Theological Reflections on E. O. Wilson's "Consilience"

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This book is a tease, an exciting read, and makes a valuable contribution to the continuing scientific efforts to understand ourselves. However, the book's journalistic style leads the reader, at times, to appreciate its popular rather than scientific character. These theological reflections are more accurately 'theological reactions.' They are a more or less impromptu assessment of and reaction to Wilson's ideas.

In Chapter 1, Wilson suggests that we ought to accept the objective reality of scientific thinking rather than revelation to satisfy our religious hunger. He rejects the idea that there is an independent facet to reality and believes that ultimately reality, including spiritual reality, originates in physical matter. In Chapter 2 of his book he suggests that consilience understood as a metaphysical world view is the way to satisfy religious hunger. In Chapter 3, entitled The Enlightenment, he states that what we are and how we think are the products of evolution, not the purpose of evolution. This suggests that no outside agent directs evolution. Wilson makes two very insightful and worthwhile suggestions in Chapter 4. First, he suggests dividing humanity into scientific and prescientific cultures. Secondly, he suggests that science is not a philosophy or belief system but a combination of a mental operations. Scientific and prescientific cultures as a dividing point and science as a combination of mental operations offer two new ways to understand human development. Wilson suggests that science diagnoses and realigns the misalignment of outer reality and its representation in the mind. Prior to the Enlightenment this task had traditionally belonged to theology and philosophy. Since the Enlightenment the secular sciences have undertaken the task as well. Further, Wilson believes that theology has defaulted in its task. Chapter 6 presents two challenging, but disturbing, thoughts to traditional thinking. First, that mental processes have a physical grounding and second, that the brain has been assembled to survive rather than understand itself. These thoughts challenge long–held philosophical and theological beliefs about the constitution of the human brain and mind. In Chapter 7 Wilson suggests that a causal explanatory network, known as
consilience, ought to be applied to the natural and social sciences to aid in the ‘unity of knowledge,’ which he has given as the subtitle to his book.

In effect, Chapters 1 through 7, provide grist for the mill. They provide an opportunity to investigate a possible union of knowledge between the natural sciences and social sciences.

In Chapter 8, The Fitness of Human Nature, Wilson discusses nothing new from a theological point of view. He attempts to account for human nature solely within the physical order, that is, without positing an independent (separate) spiritual or transcendent order in his attempt. Similar philosophical undertakings have been attempted in the past. These attempts, known as materialism or positivism, suggest that the highest form of knowledge is a description of sensory phenomena. Wilson’s book is a variation on this theme. He says that with the science and arts combined, we have it all and that “the archaic world of myth and passion ... can be understood more completely as a physical entity” (Wilson 1998:237). Rather than Wilson’s approach, there is a more appropriate approach to understanding knowledge in its scientific and theological forms. Watts and Williams (1988) explore scientific and theological knowledge in their book, The Psychology of Religious Knowing. Unlike Wilson, they do not conclude that religious knowing is rooted in the physical but rather that: “Religious knowing involves, not so much coming to know a separate religious world, as coming to know the religious dimension of the everyday world” (Watts & Williams 1988: 151). The religious dimension is a correlation of the everyday (physical) world, but not necessarily rooted in it.

In Chapter 9, The Social Sciences, Wilson writes: “Discourse among scholars, in short, can proceed without worrying about consilience...but to resist linking discoveries by causal explanation is to diminish their credibility” (Wilson 1998: 190). To remove theology, which Wilson believes provides no causal explanation, as a knowledge system from his explanation and understanding of consilience does not necessarily improve credibility. Diminished credibility among the scholars does not come about through their resistance to consilience but rather from the impoverished way scholars have understood or interpreted knowledge systems. Improved credibility comes by way of re-interpretation, not deletion. In fact,
consilience in its parsimonious attempt to understand ourselves may have lead thinkers into the trap of reductionism,

Wilson articulates a very convincing theory in Chapter 10, *The Arts and Their Interpretation*, in which he outlines an holistic methodology for science. However, in keeping with his position of deleting transcendental philosophies from his schema he omits an organized faith life from his list of most distinctive human qualities. He writes: “The most distinctive qualities of the human species are extremely high intelligence, language, culture, and reliance on long-term social contracts” (Wilson 1998:224). To my mind, the lack of an organized faith life as a distinctive quality suggests that his methodology is somewhat less than holistic.

In Chapter 11, *Ethics and Religion*, Wilson makes no distinction between ethics and morality. This may be defensible, in his case, since by his own admission, he “had been raised a Southern Baptist” (Wilson 1988:5). As such, he may have been raised in a tradition which does not appreciate the classical theological distinction between ethics and moral theology. Bullock and Stallybrass (1977:401) define moral theology as: “A term, more familiar in Catholicism than in Protestantism, covering the discussion of the relevance of religious, especially Christian, belief to ethical problems.” One must, therefore, interpret Wilson's thinking and such conclusions as: “And to be as fair as possible, I have drawn [theistic and empiricist] arguments from the most closely reasoned sources in theology and philosophy of which I am aware” (Wilson 1998:241); in light of his own theological or religious upbringing in the Protestant tradition.

Wilson’s final chapter, *To What End*, restricts the notion of humanity to the development of the laws of physics. This is somewhat disappointing in light of the strides made in philosophical and theological understanding in Christian thinking since the Second Vatican Council. In short, the causal schema advocated by Wilson does not put human understanding any further ahead but keeps it confined. to a less sophisticated philosophical and theological way of thinking. Notwithstanding Frost’s (1998) positive and rather favourable interpretation of this chapter, were scientists and theologians to follow Wilson’s model they would be in danger of ultimately truncating knowledge. Frost (1998:41) writes: “Reality is not centered on human life, but reality and life find a centeredness in us.” To what degree this
understanding is compatible with Wilson's (1998:266) statement: “The central idea of the consilience world view is that all tangible phenomena, from the birth of stars to the workings of social institutions, are based on material processes that are ultimately reducible, however long and tortuous the sequences, to the laws of physics”, is debatable. I would doubt that humanity, as a tangible phenomenon, can be reduced to the development of the laws of physics.

From a theological perspective, however, Wilson does make a very encouraging comment. “Profession-bent students should be helped to understand that in the twenty-first century the world will not be run by those who possess mere information alone .... We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom” (Wilson 1998:269).

As Wilson suggests, the case may be made that theology has done poorly in the modern world when it comes to probing the wisdom of creation and the mind of God. However, there is hope that a re-evaluation of the relationship between theology and the social sciences may offer more substantial clues to the human condition in its physical and transcendental aspects. As Wilson says in his concluding sentences to Chapter Five, Ariadne’s Thread: “In time, to complete the biblical allusion, we will come face to face with it all -- and perhaps see it clearly” (Wilson 1998:95). One wonders, however, if in the meantime what we ought to seek is a ‘unity of wisdom’ arising from a ‘union of knowledge’ rather than Wilson's notion of ‘unity of knowledge’ arising from Consilience.

REFERENCES

