

thousand years ago with the bloodshed in Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland, making links that bring the Native American past into a tumultuous yet understandable present. Stuart relates the painful circumstances of high infant mortality among the ancestral Pueblo peoples to similarly devastating conditions in less economically developed parts of our own world.

Stuart's depiction of the Chaco system as a failed experiment in power politics and overspecialized agricultural strategies is both compelling and correct. From a dry and dusty archaeology, Stuart crafts an understandable story that is depicted in a thought-provoking and contemporary context. There are lessons, he argues, that historic Pueblo societies learned from the unraveling of Chaco society—lessons that we, in turn, should take to heart: Do not extend food production systems beyond the bounds of a capricious environment. Depend more upon community and less on an elite leadership. Though somewhat romantic in some of its passages, *Anasazi America* still succeeds in melding an often opaque past into our own often disquieting present.

BOOKS: PHILOSOPHY

On E. O. Wilson and His Religious Vision

Michael Ruse

Toward the end of 1998, I was in a bookstore just off Harvard Square. Like most authors interested in the competition, I picked a copy of Edward O. Wilson's book *Consilience* off the shelves and checked just after the title page. Although the book was first published late that March, the copy in my hands was from the tenth printing (in September). I realize print runs these days are pretty small, but this was some best-seller. Which in a way is something of a paradox, because the reviews—especially those from professionals like philosophers—had tended to be united in their hostility. The review that appeared in *Science* (1) was withering in its scorn for Wilson's arguments and his conclusions.

There was something interesting at work here, and really it is not too difficult to see what it was. The professionals were reading *Consilience* as a work of scholarship; they were looking for heavy-duty empirical research, formal arguments, and

footnotes that qualify the main text sufficiently so that the author can deny what was said explicitly. The general public was reading, and liking, what Wilson had set out to write, namely an inspirational manifesto for our time. The manifesto is more than just inspirational, for at least since his Pulitzer Prize-winning *On Human Nature* (2), Wilson has been trying to use science (particularly evolutionary science) as an alternative to Christianity, which he thinks no longer viable. A deeply religious man, Wilson is trying to define a new vision—materialistic, reductionistic, evolutionary, humanistic—that will be adequate for our time and can approach properly the major challenges we humans now face. Those of us who have read Wilson's other books know that the need to cherish and preserve biodiversity is for him perhaps the supreme ethical commandment. It is hardly tendentious to say that *Consilience* is Wilson's Sermon on the Mount.

Religions bring forth disbelievers, heretics, and adherents to other faiths. The essayist Wendell Berry has now written an elegant little book, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*, which is as much a stand against *Consilience* as anything penned by Martin Luther was against the Pope. Berry thinks that Wilson's vision is wrong, wrong, wrong: Wilsonian religion uses vile misleading metaphors (with the metaphor of humans as machines the most dreadful). It illicitly reduces thought to substance, without noting the existence and power of ideas. It brushes aside free will as an illusion. It has no time for poetry, fiction, art, and all else that makes us distinctively human. And it also fails and misleads at the practical level. Scientific discovery (the Wilsonian act of Eucharist) is greatly overvalued. The joys of teaching and of humble jobs like postal delivery are unfairly downgraded. And all is sacrificed to the great and false god of progress. Like an Old Testament prophet thundering against Baal, Berry will have none of it.

At one level, it would be easy for Wilson or a supporter to take on Berry. As seems to be the norm in these kinds of cases, Adolf Hitler is wheeled out and the philosophy endorsed by Wilson is found to be a major causal factor leading to the dictator's power and actions. But surely one could say that the horrors of Nazi race theory came precisely because those criminal madmen did not take note of modern genetics. More than this, today's scholars like Saul Friedländer (3) argue that the real roots of Nazi anti-Semitism lay in the mystical,

Volkish philosophy of 19th-century German romantics, especially the "redemptive antisemitism" of the Wagnerians in Bayreuth. I hardly think Wilsonian science can be blamed for overweight tenors prancing around in mock-medieval, fancy dress.

Even where Berry gets specific we can defend Wilson. How, asks our essayist, is Wilson to explain David's lament over his rebellious, dead son? "Oh my son Absalom, would that I had died for thee."

Quite easily, I should have thought: in terms of kin selection. For all that our children can be awful, our biology compels us to love and care for them because they carry our genes. To ask Berry a return question, why did David not lament over the body of Goliath? As I remember, the usual practice at times like this was

to cut off your foe's foreskin and dangle it from the belt at your waist.

Yet, in a way, simply responding with debating quips is a mistake. It is to miss the point, as I fear is true also of Berry. Wilson is not the real enemy. Of course, *Consilience* is written in a flamboyant style and it sets out to irritate. It makes all sorts of grand, ambitious statements, and it throws out predictions and hopes that many will find deeply upsetting. But the point is that Wilson does care to make sense of existence, and he does value above all the worth of our life within that existence. He thinks, perhaps with some reason, that traditional religion does not speak to the problems of our age, and he offers an alternative. His alternative may be flawed, but Wilson is at least trying to provide an ethic for this new century.

Berry's real enemies are those who could not care less: those who think that giving a few dollars to the United Way is enough to assuage all doubts and fears about the worth of life and the way that we are treating our planet. Frankly, I doubt that anything is going to change Wendell Berry's mind. But I hope that some who pick up and read this book—and I say again that it is elegant, forceful, and concerned with important issues—will ask whether those on the same spiritual journey might combine forces and work together. Such cooperation is much better than (as is so often the case in religious disputes) simply tearing one another apart and letting those with no vision continue in their blind and directionless ways.

References

1. J. Dupré, *Science* **280**, 1395 (1998).
2. E. O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, MA, 1978).
3. S. Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (Harper Collins, New York, 1997).

Life is a Miracle An Essay Against Modern Superstition by Wendell Berry

Counterpoint, Washington, DC, 2000. 163 pp. \$21. ISBN 1-58243-058-6.

The author is in the Department of Philosophy, 151 Dodd Hall, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1500, USA. E-mail: mruse@mailier.fsu.edu