Essay Review: Restroom Reading

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Do not do what I have just done. Do not try to read this book straight through. Instead, put it on your bedside table and read bits and pieces for 20 min or so each day. Better still, buy a second copy and put it in the guest bedroom or the outhouse or wherever visitors retreat to several times a day when they come to stay with you. At worst, you will have fascinating discussions over the dinner table. At best, your visitors will escape your teenagers and have spent time with one of the most fascinating minds of our generation.

With the death of Ernst Mayr, Edward O. Wilson has inherited the mantle of the world’s most distinguished evolutionary biologist. Born in Alabama in 1929, he moved to Harvard for graduate work, staying there for 50 years as he worked up through the ranks of student, fellow, assistant professor until finally he was a university professor. He has won numerous prizes, including two Pulitzer Prizes, for Wilson is not just a great scholar but also a brilliant teacher, a terrific lecturer, and an important public voice. His career has been marked by controversy. His most important book is *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, published in 1975. (As a bibliophile and book collector I dare not tell you what I paid for a first edition, first printing. It was an order of magnitude more than I paid for Richard Lewontin’s *The Genetic Basis of Evolutionary Change.*) After a magnificent survey of the world of animal social behavior, Wilson ended with a chapter on our own species. And all hell let loose.

Perhaps expectedly the social scientists did not much like this. Insecure at the best of times, with good reason they feared a take-over by the biologists. Perhaps expectedly the philosophers did not much like this. Very few have come to terms with the fact that being the end result
of directionless evolution rather than the creation of a Good God on the Sixth Day has to have some consequences for epistemology and ethics. We – for I, alas, am one – pretend to be cold and rational. Truly, we are as committed to the unique status of our own species as any evangelical – and prepared to denigrate those who disagree with the vitriol of the Christian Right. Completely unexpectedly, some biologists – including some in Wilson’s own department, no less – went absolutely bananas, accusing him of every sin in the book. Sexism, racism, IQ-ism, falsity, unfalsifiability – funny that these two last charges were made by the same people – capitalism, and everything else. My personal hypothesis – a full-blooded, human-sociobiological hypothesis, so it has much to commend it if only for that reason – is that Wilson’s critics were beta males who hated being bettered by an alpha male. A more prosaic reason is that the critics were Marxists who hated any suggestion that human nature is molded by other than market forces, designed to exploit the exploited.

I should not complain. The sociobiological controversy has kept philosophers like me in copy for 30 years now. That and the Creationists keep wolf from the door of the Ruse family. Every time someone attacks Ed Wilson, there is steak on the table. Strawberries and cream follow when someone defends Noah’s Flood. But important and fascinating as it is, to focus on the sociobiological controversy exclusively is to miss the full sweep of Wilson’s life and labors. As a working evolutionist he has done so much: from early work on ants and their biogeography; through seminal work with the ecologist Robert MacArthur on the inhabitants of islands; then on to animal chemical communication (through so-called pheromones); next sociobiology of all animals; and for many years thereafter massive surveys and studies of the ant world. At the same time, Wilson has written extensively on conservation, as well as other issues including philosophy. In major respects, Wilson now is one of the authentic voices in American religion. Having been born and raised a Southern Baptist, he has embraced a form of evolutionary humanism and has for many years being trying to promote this as an alternative to conventional religion. Unlike fellow non-believers such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, Wilson is convinced that religion is a force for good and that our task must be inventive restructuring and substitution rather than outright rejection. Read his new book, The Creation, to see what I mean.

I have known Edward O. Wilson for nearly three decades. I have co-authored a couple of papers with him, and I am proud to call him my friend. In Darwin’s Black Box, somewhat embarrassingly Michael