

Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny

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In his bestselling *The Moral Animal*, Robert Wright applied the principles of evolutionary biology to the study of the human mind. Now Wright attempts something even more ambitious: explaining the direction of evolution and human history—and discerning where history will lead us next.

In *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*, Wright asserts that, ever since the primordial ooze, life has followed a basic pattern. Organisms and human societies alike have grown more complex by mastering the challenges of internal cooperation. Wright's narrative ranges from fossilized bacteria to vampire bats, from stone-age villages to the World Trade Organization, uncovering such surprises as the benefits of barbarian hordes and the useful stability of feudalism. Here is history endowed with moral significance—a way of looking at our biological and cultural evolution that suggests, refreshingly, that human morality has improved over time, and that our instinct to discover meaning may itself serve a higher purpose. Insightful, witty, profound, *Nonzero* offers breathtaking implications for what we believe and how we adapt to technology's ongoing transformation of the world. *Nonzero*, from *New Republic* writer Robert Wright, is a difficult and important book—well worth reading—addressing the controversial question of purpose in evolution. Using language suggesting that natural selection is a designer's tool, Wright inevitably draws the conclusion that evolution is goal-oriented (or at least moves toward inevitable ends independently of environmental or contingent variables).

<blockquote>The underlying reason that non-zero-sum games wind up being played well is the same in biological evolution as in cultural evolution. Whether you are a bunch of genes or a bunch of memes, if you're all in the same boat you'll tend to perish unless you are conducive to productive coordination.... Genetic evolution thus tends to create smoothly integrated organisms, and cultural evolution tends to create smoothly integrated groups of organisms.</blockquote>

Admittedly, it's as hard to think clearly about natural selection as it is to think about God, but that makes it just as important to acknowledge our biases and try to exclude them from our conclusions. It is this that makes *Nonzero* potentially unsatisfying to the scientifically literate. Time after time we've seen thinkers try to find in biological evolution a "drive toward complexity" that might explain all sorts of other phenomena from economics to spirituality. Some authors, like Teilhard de Chardin, have much to offer the careful reader who takes pains to read metaphorically. Others—legions of cranks—provide nothing but opaque diatribes culminating in often-bizarre assertions proven to nobody but the author. Wright is much closer to de Chardin along this axis; his anthropological scholarship is particularly noteworthy, and his grasp of world history is excellent. Unfortunately, he has the advocate's willingness to blind himself to disagreeable facts and to muddle over concepts whose clarity would be poisonous to his positions: try to pin him down on what he means by complexity, for example. Still, his thesis that human cultures are historically striving for cooperative, nonzero-sum situations is heartening and compelling; even though it's not supported by biology, it's not knocked down, either. If the reader can work around the undefined assumptions, Wright's charm and obvious interest in planetary survival make *Nonzero* a worthy read. If the first chapter's title—"The Ladder of Cultural Evolution"—makes you cringe, the last one—"You Call This a God?"—will make you smile. --Rob Lightner
"Robert Wright's previous book, *The Moral Animal*, presented a highly readable overview of

evolutionary psychology, the controversial attempt to apply the principles of evolutionary biology to the study of the human mind. In *Nonzero*, Wright attempts something far more ambitious: he extends the evolutionary story both backward and forward in time, arguing that human cultural evolution can be understood as an outgrowth of biological evolution, and that it should eventually lead humankind to higher levels of cooperation on a planetary scale. If this sounds like a tall order, it is--but Wright does an astonishingly effective job of finding directionality in history, not just over the past thousand years, but over the almost four billion years since the beginning of life on earth...Wright has written an extra-ordinarily insightful and thought-provoking book. The idea that there is directionality and purpose to history is one that has come and gone, and now may be coming again thanks to the elegant synthesis he has produced."

-- Francis Fukuyama, Hirst Professor of Public Policy at George Mason University, *Wilson Quarterly*

"In *Nonzero* Wright investigates no less than the mystery of human destiny...This is grandiose stuff, but Wright's cosmology has been enriched by its new inclusiveness. *Nonzero* is a zealous and often thrilling gloss of all of human history--a work of philosophical derring-do from one of America's alpha minds."

-- Virginia Heffernan, *Talk*

"Wright's chapters on the evolution of biological complexity and intelligence -- in addition to being beautifully written and scientifically sound -- are a welcome corrective to current trendy views that understate natural selection's creative power. There is, indeed, as Darwin said, a grandeur in this view of life."

-- James Gould, professor of biology, Princeton University, and author of *Biological Science*

"In *Nonzero*, Robert Wright uses clear, often evocative language to explain and cooperation as driving forces in progressive evolution, and thereby the connection between biology and human history as illuminated by ongoing research."

-- Edward O. Wilson, professor of comparative zoology, Harvard University, and author of *Consilience*

"This is a truly provocative book...I recommend *Nonzero* to any and all readers as a marvelous summary and interpretation of what is now known and surmised about biological and human history on our planet. For an author so well informed scientifically, perhaps the book's most unusual feature is the fact that Wright does not flinch from closing with a chatty, informal yet incisive argument about cosmic meaning and purpose behind the story he unfolds...I greatly admire the book: wonder who Robert Wright may be who knows so much and has thought so clearly; and allows his imagination to range so freely."

-- William H. McNeill, author of *Plagues and Peoples*

"Evolution meets game theory in this upbeat follow-up to Wright's much-praised *The Moral Animal*...This book sends an important message that, as human beings make moral progress, history, in its broadest outlines, is getting better all the time."

-- Publishers Weekly

"This is the book to read to start off the millennium. Leaping from mountaintop to mountaintop, this integrative and inspiring volume is brimming with hope for a positive human future. Religions are made of such stuff."

-- Martin Seligman, professor of psychology, University of Pennsylvania, and author of *Learned Optimism*

Other Books

The Nature of Nature. Generations of researchers have failed to answer our most basic questions about nature: What is everything made of? How do things change and how do they work? What is life? In *The Nature of Nature*, visionary scientist Irv Dardik tackles these questions by introducing his discovery of SuperWaves, a singular wave phenomenon whose design generates what we experience as matter, space, time, motion, energy, and order and chaos. Simply put, the SuperWaves principle states that the fundamental stuff of nature is waves: waves waving within waves, to be exact. Dardik challenges the rationality of accepting a priori that the universe is made of discrete particles. Instead, by drawing from his own discovery of a unique wave behavior and combining it with scientific facts, he shows that every single thing in existence: from quantum particles to entire galaxies: is waves waving in the unique pattern he calls SuperWaves. The discovery of SuperWaves and the ideas behind it, while profound, can be intuitively grasped by every reader, whether scientist or layperson. Touching on everything from quantum physics to gravity, to emergent complexity and thermodynamics, to the origins of health and disease, it shows that our health, and the health of the environment and civilization, depend upon our understanding SuperWaves. *The Nature of Nature* is an absorbing account that combines Dardik's contrarian look at the history of science with philosophical discussion, his own groundbreaking research, and hope for the future.

⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ . *The Discovery of SuperWaves and How It Changes Everything* Irv Dardik, Estee Dardik Lichter. 5 Richard Feynman . *The Character of Physical Law* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press , 1965), 147. Excerpt reprinted with permission from the publisher."