

Our Place in the Sun

On Human Nature

by Edward O. Wilson

Harvard University Press

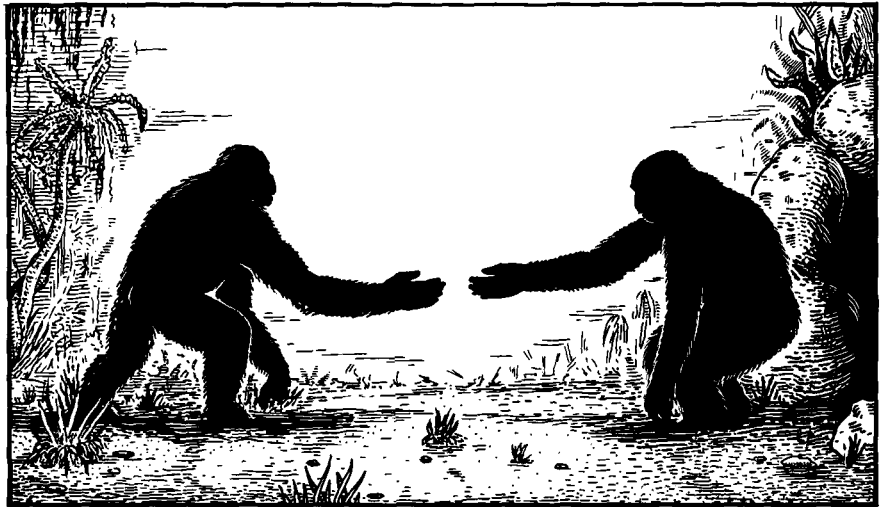
260 pp., \$12.50

Reviewed by Terrence Des Pres

WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR the origin of human society? A thunderbolt, in Vico's view; or as Boulanger thought, a great flood. Rousseau envisioned a drawing-room setting in which savages, observing due process, gathered to produce a contract. But Rousseau's ceremony presupposed its outcome, and resort to deluge and storm suggests the extremes to which imagination goes when evidence is lacking. "In the beginning" is an infinitely tempting phrase, and until very recently the time and manner of this mythical starting point were anybody's guess. But with the publication, in 1975, of Edward O. Wilson's *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, speculation gave way to controversy within the framework of an answer no longer in doubt. There never was a clear beginning. Human social order emerged from prehuman forms of society, mammalian in general, primate in particular, that evolved for hundreds of thousands of years before man.

The consequences of this discovery are radical. If human society grew from animal prototypes, then men share similarities with at least some of the higher mammals; and although man has existed long enough (over a million years) to turn his endowment to uniquely human ends, the facts remain that our deepest nature is genetically determined, that we may use culture to transcend much but never all of our biological foundation, and that finally—as anyone who contemplates death or the violence of totalitarian regimes might see—there is a broad but finite range of potential that defines our humanness and circumscribes our dreams.

As a science, sociobiology is in its infancy, but the disciplines it draws upon—principally ethology (the study of social behavior in animals), ecology (the study of populations in relation to their environments), and genetics (the study of inherited traits)—have produced a rapidly expanding body of information, the momentum of which is already sufficient to identify this "new naturalism," as Wilson calls it, as a dramatic challenge to prevailing theories of man as a social creature. The problem for most of us is that a work of science



WALTER GURNO

like Wilson's *Sociobiology* maintains a level of language and method remote to the interested layman.

And thus the importance of *On Human Nature*. Although it lacks the lofty rigor of the treatise that preceded it, Wilson's new book is a good deal more accessible, indeed exactly what was needed by readers who would appreciate a clear exposition of Wilson's key ideas, supported by thoughtful examples, without dependence on technical terms or mathematical models.

Perhaps necessarily *On Human Nature* upsets, or at least challenges, many accepted notions. Aggression, for example, is neither a tragic flaw nor an overwhelming instinct; much aggressive behavior is learned, warlike societies can become peace-loving and vice versa, and "when a count is made of the number of murders committed per thousand individuals per year, human beings are well down on the list of violently aggressive creatures." Seeing altruism as the confluence of sacrifice and self-interest, Wilson describes sainthood as "cheerfully subordinate to the biological imperatives above which it is supposed to rise." And sex, it turns out, counts less for reproduction than for the human bonding it inspires, which "argues for a more liberal sexual morality." Only on religion is Wilson weak; he says little not earlier noted by sociologists like Durkheim and Weber.

In his central argument, Wilson stays directly on target. The human mind is a machine that selects, from its reservoir of possible reactions, the best response to conditions it meets in the world. It is, as Wilson says, "an alert scanner of the environment that approaches certain kinds of choices and not others in the first place, then innately leans toward one option as opposed to others." In a given case, the options at our disposal

are those we have inherited through thousands of generations of natural selection, and Wilson consistently uses terms like "predisposition," "prepared learning," and "behavioral repertoire" to describe the flexibility, which is to say the moral character, of our innate resources.

Wilson knows that the sort of reductionism his critics foist upon him, claiming that he sees human action as "insect-like, confined to a single channel," is simply not true. Nor are creativity and freedom lost: "Rather than specify a single trait, human genes prescribe the capacity to develop a certain array of traits." Within such fixed but rich parameters, human culture builds, magnifies, curtails, and transforms, until existing patterns of behavior are so thoroughly a mix of biology and culture that "we need new descriptive techniques to replace the archaic distinction between nature and nurture."

The list of properties native to the human species, found in every known culture, is very long. It includes not only fundamentals like law, language, tool-making, and funeral rites, but also dancing and adornment, joking and dream interpretation, gift giving and table manners. Wilson sees no evidence for racial divergence, and he comes out strongly in favor of equality. As a statement about mankind, Wilson's book celebrates "a single human nature." Perhaps most compelling is the idea of our ingrained humanity, a sort of "biological refractoriness" which insures that perversions like slavery cannot last in the long run, and guarantees us a firm if less than godly ground, a basic sanity inspired by life itself. ●

Terrence Des Pres is the author of *The Survivor: Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*. He lives in Hamilton, N.Y.

Sixties Survivors

Downriver

by Peter Collier
Holt, Rinehart & Winston
336 pp., \$9.95

Happy All the Time

by Laurie Colwin
Knopf, 224 pp., \$7.95

Like Father

by David Black
Dembner/Dodd, Mead
256 pp., \$8.95

Reviewed by Ross Feld

YOU'RE IN YOUR thirties now, like the authors of these three novels, and subject to fits of puzzlement. The Seventies seem to you like a waiting room that gets very quiet the minute you walk in. And as for the raucous Sixties, full of zest, hype, fear, and chance—what stuff were they really made of that they so submissively channeled down into the Wharton School of Business, *est*, the mellow sound, and *Star Wars*? How easily the times shift from *anything goes to everything gives*.

(It may be of passing interest that of the three books discussed here, the two by men grope around in best Sixties-survivor style, while that by a woman—a more experienced novelist, granted—sails ahead with the greatest pluck.)

Peter Collier's *Downriver*, a first novel, goes wrong in extremely right-headed and sympathetic ways. Collier's hero, Cabell Hart, is a disgruntled refugee from a Symbionese-style Berkeley cadre (for whose revolutionary sake he even had himself vasectomized, made "a capon for the Left"). Now he's living quietly in Oakland, working in a hardware store and wondering what all the fuss was about. When word comes that his father is dying of melanoma, Cabell realizes that if he can't be a father, he ought to at least seize one last opportunity to be a son; he hurries down to Los Angeles, all solicitude and pain. He and his father take a last trip together to the original Hart homestead in South Dakota, borrowing on the past to cushion the immediate future's foreclosure. Within a month his father dies, and Cabell journeys to northern California to inform his estranged hippie sister, who is living in the backwoods with her young son. But she, Cabell finds, is dead too, raped and murdered by local no-goods (including the police chief) who've covered up their foulness with

ease. The rest of the book details Cabell's search for the killers, the violence he suffers at their hands when he does find them, and his eventual and gory revenge.

Families, Indians, the Panthers, the Left, ecological survival, abiding values—Collier is determined to touch every generational base. To get at them, he shifts into three gears. Intimate: the father's death, the son's guilt and grief, touching and graphic. Abstract: "He is flooded with sadness by this blocked latency, this tragedy of love chewed up in the contradictory motion of large imperatives." Primal: a whole (and altogether embarrassing) last section where Cabell, dumped injured into a ravine, turns into hallucinatory protoplasm: kill, eat, snort, grunt.

But octopus-style or no, Collier's attempt to squeeze recent history for its meager juice feels authentic. There are no caricatures: He cares too much. Every which way, *Downriver* searches for the message, the lesson it's sure *has* to be there, somewhere.

Laurie Colwin's approach in *Happy All the Time* is to elbow right past the agonizing: Everything that Collier stirs up, she bottles and stores offstage. Her characters do not suffer their thirties; they *use* them, like people who've received a new, vaguely untrustworthy, but intriguing gift. Guido Morris and Vincent Cardworthy are third cousins and best friends. First as graduate students in Cambridge, Mass., then as professionals in New York (Guido manages the family's arts philanthropies, Vincent is a city planner specializing in garbage utilization), they go looking for future wives in the refreshingly blithe belief that "one is always foolish until one is correct"—the carefully polished attitude we used to get from the high-spirited, tuxedoed boy/men of Forties movies.

Guido (Cary Grant) falls for Holly Sturgis (Constance Bennett)—"neat as a cupcake" and the ideal mate for a man who takes it wholly for granted that "desire was mere shorthand for aesthetics and intuition." Holly is nigh perfect—"no grand schemes, no secret visions...no ambitions to speak of, except to live nicely from day to day," an impeccable cook, hostess, and, in time, mother. She keeps her own counsel with such mysterious grace that Guido, gaga, would be as happy to sleep with her clothes as with her body.

Vincent (Jimmy Stewart) nets someone slightly more problematical: Misty Berkowitz (Katherine Hepburn, only Jewish)—very smart, a linguist by training, protected by a brass-tack wit,

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—*Publishers Weekly*.



PEOPLE OF THE LAKE

Richard E. Leakey
and Roger Lewin

3rd Printing; \$10.95.

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