been investigated by various biologists, psychologists and philosophers, not least Wilson himself in collaboration with philosopher Michael Ruse (Ruse & Wilson 1986). Meanwhile, the same applies to the other major subfield of philosophy, namely epistemology, to which Wilson devotes only a single parenthesis (p3). What humans are capable of knowing is itself a product of the structure of the brain, which is itself a product of natural selection. Thus, epistemology no less than ethics must be 'biologized' (see Ruse, 'Taking Darwin Seriously').

Worth Reading Today? So is 'Sociobiology: The New Synthesis' worth reading

today? This depends what it is you want from the book. At almost 700 pages, reading 'Sociobiology: The New Synthesis' is no idle investment of time. Wilson is a wonderful writer with the unusual honour for a working scientist of being a twice Pulitzer-Prize winner. However, excepting a few parts of the first and final chapters, 'Sociobiology: The New Synthesis' is largely written in the style of a textbook, and is not a book one is likely to read for its literary merits alone. As a textbook, 'Sociobiology' is obviously dated, as is inevitable for a book published some forty years ago. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of a true science is the speed at which cutting-edge work becomes obsolete. Religious believers still cite holy books written thousands of years ago, and adherents of pseudo-sciences such as psychoanalysis and Marxism still paw over the words of Freud and Marx. However, the scientific method is a cumulative process that allows theories to be falsified and supplanted and is no respecter of persons. Thus, works of science go out of date almost as fast as they are published. The speed with which Wilson's work was rendered obsolete is therefore a marker of the success of the sociobiological research project which it helped inspire. If you want a textbook summary of the latest research in sociobiology, I would instead recommend the latest edition of Alcock's 'Animal Behavior: An Evolutionary Approach' or Krebs and Davies' 'An Introduction to Behavioural Ecology'; or, if your primary interest is human behaviour, the latest edition of David Buss' 'Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind'. The continued value of 'Sociobiology: The New Synthesis' is its importance as a landmark in the history of biology, social science, and human thought. Its value today is in the field, not of 'Science', but 'History of Science'.

References

Nowak et al (2010) 'The evolution of eusociality' Nature 466:1057-1062.

Price (1996) 'In Defence of Group Selection', European Sociobiological Society Newsletter No. 42 October 1996

Ruse & Wilson 1986 'Moral Philosophy as Applied Science', Philosophy 61(236):173-192

Trivers (1971). 'The evolution of reciprocal altruism'. Quarterly Review of Biology 46:35-57

In Chapter 1 of 'Sociobiology the New Synthesis' • Edward O. Wilson writes, 'Sociobiology is defined as the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behavior.' • Sociobiology can also be seen as the assertion that human behavior is influenced by instincts we share with other animal species, instincts that place restrictions on social reform. The publication of Professor Wilson's book in 1975 did not confront the left with the existential challenge the publication of 'The Bell Curve' did nineteen years later. <http://www..com/Bell-Curve-Intelligence-Structure-Paperbacks/dp/0684824299> It still aroused anger, and caused Professor Wilson to suffer some harassment at his teaching position at Harvard.

Sociobiology takes note of the fact that human societies everywhere in the world, and always throughout history have been similar in ways that cannot be explained by cultural transmission. Everywhere we find status hierarchies, religions, different roles for men and women, male dominance, long periods of child dependency, incest taboos, marriage, ethnocentrism, and war. When *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* was published many on the left accused Professor Wilson of defending institutions they wanted to change or eliminate. Deriding Wilson as a reactionary was unfair. In his writings he advocates protection of the environment and acceptance of homosexuals. Nevertheless, sociobiology has implications that are more congenial to the philosophy of Edmund Burke than that of Karl Marx. Burke argued, and Wilson would agree, that before trying to eliminate an institution we should try to understand why it came into existence. Since 1975, the political successes of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, the fall of the Soviet Union, the rise of Islamic fanaticism, the failure of the war on poverty, disappointments connected with the civil rights movement, and the failure of No Child Left Behind ought to have inspired humility for those to the left of liberalism. Good intentions are not good enough. Charles Murray wrote in *The Inequality Taboo* "specific policies based on premises that conflict with scientific truths about human beings tend not to work. Often they do harm." In a retrospective on the failure of the new left held in the early 1980s, Jerry Rubin said, "We are refugees from a future that never happened." According to sociobiology status hierarchies exist because innate human inequality exists. Some people are congenitally more able to contribute to the success of a social group than others. Different sex roles exist because there are intrinsic differences between the nature of men and women. Male dominance exists because men tend to be more aggressive and competitive than women. Men tend to make more money than women, because women prefer successful men, but men do not prefer successful women. Ethnocentrism exists because there is never enough of what humans value to go around. More for Them usually means less for Us. War exists because life is a struggle for scarce resources. War is one of the ways the struggle is carried out. This does not mean that reform is pointless. It does mean that it should be restrained by prudence. There is often wisdom in tradition. Wisdom includes pessimism about human nature and human potential. In *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* Professor Wilson frequently illustrates his points with calculus equations. His bibliography includes books in French and German. He knows his book is going to start a fight. He does not believe in coming to a gun fight with a knife. The vast majority of this book describes animal societies. This is justified, because we can see how features we may consider unique to humans were anticipated millions of years earlier, sometimes tens of millions of years earlier. There are ants, for example,

that tend livestock. There are ants that grow crops. There are ants that capture slaves from other ant colonies. Ants of all ant species fight battles with ants of other colonies. Baboons were living in African grasslands before our ancestors began doing so. Wolves practiced social hunting before our ancestors learned how to. Chimpanzees fight chimpanzees in other bands. They practice cooperative hunting, and relish meat. *Sociobiology the New Synthesis* is a large, heavy book that does not make for light reading. It might be a good idea to read *Sociobiology and Behavior*, by Professor David P. Barash of the Department of Psychology and Zoology of the University of Washington first.<http://www..com/Sociobiology-Behavior-David-P-Barash/dp/0444990887> Professor Wilson could have gone into more detail about how human societies are similar, and how these similarities are related to instincts that had survival in the past, even though some of these instincts might be dysfunctional now. He does this in his book, *On Human Nature*.<http://www..com/On-Human-Nature-Preface-Revised/dp/0674016386> The sociobiology of human sexual behavior is aptly covered in *The Evolution of Human Sexuality*, by Professor Donald Symons of the University of California, at Santa Barbara.<http://www..com/Evolution-Human-Sexuality-Donald-Symons/dp/0195029070> I anticipated the findings of *Sociobiology the New Synthesis* before reading it. In the early 1970's I was appalled by the continuation of the War in Vietnam, which seemed obviously to be tragically futile. I was made afraid by the fact that the United States and the Soviet Union were spending vast sums of money preparing to fight a nuclear war that would destroy both sides. I disliked the fact that white blue collar workers were voting Republican in larger numbers, despite the fact that the GOP had always advanced the economic interests of management, rather than labor. I concluded that human behavior was influenced by instincts that had survival value during human evolution, even though many of these instincts threatened us now with extinction. I began reading books about physical and cultural anthropology. When *Sociobiology the New Synthesis* was published most of it was self evident to me.

[Download to continue reading...](#)

Sociobiology: The New Synthesis, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition Handbook of Reagents for Organic Synthesis: Reagents for Heteroarene Synthesis (Hdbk of Reagents for Organic Synthesis) A River Runs through It and Other Stories, Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition Young Men and Fire: Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition Guest Book 50th Wedding Anniversary: Beautiful Ivory Guest Book for 50th Wedding Anniversary, Golden Anniversary Gift for Couples Care of the Soul, Twenty-fifth Anniversary Ed: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life Advanced Organic

Chemistry: Part B: Reaction and Synthesis: Reaction and Synthesis Pt. B The Organic Chemistry of Drug Synthesis, Volume 3 (Organic Chemistry Series of Drug Synthesis) Landmarking and Segmentation of 3D CT Images (Synthesis Lectures on Biomedical Engineering Synthesis Lectu) Liar's Poker (25th Anniversary Edition): Rising Through the Wreckage on Wall Street (25th Anniversary Edition) Twenty-Five Buildings Every Architect Should Understand: a revised and expanded edition of Twenty Buildings Every Architect Should Understand (Volume 2) GIS Tutorial for Health, fifth edition: Fifth Edition (GIS Tutorials) Jawetz, Melnick, & Adelberg's Medical Microbiology, Twenty-Fifth Edition (LANGE Basic Science) Governing California in the Twenty-First Century (Fifth Edition) General Intellectuals: Twenty-Five Thinkers for the Twenty-First Century Walker Evans: American Photographs: Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Edition The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith, Fifth Anniversary Edition I Kill Giants Fifth Anniversary Edition TP Happily Ever After: Our Wedding Anniversary Album (Wedding Album, Wedding Book, Anniversary Book) The Blood of the Fifth Knight (The Fifth Knight Series Book 2)

[Contact Us](#)

[DMCA](#)

[Privacy](#)

[FAQ & Help](#)