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Groping for Groups

E. O. WILSON'S *THE SOCIAL CONQUEST OF EARTH* and Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind*[1] have enough philosophical overlap to merit dual consideration. Wilson is one of the titanic figures in evolutionary psychology, a field he himself generated as "sociobiology" almost forty years ago, and I have written about him before in this journal with much veneration and enthusiasm. I was thus undaunted by the fact that his book had received extremely negative reviews from some of the biggest names in evolutionary studies. Haidt has a somewhat different, but impassioned, spin on Wilson's very subject, the contested notion of "group selection," a conception of Darwinian natural selection that is opposed to the reigning orthodoxy of kin selection and inclusive fitness. Group selection, in Wilson's case, connects with his theory of "eusociality." "*Homo sapiens*," Wilson writes, "is what biologists call 'eusocial,' meaning group members containing multiple generations and prone to perform altruistic acts as part of their division of labor." Haidt's book, a sociology more than sociobiology, is a pumped-up version of Rodney King's famous plea, "Can we all get along?," set off after the riots from his brutal videotaped beating by the Los Angeles police. "I mean, we're all stuck here for a while. Let's try to work it out," King explained, words now raised to the level of mythology as Haidt's closing sentence.

But Wilson's final words at the end of his own book are even more preposterously utopian:

> So, now I will confess my own blind faith. Earth, by the twenty-second century, can be turned, if we so wish, into a permanent paradise for human beings, or at least the strong beginnings of one. We will do a lot more damage to ourselves and the rest of life along the way, but out of an ethic of simple decency to one another, the unrelenting application of reason, and acceptance of what we truly are, our dreams will finally come home to stay.

Compared to a fantasy such as this, Haidt's channeling of Rodney King looks pretty modest. But how did we come to such a pass and what are the issues at hand?

[1] THE SOCIAL CONQUEST OF EARTH, by *Edward O. Wilson*. Liveright Publishing Corporation. $27.95. THE RIGHTEOUS MIND: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion, by *Jonathan Haidt*. Pantheon. $28.95.

Wilson's opening words in Chapter One, "The Human Condition," are taken from inscriptions on a painting by Paul Gauguin from his Tahitian phase, translated as "Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?" Right from the start, we seem to be promised that answers will be supplied in this book. For Wilson, unsurprisingly, these answers are not to be found in creation myths, religion, or even philosophy; instead, he believes, science in general and Darwinian science in particular are for now the best knowledge tools we have. "We are an evolutionary chimera, living on intelligence steered by the demands of animal instinct." This is the conflict that needs to be solved, perhaps by some sort of reconciliation of opposites to be tackled by both Wilson and Haidt. Unlike the "social insects," such as ants, bees, and termites, that have been around for the past 100 million years—creatures that know the ropes for survival on this planet and are the subject of half of Wilson's book—we *Homo sapiens* are just new kids on the evolutionary block from several hundred thousand years ago, prone to mess things up (e.g., destroying our planet) by acting against our own most profound requirements for survival. How did we get here so fast—as godlike apes, according to Wilson—and with such great success (as one might feel after watching the latest Mars lander on TV)? And why does Wilson press the "eusociality" of insects throughout despite the seemingly bad fit between us and them?

Though no eusocial genes have been discovered for our species, Wilson gets around this presumably fatal deficiency by stressing "multilevel natural selection" and "group selection," which he claims do the work of eusociality for *Homo sapiens.*

> At the higher level of the two relevant levels of biological organization [i.e., the "organismic" and the "eusocial"], groups compete with groups, favoring cooperative social traits among members of the same group. At the lower level, members of the same group compete with one another in a manner that leads to self-serving behavior. The opposition between the two levels of natural selection has resulted in a chimeric genotype in each person. It renders each of us part saint and part sinner.

Wilson's view is that eusociality is what has conferred our biological preeminence as the social conquerors of this planet. Like insects, we live our lives from "fortified nest sites"—in our case, villages, cities, nation states—out of which overlapping generations acquire loosely assigned roles and tasks in order to cooperate for solving the needs of the nest, which are far more important than those of any individual. Unlike insects, we started out as small tightly knit tribes that by now are vast nation states, evolving in the process large body size, grasping hands, an omnivorous diet including meat, the development of fire, language, and large brains that pass along information and technologies to spur the growth and spread of culture. Eusocial as we may be,

however, Wilson repeatedly warns us that there are critical differences between us and the Hymenoptera, or highly social ants, bees, and wasps. Unlike those insects, whose queens "can give birth to 150 million daughter workers" during a life of maybe a dozen years, *Homo sapiens* are capable of reproducing and evolving by means of individualized natural selection. Insect daughter workers don't reproduce and are identical "robotic offspring guided by instinct."

Thus, by page 20 of this book its founding concept is already shattered and its basis continues to crumble despite Wilson's repeated assertions to the contrary. The eusociality of various species of insects is produced by their unusual and rare type of genome, in a word, by their unique innate program. The individual members of insect societies are as lacking in individuality as iron filings drawn to a magnet. As Wilson moves through densely informative chapters reflecting his expertise on insects, accumulated during a lifetime, we seem less and less to resemble them. Our own putative eusociality, the book's repeatedly applied therapeutic glue, seems less and less sticky. Things fall apart.

One of Wilson's projects is to demolish William Hamilton's commanding theory of kin selection and inclusive fitness, long held to explain the sociality of humans and other forms of life, and to supplant it with the heretofore largely rejected notion of evolutionary group selection. Hamilton explained altruism (Wilson's "eusociality") as based on the innate drive to perpetuate our "selfish" genes (to use Richard Dawkins' celebrated term) beyond our own offspring through more and more distant relatives who would assure the genes' survival and spread. Although Wilson concedes that within a tribe there may be "cheaters," Bernie Madoffs, if you will, who don't give a damn about fellow members, he insists that when push comes to shove, tribes coalesce into a unified force to overcome threats from other tribes. This coalescent tendency is less the result of "kin selection" to deploy selfish genes, he believes, than the result of group selection to bind us together to out-compete other groups. For Wilson, group selection, in this sense, is the rock on which civilization has been founded.

But the critics have been hostile. Steven Mithen, extolling Wilson's career before launching into a demolishing review filled with regrets, reports that when Wilson and two colleagues published a precursor article on group selection in *Nature* in 2011, 150 biologists co-authored a reply in protest.[2] Steven Pinker, in a long attack on group selection, writes, "The gene-centered explanation of eusociality depends on the relatedness of sterile workers and soldiers to a small number of queens who are capable of passing along their genes, and of course that reproductive system is absent from human groups."[3] Richard Dawkins, also in attack mode, writes, "It is important not to confuse this question—as

[2] Steven Mithen, "How Fit is E. O. Wilson's Evolution?," *The New York Review of Books*, June 21, 2012.

[3] Steven Pinker, "The False Allure of Group Selection," Edge, June 18, 2012, http://edge.org/conversation/the-false-allure-of-group-selection.

Wilson regrettably does—with the question of whether individuals benefit from living in groups. Of course they do."[4]

At the end of the first half of *The Social Conquest of Earth* (the chapters in which he argues his main theme), Wilson lists once again the features of insect eusociality and comments: "Given that the last two steps [that look like group selection] occur only in the insects and other invertebrates, how, then, did the human species achieve its own unique, culture-based social condition? What mark has the combined genetic and cultural process put on human nature?" To answer this initiating question of his project, he concludes the book with a series of chapters on human nature, language, morality, art, religion, and whatnot. These chapters are engaging but lightweight and, more importantly, tangential. They veer ever further from his subject. Group selection comes to seem like a soup of complex ingredients in which all the overcooked vegetables have lost their flavor.

Almost every claim Wilson makes about some aspect of human behavior as group-selected seems little more than a string of *fiat lux!* buzzwords, inscrutably dark in the absence of persuasive evidence or argument. For example, "Substantial evidence now exists that human social behavior arose genetically by multilevel evolution. If this interpretation is correct . . . we can expect a continuing conflict between components of behavior favored by individual selection and those favored by group selection." That is, individual selection within a group creates competitiveness, and group selection between groups creates selfless behavior. But Wilson takes it all back anyhow by reminding us that we are not eusocial robots generated by queens that produce millions of identical progeny. The human "groups" to which he keeps referring are associations produced by culture, dependent upon the genomes of individual people. From what I can see, there are religious groups, neo-Nazi groups, gun-crazed groups backed by the NRA, athletic groups, music groups, financial groups, academic groups, even nation-state groups (the kind Wilson really has in mind), but none of them betrays any magically sprayed genomic aerosol that "selects for" them as a group in one fell swoop. Human groups are not iron filings formed willy-nilly by a centripetal force, call it what you will. Each human trait has been "naturally selected for" insofar as it serves as a vehicle for certain "selfish" genes. These contribute to the development of individual life histories shaped by many choices, most of them the largely unwitting influences of culture. Or as the critics keep reminding us, a fleet herd of deer is only a herd of fleet deer.

Wilson's most expert chapters are on insect ecology, but they could probably have been left out altogether, even though they have been paraded as the raison d'être for the entire enterprise. Human beings turn out to be very dissimilar to insects, eusocial or not. The book

[4] Richard Dawkins, "The Descent of Edward Wilson," *Prospect*, May 24, 2012, http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/edward-wilson-social-conquest-earth-evolutionary-errors-origin-species.

considered as a whole is a collection of philosophy, sociology, evolutionary science, entomology, and wishful thinking, structurally incoherent as well as shifting and unclear in its use of key terms. Every time the phrases "multilevel selection" and "group selection" are used they occur within a muzzy rhetorical smokescreen.

The final chapter, "A New Enlightenment," offers little that is new or enlightening. Instead, a series of banalities. "Why, then, is it wise to question the myths and gods of organized religion? . . . . Commitment to a particular faith is by definition religious bigotry. . . . Yet it is foolish to think that organized religions can be pulled up anytime soon by their deep roots and replaced with a rationalist passion for morality. More likely it will happen gradually, as it is occurring in Europe. . . ." Ecology, science, rationality, are offered as "solutions," but we've heard it all before, here and elsewhere. Wilson's description of our superstitions, stupidities, and savageries can hardly be naysaid—but it does not take a book about insect eusociality and group selection to arrive at these shopworn conclusions, especially when Wilson *seems* to be implying that the insects don't suffer from such self-destructive idiocies because they have been robotized into group perfection. And what are we to make of the passage I have already quoted above: "Earth, by the twenty-second century, can be turned, if we so wish, into a permanent paradise for human beings"? If we so wish what? To be group-selected in factories in the style of Huxley's *Brave New World?*

Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion,* was published around the same time as *The Social Conquest of Earth* but was able to refer to earlier versions of its contents. It can be viewed as an appendix of sorts to Wilson's book that tries to open up his generalities into a primer of specificities. Haidt's introduction tells us that politics and religion, as the expression of our "underlying moral psychology," is what this book is about. He jumps right into the debate about group selection vs. individualized kin selection and even makes use of ants and bees in the Wilsonian manner.

Haidt prepares us for the book's founding principles by outlining its three homiletic parts: the first develops the observation that "*intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second*" (italics in original). This is recast along the way as, "*the mind is divided, like a rider on an elephant, and the rider's job is to serve the elephant.*" Although this principle is an accurate recasting of Hume's distrust of Reason as a vehicle for post-factum rationalizations of gut responses, Haidt's treatment of all points of view as forms of righteous emotional subjectivity, with few valid means of defending judgments about virtue or vice, is quite a stretch. To avoid self-righteousness, he seems to think I should learn to love, or at least *understand sympathetically* (as in "Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner"?), people like Michele Bachmann, Rick Santorum, Rush Limbaugh, the NRA, evangel groups that paraded outside a Tucson massacre with signs warning us that it's God's punishment for gay marriage, or that it's OK to burn the Quran even though it will set off

conflagrations in the Middle East. In other words, Haidt's second principle is that "*there's more to morality than* [preventing] *harm and* [promoting] *fairness,*" an attack on the criteria behind liberal ethics as he sees them. This could serve as an implied defense of "my country right or wrong" (even by Nazis?) and as support for religious dogmatism and church power. It could justify even child molestation by priests and their reductions of women to baby-making factories, to ethnic cleansing, to slavery, and other atavisms of putative "group selection." These shibboleths may have bound us together tens of thousands of years ago for survival within our own group of hunter-gatherers, who outran bison to exhaustion and then collectively stabbed them to death with their weapons. But what about today's Middle Eastern patriarchs who force thirteen-year-old girls into marriages, who cut their clitorises, stone them for "disgracing" their families by being raped? And American "religious" right-to-life types who shed tears over fetuses but have no clue as to the complexities of adult consciousness or the agonies of unwanted children that radiate into vast webs of family and social dysfunction, poverty, and crime? Is it self-righteous to disapprove? Or are there some valid criteria for practical ethics after all?

The third part of this book tells us that "*morality binds and blinds,*" with its homily that "*human beings are 90 percent chimp and 10 percent bee,*" which amounts more or less to a distrust of morality altogether. (You're either an individualist savage or a robotic defender of the hive.) As for righteousness, "I want to show you that an obsession with righteousness (leading inevitably to self-righteousness) is a normal human condition. It is a feature of our evolutionary design, not a bug or error that crept into minds that would otherwise be objective and rational."

Homo sapiens gradually emerged from millions of years of struggle for survival by means of savagery, again and again set back by the mindlessness of group preservation, its fear of a reflective knowledge that disrupts the immediate certainties of the guts. We're here today because of an unbroken reproductive line from ancient barbarism to ours. (Thank you, Australopithecines!) Steven Pinker, particularly in his 2011 mega-book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined,* has been assuring us that civilization, since its dawn around the time of farming and settlements, has softened some of our barbaric roots, reducing violence and ameliorating human life. And he may very well be right. It has even become possible to use reason beyond its mere instrumentality for survival. But as we see today, intellectuals are still the first to be slaughtered by the reactionaries of revolutionary movements. In America, anti-intellectualism can be seen every day (as "anti-elitism") among the reactionary revolutionaries of the Tea Party, even as they assault the founding moral principles so laboriously nurtured, refined, and enlarged throughout the two-hundred-plus years of U.S. history.

Haidt identifies himself as a well-intentioned liberal who is not exactly *celebrating* barbarity. He is well read and writes with much skill. But although he wants to put in a good word for the gut-driven thought-

lessness of groups motivated by the primal genetic instincts that got us here, the barbarities that enabled our survival as small tribal units in the distant past won't make for survival in the global high-tech society of the twenty-first century. After alluding to conservative Republicans' respect for tribal loyalty, both patriotic and religious, as well as "Christian ideas about sanctity and sexuality," he writes, "The moral vision offered by the Democrats since the 1960s, in contrast, seemed narrow and too focused on helping victims and fighting for the rights of the oppressed." (God forbid!) Most liberal readers of this book will feel that with friends like Haidt, who needs enemies? He keeps reminding us that he is not some callous and stupid right-wing sonofabitch—but a pampered leftist bourgeois with all the advantages. Maybe he's feeling guilty. But with all his knowledge he hasn't benefited from the lessons of history. Sleeping with the enemy for a few years didn't work for Obama. Pacts with the devil, sometimes referred to as "Munich," have a way of backfiring, and petting mad dogs rarely prevents being bitten.

"Culture," in its various concrete manifestations over many millennia, has been striving to redirect the energies fueling our atavistic tribal emotions—with some limited success, as Pinker tries to show. Sex, the most powerful energy of all, is why we happen to have survived this long. Today, it pervades everything as porn: politics, religion, television, the arts, and sports. But maybe porn, along with birth control and other diversionary tactics, can help this redirection of drives that look increasingly suicidal. As for bellicosity, decades before the saber-rattling catastrophes of Bush and Cheney, we lucked out with John F. Kennedy. Although *his* resistance to the atavisms of sex may have been weak, he saved us, nonetheless, from the warrior instincts of his associates that brought us to the verge of Armageddon at the time of the Cuban missile crisis. What if those tribal energies could be tamed and exploited as civic heroism, urban renewal, disaster relief, climate control, and international social services, while feeding capitalism, the arts, and even perhaps a new ethics of survival? The ancient advantages of parochial human tribalism may now be in desperate need of being selected *against*, a task for culture, not genetics, even as Wilson and Haidt seem to cheer on the ancient atavisms like football coaches strategizing for more concussions. Given the miscegenations of today's global culture, which are slowly dissolving the genetic distinctiveness of ethnic groups and their grounds for tribal rivalries, a salutary hybridization may actually be taking place. Even so, nothing I can envision will ever open the doors to the impossible stasis of Wilson's "permanent paradise," whether in the twenty-second century or any other.