Millis



**Your new book, *The Meaning of Human Existence*, addresses a huge question. What inspired you to tackle it?**
I think it's time to be audacious. The central questions of religion and philosophy are three in number: where do we come from, what are we and where are we going? Usually these are just the beginnings of long discussions, but that's no longer the case. We now have a pretty good picture of how humanity arose in Africa, what intermediate forms existed, the rate at which these forms evolved and the circumstances in which they evolved.

So I can say, right now, that of those three great questions, we have most of the answer for where we come from. And in this book I take up the question: what are we? We're starting to close in on that one. We need to know where we came from and what we are to have the self-understanding to sensibly plan where we're going. Right now, we don't have any idea where we're going.

**Would you say there is a lot of denial about where humanity is heading?**
Well, there's immense disagreement. One of my favourite quotations is from the late French author Jean Bruller, who wrote under the pseudonym Vercors. He said that all of man's problems derive from the fact that we do not know what we are, and cannot agree on what to become.

**So will you examine humanity's future next?**
I'm writing a trilogy. The first was *The Social Conquest of Earth*, which dealt with where we come from. *The Meaning of Human Existence* deals with what we are. And the final part, *The End of the Anthropocene*, will look at where we are going.

The major theme of that upcoming book will be that we are destroying Earth in a way that people haven't appreciated enough, and that we are eroding away the biosphere through species extinction, like the death of a thousand cuts. I want to examine the new ideology of the anthropocene – namely those who believe that the fight for biodiversity is pretty much lost and we should just go on humanising Earth until it is peopled from pole to pole; a planet by, of and for humanity. It sounds good, but it's suicidal.

**PROFILE**
Entomologist **E. O. Wilson** is a professor emeritus at Harvard University. He is the founder of the E. O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation, based in Durham, North Carolina. His latest book is *The Meaning of Human Existence* (Liveright, 2014)

**Why is biodiversity loss suicidal for humans?**
The biosphere is an extremely complex system, and razor thin: if you look at it from the side, from orbit, you can't even see it with unaided vision. That's where we live, and that's what produced us, plastered on the surface of our planet. We were not just created separately in some manner and then lowered into the biosphere. Everything about us – our minds, our bodies – is conditioned to exist in those exact conditions created by our biosphere.

The beautiful equilibrium of the living world is a result of all the species, plants, animals and microorganisms around us. As it is eroded away, the living world is almost certainly going to reach a tipping point where its equilibrium is going to decay and unravel. And when that happens, the whole thing collapses – and we collapse with it.

**Why does our species seem to ignore scientific warnings about Earth's future?**
I think primarily it's our tribal structure. All the ideologies and religions have their own answers for the big questions, but these are usually bound as a dogma to some kind of tribe. Religions in particular feature supernatural elements that other tribes – other faiths – cannot accept. In the US, for example, if you're going to succeed in politics, it's a prerequisite to declare you have a faith, even if some of these faiths are rather bizarre. And what they're saying is "I have a tribe". And every tribe, no matter how generous, benign, loving and charitable, nonetheless looks down on all other tribes. What's dragging us down is religious faith.

> **"Eroding the biosphere with species extinction is like the death of a thousand cuts"**

**Is atheism the answer?**
In fact, I'm not an atheist – I'm a scientist. Atheism is the belief that there is no god, and you declare there is no god: "Come, my fellow atheists, let us march together and conquer those idiots who think there is a god – all these other tribes. We're going to prevail."

I would even say I'm agnostic because I'm a scientist. Being an agnostic means saying, dogmatically, that we will never be able to know, so give it up. The important thing is that it appears that humans, as a species, share a religious impulse. You can call it theological, you can call it spiritual, but humans everywhere have a strong tendency to wonder about whether they're being looked over by a god or not. Practically every person ponders whether they're going to have another life. These are the things that unite humanity.

**If humans have a built-in spiritual yearning, can we do anything about it?**
This transcendent searching has been hijacked by the tribal religions. So I would say that for the sake of human progress, the best thing we could possibly do would be to diminish, to the point of eliminating, religious faiths. But certainly not eliminating the natural yearnings of our species or the asking of these great questions.

**You pioneered sociobiology and discovered pheromone-based communication. But is there a scientific conundrum that you wish you had been the one to crack?**
I would like to have discovered the structure of DNA, but a couple of Brits and an American beat me to it. Everybody would like to make a discovery like that. But the question I most want answered now is whether or not there's life on other planets. I've just got to know!

**From all these big questions to the smallest creatures... I cannot interview the world's best known ant expert without asking: do you have a favourite?**
I do. It's an ant called *Thaumatomyrmex*. In all my travels, I've only seen three. They're very rare. It has teeth on jaws that look like a pitchfork. The teeth are extremely long, and when it closes the jaws, they overlap. In at least one species, the teeth actually meet behind the head. So what does this monster eat? What does it use those teeth for? I just had to know, so I sent an appeal out to younger experts in the field, particularly in South America, where these ants are found.

Eventually they discovered the answer: it feeds on polyxenid millipedes. These millipedes have soft bodies, but they're bristling all over like a porcupine. So the ant drives a spike right through the bristles and nails it. And what we hadn't noticed is that the ant also has thick little brushes [on some of its limbs], and members of the colony use these to scrub the bristles off – like cleaning a chicken – before dividing it up. That's my favourite. ■

Interview by Penny Sarchet