

## A Dream of Reason

CONSILIENCE:  
THE UNITY OF KNOWLEDGE  
By Edward O. Wilson. Alfred A. Knopf. \$26.

Reviewed by D. GRAHAM BURNETT

Isaiah Berlin, cribbing from Archilochus, once suggested that thinking persons might be sorted into two categories: foxes and hedgehogs. "The fox knows many things," wrote the elliptical Greek poet, "but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Glossed by Berlin, this hermetic fragment gave rise to an arcane (if erudite) parlor game: Goethe? fox; Montaigne? fox; Plato? hedgehog; Hegel? hedgehog. Who had one big idea, a unitary, all-encompassing vision? Whose thinking, by contrast, spun outward in centrifugal delight, seizing on variety, embracing profusion?

E. O. Wilson, by these lights, is one foxy hedgehog. Not only does his double identity—mild-mannered naturalist/collector/taxonomist cum contested synthesizer of the sweeping theories of sociobiology—seem to span the veritable poles of foxdom and hedgehogitude, his new book offers the reader both a little of everything and a theory of everything. Here you will find a critique of rational choice theory in economics, a discussion of Shipibo shamanism, and a brief history of the eighteenth century (with particular attention to the Marquis de Condorcet). This is a bold book for a man, nearly seventy, who could, should you express interest in something a little less speculative, show you a few of his five thousand detailed drawings of ants, soon to appear in his synthetic myrmecological monograph on the Western Hemisphere.

While *Consilience's* eclectic content suggests the meanderings of a fox, the title reveals a hedgehog's presiding spirit: Wilson's subject is more than the mere unity of the sciences, it is

the unity of all forms of human knowledge, their imminent "jumping together" or consilience. Decrying academic specialization, intellectual fragmentation, and particularly the mincing epistemological anxieties of post-structuralists, postmodernists, and their irresolute kin, Wilson invokes the optimistic rationalism of the Enlightenment as he declares science—Western if you like, reductivist if you insist—the most promising way forward on the fundamental questions: Who are we? Where did we come from? Where should we go? That these kinds of questions have long belonged to other modes of inquiry—philosophy, the arts, the humanities—Wilson grants, but his message in its most robust form declares that some of these enterprises, most notably their modern incarnations, have forfeited their mandate. The others will be leavened by science even if, in the end, they do not come within science's expanding scope.

"Science offers the boldest metaphysics of the age," Wilson declares in his opening. But make no mistake. This is not merely a resurrection of the sort of triumphalist account of science (and its obligation to help straighten out social life) which, despite a long lineage—from the volumes of the ambitious Auguste Comte to C. H. Waddington's angry little book *The Scientific Attitude* and its denunciations of the "harlot humanities"—has fallen from favor of late and is not much seen. True, one finds here an unapologetic scientism, substantiated by popular science vignettes showing the investigations of mind and behavior at their most powerful. True, too, that a set of familiar metaphors do their turn sketching the heroic character of scientists and their work: they are intrepid explorers of modern *terra incognita*, "confident enough to sail for blue water"; they cast light into the troglodytic realms of folk understanding; they are dogged as middle-earth prospectors, yet possess the poet's spirit. True again that much of the portrait—particularly the presentation of scientists' constitutional inability to defer to protestations of impossibility, and their "proprietary sense of the future"—will be familiar to those who recall a brush with C. P. Snow's 1959 book *The Two Cultures* (a text Wilson cites approvingly).

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~ D. Graham Burnett is a Mellon Fellow in History at Columbia University and a member of the Society of Fellows there. He is currently collaborating with Aaron E. Hirsh, a biologist, on *Origins: An Introduction to Darwin and His Ideas*.

Yet for all this (or perhaps because of it), *Consilience* is a book that merits close attention. Wilson's posture will alienate many. But if the humanistically inclined put down *Consilience* after reaching page 12 ("Philosophy, the contemplation of the unknown, is a shrinking dominion. We have the common goal of turning as much philosophy as possible into science"), it will be very unfortunate indeed. Triumphalism aside, be assured that *Consilience* presses directly to the heart of some of the most important issues facing us as culture-bearing units and unities. It drops the gauntlet—affably, without rancor—before the humanities, and in so doing offers its practitioners and admirers an opportunity to answer clearly, in their own voices, Wilson's vital question: "What is the relationship between science and the humanities, and how important is it for human welfare?"

Of his book (and, one presumes, his answer to this very question) Wilson has claimed: "I expect a lot of opposition. If I do not get it then I've failed." If this is so, then he can claim success with this reader. I disagree deeply with his central contention, as well as with much of the history he uses to ground his claims. This raises an interesting problem: Would the best reply to Wilson take issue piecemeal with each bit of his fox-like story, or should it burrow in on the prickly hedgehog hunkered down in the middle?

A fox's critique might ask, among other things: Can the religiosity of Descartes plausibly be called a mere "concession to metaphysics"? Can a pristine rationalist Enlightenment be so cleanly distinguished from the "absurd digressions and speculations" indulged in by its (to Wilson's mind) episodically wayward practitioners? What precisely do we learn of Goethe when we are told he lacked "what is today called the scientist's instinct"? How can the nineteenth century be presented as a temporary setback for the Enlightenment spirit (a lapse precipitated by the irrationalist excesses of the Romantics), when the same century saw the most fantastic burst of industrialization? Tracing so tidy a genealogy for the spirit of science as Wilson attempts calls for some foxy history indeed.

But such quibbling may seem pedantic when engaging a book that calls for nothing less than a profound rethinking of the na-

ture of politics, ethics, religion, the arts, all the social sciences, and the humanities too. The temptation to dismiss Wilson's analysis of these many fields must be resisted, for while one might easily argue that he betrays some very odd ideas about their respective characters, to say no more would be to miss that (taken seriously) he is calling for these enterprises to become something radically different; to become, in effect, part of a whole called "science."

What then of the hedgehog in *Consilience*? It speaks thus: "No compelling reason has ever been offered why the same strategy [the construction of coherent cause-and-effect explanations across levels of organization] should not work to unite the natural sciences with the social sciences and humanities." Wilson wants us to move ahead on the hypothesis that such unity is both possible and felicitous. In evaluating this argument, much hinges on the precise nature of the "uniting" envisioned. Here *Consilience* never flat out states its case, and the very term "consilience" helps. Borrowed from the writings of William Whewell (the early Victorian master of Trinity College, Cambridge; best known for coining the term "scientist"), the word seems to wander in Wilson's usage from implying "reduction to" to something much milder—say, "consistence with."

This oscillation accounts for the irenic tone of some passages in the book—for instance where we are told, reasonably enough to my mind, that "there is a biologically based human nature, and it is relevant to ethics." But these sorts of collaborative passages must be juxtaposed with irruptions of what might be called high church oozism (it all goes back to the primordial ooze!), exemplified by Wilson's reflections on spiritual revelation and the prayers of mystics like St. Teresa of Avila: "Perhaps, as I believe, it can all eventually be explained as brain chemistry and deep, genetic history." This perspective gives rise to considerably edgier accounts of the relationship between the natural sciences and other modes of knowing. Perhaps what is wanted is not quite constructive dialogue, but rather *lebensraum* for a science rampart.

Here one encounters the tragedy of *Consilience*. At its shining moments, the book offers a challenging call to recognize the profound

ways that behavioral genetics and human evolutionary scenarios will (continue to) change just who we think we are. Unfortunately, Wilson has harnessed this visionary material to a distressingly flat account of disciplines and their boundaries. He has said that the humanities (and kin) may be able to become *part of science*, rather than that all forms of human inquiry (science included) will come to look very different indeed. Here the friendly overtures will not help. Consilience is not a doctrine of conciliation.

There can be no disputing that Wilson takes toward philosophy a position of extreme hostility. He declares that "its involuted exercises and professional timidity have left modern culture bankrupt of meaning." It could be argued that Nietzsche—not timid—offers quite a coherent account of what a man is to do with a world (like Wilson's) composed, for all intents and purposes, of matter in motion. But one gets the clear sense that Wilson would be unwilling to concede that his beloved "will to truth" inevitably undoes itself (or, for that matter, that it is itself the last fruits of reli-

gious foolishness, as Nietzsche suggests). Fair enough; Wilson need not like Nietzsche. But where the philosophical aversions of *Consilience* cause politics to be treated like something the cat brought in, there is reason for concern.

For Wilson, the social sciences are suffering from a case of arrested scientific development. They are stuck in the "natural history" phase of a science—happily naming things, furiously organizing tables, but sadly lacking in theory. The cause? A "problem endemic to the social sciences: political ideology." Wilson seems to conceive of politics as an inhibiting matrix, a molasses-like impediment to brisk thinking and good decision making. For all its optimism, this is an unsound perspective. As the sage Lionel Trilling pointed out in his response to C. P. Snow in 1962: "We dream of Reason taking over the whole management of the world, and soon. No doubt a beneficent eventuality, but our impatience for it is dangerous if it leads us to deny the actuality of politics in the present."

Amen. Wilson considers Rousseau and the

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French Revolution the death of the Enlightenment, but theirs too, as Burke was quick to note, was a dream of reason. While one gets the sense that Wilson has worked hard to give his strong program of human sociobiology a new holistic spirit (a sort of kinder, gentler determinism), his remains a dream of unity based on matter in motion, explicable by fundamental laws. The full implications should stagger a careful reader. *Consilience* is a dream of unity that, like all others, has strict rules governing the units.

Let us turn, then, to the dark underbelly of the hedgehog. At issue is nothing less than the endlessly contentious question of how to bound the explanatory mechanisms of each mode of human knowing. For a moment, leave aside the evidence and plausibility of Wilson's claim; measure it by its telos. What world does *Consilience* promise? A world confident in singular explanations, a world where every question has a unique (if very complex) answer. Wilson claims this will work itself out democratically, but I see little reason to think so. Dreams of reason have found executors very quickly; they have seldom been savory fellows. Julien Benda, the grim great-granddaddy of all the conservative denunciators who rail against the (liberal academic) intelligentsia, was certainly no flighty irrationalist, yet he flinched in 1927 before the implications of the scientism he saw around him: "The dogma that history is obedient to scientific laws is preached by persons of arbitrary authority. This is quite natural, since it eliminates the two realities they most hate, i.e., human liberty and the historical action of the individual." A decade later these words would seem prescient indeed.

Wilson is by no means naïve to such things. He raises the specter of the Terror himself, and his homey, unpretentious style signals simplicity of expression, not simplicity of thought. If he has defended an empirically accessible human nature, and the promise of a newly coherent and universal intellectual project (with ethical and political arms), it is not because he has not heard the objections, but rather because he has sensed the need for some common ground in a world bent on particularism. His song of science is a paean, but also a plea to young would-be scientists; the encomiums

on scientific method and its attainments must be read as such. *Consilience* is thus an intervention, an attempt to work change in a real, muddy world of multiculturalism and social construction, an intervention aimed at steering things right (or merely more *rightly*). While science is its subject, it is not, in sum, without an ideology of its own.

For all that, Wilson feels like a *liberal* man. Like C. P. Snow before him, he communicates an ample spirit; he reveals himself as a lover of the world and its denizens. (Not for nothing did he title his most personal book *Biophilia*.) Like Snow too, Wilson draws deeply from the well of his sympathetic humanism in concluding his ruminations on the sciences and the humanities. For both authors the urgency of this matter was heightened by an impending crisis: for Snow, the pressing need to industrialize the third world; for Wilson, impending ecological collapse. To point out that imminent crisis has often been the fulcrum of illiberality would be unkind; to point out that both authors see the expansion of their esteemed science as a solution to the crisis they themselves foretell would not be wrong. The irony, of course, is that Snow's solution was, memorably, "jam" for the poor. The huddled masses of the Southern Hemisphere were to receive from the hands of science the power systems, the agricultural revolutions, and ultimately all the stuff of the rich. It was a noble aim in 1959. Now Wilson, with the same depth of spirit, the same earnest exhortation, calls on science *not* in the name of jam, but in the name of unjamming ourselves from the ecological disaster the jamming brought with it. How quickly they change, these dreams of reason, even the best of them.

This might sound snide, but I do not intend it that way. Who could want to stand idly by while people starve or the world becomes unlivable? It is the urgency and above all the complexity of such matters that make Wilson's challenge so important. The crucial issues do indeed span our divided disciplines. For this reason Wilson has posed the right question: What is the relationship between the sciences (I prefer the plural) and the humanities? Wilson sees no compelling reason not to believe they could be one. I, like many humanists, and probably like plenty of scientists too, believe

myself possessed of several such compelling reasons; it would be a privilege to try them on him some time. More important, it would behoove all scholars and thinking persons to ready their own reasons, humanists in particular. For despite all Wilson's curious rhetoric of science "sequestered" in America, and his sense of a two-pronged assault of anti-science forces—from below (cults and mysticism) and above (the Pyrrhonian minions of Bruno Latour)—science is doing just fine, thank you. A glimpse at budgets, hiring, stipends, and institutional priorities should set that matter to rest. One wonders what one of Wilson's scientists, fretting at being undervalued, would make of being thrust into the shabby shoes of a humanist, who certainly has good reason to feel beleaguered as she casts an eye at the profile of higher education in America. That we should all feel marginalized raises a curious question: Just what has come to lie at the center of these institutions of liberal learning? Could it be all those undergraduate business majors?

And it is here, finally, that these abstract debates over the lineaments of knowledge become truly interesting. For the issue at stake in *Consilience*, like that in *The Two Cultures*, is ultimately nothing less than what we need to know to live with ourselves and with each other. This cannot be anything but a pedagogical question, a question about the curriculum, a question about the nature of a liberal education. It is in debating these questions that we maintain the conditions of possibility for a free society. *Consilience* deserves to be engaged—answered—with this in mind.

A tablet now plucks the cords of our nether members, for the better, I am told; those that pluck at the higher faculties are not far off. What will we say to a drug that stiffens the intellect, focuses the powers of concentration, for a price? We will want to be in full possession of our humanity to make wise decisions about such things. Oddly, we have never had that humanity more firmly in hand, nor have we been more completely confused about what it works out to be. With Wilson's suggestion that the ships of religion and philosophy are to be "left scuttled and burning" on this new shore, I cannot agree. They got us here, and I suspect that I, for one, may wish to leave.

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