Can We Explain Human Nature Using Evolutionary Psychology? (Leader's Guide)

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Leader’s Guide to

Can We Explain Human Nature Using Evolutionary Psychology?

A Study of The Social Conquest of Earth

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Summer 2017
How to Use This Material?

This study of evolutionary psychology using E. O. Wilson’s *The Social Conquest of Earth* consists of 5 modules. Each module contains two sections. The first section presents a set of Reading and Reflection questions that are to be completed before each meeting and are meant to help the participant wrestle with the concepts introduced in that week’s chapters. The second section consists of two (or more) Discussion questions, which will be written by the participants and the leader as they read. Both sets of questions are meant to foster discussion, but your group should by no means limit itself to the questions contained in these sections.

This study is intended for informal, small group discussion, such as that of a Bible study or small group. The themes presented in each submodule may be unpacked on its own, but it is the hope of the authors that the entire study may be useful to the interested reader (leader and participant alike). The study is also aimed toward high school students, college students, and post-college adults with an interest in how science and the Christian faith interact.

As you read, it is our hope that you will come across (and come up with) questions which challenge you, both in understanding your personal faith and in understanding science. In these questions, you will have the opportunity to grow through asking and answering these questions: Why has the church historically believed in *this* answer or *that* answer? How might you be challenged to defend your answer?
Planning and Preparing for a Session

The material assumes that each session will last for about 30-45 minutes. It also assumes that each participant will have read the assigned chapter(s) and considered the Reading and Reflection questions ahead of time.

It must also be noted that the provided discussion questions are intended as a guide for your discussion, but you should by no means restrict your discussion to these questions. Try to keep your group’s discussion relevant to the general themes addressed in the module, but be flexible.

Equipped for Service

This “Leader’s Guide” is meant to equip leaders of these small group discussions, and thus the following pages are far more detailed and expansive than the average participant may judge necessary for complex discussion. We offer information from other references and suggested answers to questions posed in the text. This has been done in the hope that you, as the leader, may more easily facilitate and moderate discussion amongst your peers in the small group. Your small group may be made up of the generation that initiates change in how the common Christian comes to understand these questions and answer – in the service of your peers, do not underestimate your own significance as a leader or co-leader.
Who is the author of *The Social Conquest of Earth*?

Edward Osborne Wilson is a naturalist who specializes in the study of ants (or myrmecology), in which he is considered the world’s leading expert. He is also known for his work in sociobiology, a field that posits that human social behaviour is a result of human evolution. It is similar to evolutionary psychology, which examined human psychology from an evolutionary standpoint. *The Social Conquest of Earth* deals with sociobiology and evolutionary psychology.


Wilson is not a Christian, though he was raised in a nominally Christian home. He calls himself a scientific humanist and an agnostic. Though his earlier works were not necessarily hostile towards religion, in recent years Wilson has concluded that religion must be eliminated for the sake of human progress. Wilson is not kind to religious people in *The Social Conquest of Earth*. But, he explores the implications of evolution for our understanding of human nature in a fairly accessible way.
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Module 1: Introduction to *The Social Conquest of Earth*

Chapters covered: “Prologue” and “The Human Condition”

Reading and Reflection

**“Prologue”**

1. What do you think Wilson means by “myth”?

   Suggested Answer: Wilson probably means “an explanatory tradition,” or something similar. Myths are not necessarily untrue, though we often associate “myth” with made up stories. How do you understand the term “myth”?

2. Why do you think Wilson chose to frame his book around a painting by Paul Gauguin?

   Suggested Answer: Gauguin has been called the “Maker of Myths,” and explanatory traditions are Wilson’s main focus in this book. Wilson wants to explore the science of human nature and compare it to myths related to human nature, and Gauguin’s painting provides a nice framework for exploring human nature.

3. Look up some paintings by Gauguin. What do you think?

**“The Human Condition”**

1. How would you answer the three questions Gauguin poses in his painting?

   Suggested Answer: Answers will vary. If participants are comfortable sharing their opinions, ask them what they think about the idea of human evolution.

2. What do you think Wilson means by saying that humanity is “caught between the fantasies of sleep and the chaos of the real world”?
Suggested Answer: Wilson is probably drawing a contrast between the empiricism of modern science (“the real world”) and the pathos of antiquated sentiments and religions. Wilson is in full support of making scientism a world religion. Participants might not know this about Wilson, however, so their answers may vary.

3. What do you think of Wilson’s assessment that religion (and, more specifically, creation myths) were essential in the evolutionary success of a tribe? How does it feel to have a fundamental belief about the world described as a vestige of evolution?

Suggested Answer: Some participants may feel angry at Wilson’s description of their most fundamental beliefs; others may write Wilson off as an ignorant evolutionist. Challenge participants to consider whether Wilson’s assessment is necessarily at odds with a Christian view of the world. Can religion be a product of evolution and a gift from God?

4. Wilson says that science and religion (or trust in empiricism and belief in the supernatural) can never be reconciled. What do you think of this statement? Why do you think Wilson feels this way?

Suggested Answer: Wilson believes that empiricism is the only valid way of knowing, and that trust in empiricism precludes trust in anything that cannot be proven empirically; he believes in scientism. Religion is founded on faith, and faith cannot be proved very well empirically. Because he believes that religion and science rely on different ways of knowing to uncover truth, Wilson believes that the two are irreconcilable.

5. What do you think of Wilson so far? What assumptions has he made? Do you agree or disagree with his assumptions? Why?
Discussion

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about ideas presented in this week’s assigned chapters.

1.

2.
Module 2: The Path to Conquest


Reading and Reflection

“The Two Paths to Conquest”

1. What do you think of Wilson’s assessment that the reason humans have become capable of destroying the earth is because we evolved quickly and spread quickly?

   Suggested Answer: The parallel Wilson draws between humans and ants is probably a new one to most participants, and the idea that humans evolved relatively quickly is probably also a new one. The idea of humans “coevolving” with the biosphere is probably also a new one. Does humanity’s speedy evolution relieve our responsibility for the destruction of the environment?

2. How does Wilson describe the human condition? Do you agree with this description? What human characteristics does Wilson note as particularly important in our evolutionary success?

   Suggested Answer: “Selfish at one time, selfless at another, the two impulses often in conflict” (17). Wilson highlights human intelligence and human sociality as defining characteristics of humankind, and large size and limited mobility are noted as humanity’s defining biological properties.

3. What are the two paths to conquest Wilson references in the title of this chapter?

   Suggested Answer: The path ants took to become a successful social species and the path humankind took to become a successful social species.
“The Approach”

1. What do you think of Wilson’s description of how the human body evolved from a prehistoric human common ancestor?

“The Arrival”

1. What do you think of the role carnivory has played in humanity’s evolutionary success? If this is an accurate description of how early humans developed, what ethical implications does humanity’s dependence on killing and consuming animals have?

2. What role does Wilson suggest that social intelligence played in humanity’s ability to eat?

   Suggested Answer: Social intelligence allowed humans to use teams to gather food and share the obtained food in ways that were acceptable to fellow tribe members.

“Threading the Evolutionary Maze”

1. Wilson cites cooking as a “universal means of social bonding” (47). Cooking seems to have played an important role in human evolutionary history. What role does cooking play in communities today? Why do you think that is?

   Suggested Answer: Cooking is still a very social thing, in many cultures. Wilson argues that the communal nature of cooking was helpful to early humans because it unified them and strengthened their social bonds. Most people will not object to the social value of cooking, but viewing that social value as an evolutionary advantage is probably a new concept.
Discussion

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about ideas presented in this week’s assigned chapters.

1. 

2. 
Module 3: Tribalism

Chapters covered: “The Creative Forces,” “Tribalism is a Fundamental Human Trait,” “War as Humanity’s Hereditary Curse,” “The Breakout,” “The Creative Explosion, and “The Sprint to Civilization”

Reading and Reflection

“The Creative Forces”

1. On page 51, Wilson says, “In order to bring the human condition into being, a divine Creator would have had to sprinkle an astronomical number of genetic mutations into the genome while engineering the physical and living environments over millions of years to keep the archaic prehumans on track. He might as well have done the same job with a row of random number generators.” What do you think of this statement? What assumptions about a divine Creator does Wilson make? Why do you think Wilson has made those assumptions?

Suggested Answer: Wilson has put God (or “a divine Creator”) in a box, so to speak. His conception of a divine Creator does not account for the omnipotence of said Creator. What assumptions do you make about God and what God can and cannot do?

2. What is eusocial evolution and how does it relate to Wilson’s understanding of human nature?

Suggested Answer: Eusocial evolution builds on the theory of multilevel selection, which suggests that natural selection acts on both individuals and on other levels of biological organization (e.g. cells and populations). So, if a trait is not advantageous for an individual, but if it is advantageous for the group, the individual may still evolve the trait. This provides a way for altruism (which usually does not benefit the individual) to have evolved, and thus human societies have arisen. Based on these ideas, Wilson surmises that human condition is defined by the competition between group selection and individual selection (the two forms of natural selection that compose multilevel selection). Culture is founded on clashes, says Wilson.
“Tribalism Is a Fundamental Human Trait”

1. Where do you see “tribalism” in today’s world? What “tribes” do you belong to? In what ways does tribalism impact the way you view your identity?

Suggested Answer: Sports teams, school loyalties, nationalism, denominational loyalties, brand loyalties, etc. As Wilson says, tribalism gives us social meaning in a chaotic world.

2. What can we (or should we) do about in-group bias? What do you think about Wilson’s use of the “Shibboleth” passage to support his point?

Suggested Answer: Acting on our in-group bias may be self-preservational in some instances, but it is not often a very Christian thing to do. Does this mean that we should always combat our in-group bias? In regard to the Scripture passage Wilson neatly slipped into the end of the chapter: this is an instance of proof texting. Wilson has given us a few verses with absolutely no context in the hope that people will conclude that Judeo-Christian religions regularly practice severe forms of anti-out-group behaviour. Bad form, sir, bad form. If you’d like, and if you have time, read the passage in Judges to get a sense of the whole story. Was the slaughter of the Ephraimites justifiable? And, if you’re up for a rabbit trail, how do we understand and explain to non-Christians the God-ordained deaths recorded in the Old Testament?

“War as Humanity’s Hereditary Curse”

1. What do you think of Wilson’s portrayal of modern (or relatively modern) wars as an animalistic defense of the tribe? What do you think of the idea that violence on a grand scale has always been part of human nature?
2. What do you think of Wilson’s suggestion that humans have used God as a convenient excuse for bloodbaths of no other legitimate excuse presented itself? What do you think of Wilson’s quoting of Luther?

Suggested Answer: In my opinion, it is true that sometimes humans have claimed to act on God’s command when in fact they were pursuing their desire for violence or wealth (or both). This does not make religion necessarily violent, however, as Wilson would like to insinuate. In regard to Wilson’s quotation from *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*: I am pretty confident that Luther is not saying that humans are free to kill whomever they please because God has okayed violence in general. What might Luther be saying here? (Maybe look up the essay and read some of it to get an idea of the context from which this convenient quotation was plucked.) Why do you think that God has instituted the sword?

3. On page 68, Wilson says that both Christianity and Buddhism profess “peace, nonviolence, and brotherly love” as core values, but threat to their laws “is an evil that must be defeated.” Is this a fair assessment? Why or why not? What does Wilson use to support his claims?

Suggested Answer: This is a very poorly validated statement. Wilson does cite some events in Buddhist history to substantiate his claim, but he provides no proof for Christianity following suit. (Wilson has a beef with Abrahamic religions, as you may have noticed, and that permeates his discussions of human sociality and religiosity.)

“The Breakout”

1. What do you think of the list of traits unique to humans that Wilson lists on page 79? Would you add any traits to the list?
2. What do you think of the approach to diversity Wilson suggests on page 81? How does this biology-centric description fit with social understandings of diversity?

Suggested Answer: As Wilson says, diversity has biological benefits. Without diversity, the human race would have a harder time thriving. Yet, we have a natural tendency to fear and dislike people in our out-group, as Wilson has already discussed in his chapter about warfare. How can we reconcile our need for diversity with our tendency to dislike those who are different from us?

“The Creative Explosion”

1. What are the three hypotheses that address the “creative explosion of culture”? Which do you find most compelling? (Or do you like Wilson’s suggestion that the three fit together?) Why?

Suggested Answer: One earth-shaking genetic mutation; many, cumulative genetic mutations; cultural innovations experienced times of success and times of depression throughout early human history, being consistently influenced by the environment.

“The Sprint to Civilization”

1. How does the statement, “no matter how old the earliest known fossil or evidence of a human activity is, there is always somewhere and remaining to be discovered evidence of something at least a bit older” influence the way you perceive archeology or paleontology?

Suggested Answer: Paleontology and archeology are constantly developing fields. Keep in mind that the ideas presented by Wilson are things we think we have learned from the fossil record as we know it thus far. This inherent uncertainty should not cause us to discount everything Wilson (or archeologists or paleontologists or scientists in general) have to say. How do you deal with uncertainty in science?
Discussion

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about ideas presented in this week’s assigned chapters.

1.

2.
Module 4: All About Ants (and Other Eusocial Insects)


Reading and Reflection

“The Invention of Eusociality”

1. Do you consider humankind to be an animal species? Why or why not? How does that impact your view of our relationship with the created world?

Suggested Answer: Most Christians agree that humankind has been called to steward Creation, but how people interpret the call to stewardship varies. Some believe that we are wholly separated from Creation (or elevated above it), others believe that we are wholly part of Creation, and our call to stewardship does not mean that God loves us any more than the rest of Creation. What are the benefits of the various perspectives on this topic? What are the dangers? How do each fit with the evolutionary history Wilson outlines?

“Inventions that Advanced the Social Insects”

1. What relevance does Wilson’s discussion of ant eusociality have for his discussion of human sociobiology? Did you find his discussion of ants to be helpful?

Suggested Answer: Wilson is an ant specialist at heart, clearly. It is helpful, in my opinion, to study the eusociality of other creatures when we are trying to better understand human eusociality. A person who is new to the field of sociobiology would be excused for thinking that these two ant-centric chapters were of limited relevance to Wilson’s thesis.
“The Scientific Dilemma of Rarity”

1. On page 138, Wilson gives an illustration depicting “what might have happened” if a bipedal dinosaur had attained eusociality. What do you think of this speculation? What might the world look like today if dinosaurs had become social creatures like humans are? Are these speculations interesting to you? Are they worthwhile? What do they achieve?

Suggested Answer: To some, this speculation may seem bizarre and unscientific. It is an interesting supposition. How would your understanding of God’s relationship with humankind change if humans were not the first large eusocial species?

“Insect Altruism and Eusociality Explained”

1. Wilson says that humanity is “a biological species in a biological world” (139). What do you think of this assessment? Is it accurate?

Suggested Answer: Answers may vary, but I believe it to be true, if a little limited in scope.

2. Does the “well-flavoured vegetable” metaphor make sense to you? How does it illustrate altruism?

Suggested Answer: Though the vegetable itself is lost to the stew (or whatever the cook happens to be concocting), seeds from the uncooked vegetables can propagate the species and ensure that the cook can concoct many more well-flavoured vegetable dishes in the future. The sterility of the individual does not mean that its genes will not be passed on to future generations, and it does not mean that sterile organisms cannot experience natural selection.
“Insects Take the Giant Leap”

1. What do you think of viewing a colony as a “superorganism”? How would you define the term *organism*? Could human societies be viewed as superorganisms?

Suggested Answer: Calling multi-individual systems “organisms” seems to be increasingly popular in biology. Conventionally, an organism is a whole with interdependent parts (e.g. organs). Human systems are sometimes considered organisms, and some have even considered the whole earth to be an organism (with all ecosystems being “organs” part of the larger whole).

“How Natural Selection Creates Social Instincts”

1. Summarize how natural selection creates social instincts.

Suggested Answer: If creatures with a predisposition toward social behaviours fare better in a given environment, they are more apt to survive and pass along their genes. This selection of social traits will compound, eventually creating a population of very socially adept individuals.

“The Forces of Social Evolution”

1. Do the ideas of kin selection, multilevel selection, and inclusive fitness make sense to you, after reading Wilson’s elaborations on each?

Suggested Answer: If not, look up some alternative summaries online. The *Nature* press release “Altruism can be explained by natural selection,” by Natasha Gilbert, provides a nice summary of Wilson et al.’s article about the inaccuracy of kin selection theory and the definition of inclusive fitness. If you’d like, a link to the full scientific article can be found at the bottom of the press release.
“The Emergence of a New Theory of Eusociality”

1. What are the stages of the new theory of eusocial evolution (as applied to insects)?

   Suggested Answer: As listed on page 187, the first stage is the formation of groups, the second is the presence of preadaptive traits (e.g. nest-dependence), the third is genetic mutations that promote the persistence of the group, the fourth is group-level selection phenomena, and the fifth is group-level to a degree that causes communities to behave like “superorganisms” (187).

Discussion

(Congratulations! You have made it through the 78 pages of relatively science-heavy—and undoubtedly insect-heavy—assigned readings!) In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about ideas presented in this week’s assigned chapters.

1.

2.
Module 4: What Are We?


Reading and Reflection

“What Is Human Nature?”

1. How do you define human nature? What do you think of Wilson’s description of how the religious and theologians go about understanding human nature?

Suggested Answer: Answers to the first question may vary, though most participants will probably include humanity’s natural inclination toward sinfulness in their response. Again, Wilson believes that the religious use God or the devil as a cop out. Apparently, the understanding of human nature provided by religions are unsatisfactory explanations, in Wilson’s mind.

2. What do you think of Wilson’s suggestion that human nature is produced by the interaction of genetics and of cultural evolution? Is this idea compatible with your definition of human nature?

Suggested Answer: Wilson’s idea seems plausible, and compatible with a Christian understanding of human nature. How does a genetic and cultural understanding of human nature fit with your understanding of human sinfulness? Could our sinful nature be genetic? Or cultural?

“How Culture Evolved”

1. Have you ever thought of non-human creatures as having culture? Does this idea make sense to you? Do you agree with it?

Suggested Answer: Usually, we think of humans as unique in their culture-creating abilities. When culture is defined as a learned behaviour (invented by a particular
group), Wilson’s idea makes more sense. Still, participants may be uncomfortable with the idea that culture is no unique to humankind.

2. What do you think of the sentence Wilson uses to conclude the chapter? (“Morality, conformity, religious fervor, and fighting ability combined with imagination and memory to produce the winner” (224).) What role do you think these traits or behaviour played in humanity’s success? Do they still play a role in human cultures?

“The Origin of Language”

1. Did you find Wilson’s description of the Origin of language satisfactory? Were you familiar with the points he made, or were they new?

Suggested Answer: If you’d like to learn more about how we understand the origin of language, read Tom Wolfe’s book The Kingdom of Speech, which covers a swath of content area, including the development of the consensus on language origins.

“The Evolution of Cultural Variation”

1. What two factors contribute to cultural variation in humans (239)?

Suggested Answer: The degree of bias in the epigenetic rule (i.e. how much epigenetics encourages one behaviour and discourages another) and sensitivity to the usage pattern employed by others who are similar.

“The Origins of Morality and Honor”

1. Can the idea that the “dilemma between good and evil” is a product multi-level selection be compatible with a Christian understanding of good and evil? Is this perspective necessarily non-theistic just because it is naturalistically biological (i.e. relies wholly on science for a description of the way things are)? Can Christians learn something about the nature of humankind from the biological principle of multi-level selection?

Suggested Answer: In my view, it is possible that multi-level selection is a part of why humans are the way we are. It is entirely possible that God used evolutionary
processes, such as natural selection, to form humankind into our present form. I would argue that the difference between good and evil is not as simple as merely the difference between altruism and selfishness (which Wilson somewhat acknowledges by modifying his statements with “much” and “the greater part of” (241)).

2. Do you agree that humans are “prone to be moral” (247)? Why or why not?

3. What do you think of the statement that “A society that condemns homosexuality harms itself” (254)? How does Wilson support this claim?

4. What do you think of the idea that morals have their roots in biology? Is that compatible with a Christian view of morality?

Discussion

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about ideas presented in this week’s assigned chapters.

1.

2.
Module 5: Wilson on Religion, Art, and What’s Next for Humankind

Chapters covered: “The Origins of Religion,”

Reading and Reflection

“The Origins of Religion”

1. Why do you think there are so few Christians in the elite ranks of scientists? Is it a matter of incompatibility between science and faith? A perceived incompatibility between the two? A bias against Christians in the field?

2. What do you think Wilson means by the statement, “There are circumstances under which intelligent, well-educated people equate their identity and the meaning of their lives with their religion, and this is one of them” (257)? Do you think that this is true?

   Suggested Answer: Wilson is not claiming to be a member of an organized religion. Rather, he is defining religion fairly loosely, including his self-identity and the object of his life in this definition. God is less commonly the head of religions in the developed world; man is striving to take His place.

3. What do you think of the statement, “The illogic of religions is not a weakness in them, but their essential strength” (259)? Is this accurate? Does Wilson substantiate his claims? Do you think that the summary of Christianity he includes later in this paragraph is accurate?

   Suggested Answer: This can be a tough chapter to read; Wilson is ruthless. However, the claims he makes are not well supported by science. He relies primarily on vague and largely inaccurate portrayals of religions (primarily Christianity) to make his case, which does not endear him to any religious people who might otherwise be inclined to listen to what he has to say.
4. What do you think of Wilson’s assessment of John’s vision and the book of Revelation? Have you heard that Revelation is a product of a drug-induced fantasy (or mental unbalance) previously?

Suggested Answer: Another poorly substantiated claim by Wilson. This is speculation, albeit speculation that is not unique to Wilson. Here, Wilson departs from science and enters the realm of conjecture, which he visits with some frequency throughout the book. To a degree, conjecture is needed because we lack sufficient observable evidence with which to do good science. It is interesting that Wilson finds Revelation to be out of line with the rest of the New Testament. Why would he care? Does this mean that he finds the rest of the New Testament to be reasonable? Why might Wilson be so keen to pick apart Christianity?

“The Origins of the Creative Arts”

1. What do you think of Wilson’s assertion that modern humans are still drawn to the environments that our early human ancestors developed in?

“A New Enlightenment”

1. What do you think of the idea that religions are an aspect of tribalism?

Suggested Answer: It seems that humans are biologically predisposed to be religious. Wilson does not provide any reasons to explain why humans must use religions to unite themselves rather than any other form of tribe unification (such as a tribe origins story, or a holiday, or a tribe-specific craft). Why might humans be necessarily religious? Perhaps this predisposition to believe (and want to believe) in God is a reflection of the “God shaped hole” in each of us, which is alluded to by theologians. Maybe God caused us to evolve in such a way that we naturally yearned to find our identity in Him, and we perverted that longing, resorting to other gods instead. Religion being related to evolutionary success does not negate the value of religion or the validity of faith, as Wilson would like to insinuate. He assumes that,
by providing a potential biological mechanism for religious inclinations, he has put a nail in the coffin of faith.

2. Are religions necessarily “stultifying and divisive” (292)?

Suggested Answer: No. Wilson clearly has not had experience with Christian traditions that pride themselves on their intellectualism. Religious conflict is a real thing, but religion is not the primary source of divisive behaviour. Also, in reference to the end of this paragraph: it is a little ridiculous to suggest that a missionary of a religion should not be fully committed to the goodness and validity of that religion. If the missionary truly believes that the religion he is advocating for is mediocre at best, he probably should not be trying to convert other people to that religion.

3. What do you think of E. O Wilson? What do you think of the way he ends his book? Do you think that Wilson’s strong feelings against religion are necessarily a part of evolutionary psychology?

Discussion

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about ideas presented in this week’s assigned chapters.

1.

2.
Bibliography