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Reading Response
Science Journalism
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One of my first published newspaper pieces was a preview for my student newspaper of a visit by E.O. Wilson to Oberlin College. This first introduction to his name came not long after the publication of *Conscilience*, a work that ever since has been on my reading list, but which I had not read until now. I recall sitting in our school's main speaking venue listening to Wilson describe thoughts I hadn't considered, for the first time fusing the natural world with the mental one. He described the roots of our conception of beauty and I remember then, in my first semester of college, feeling thrilled by a rush of imagination and the possibility that such imagination coupled with reason could be a powerful force. My previous 13 years in public primary and secondary education hadn't prepared me for the idea — now somewhat natural to me — that aesthetics are, at least to some degree, informed by evolutionary priorities.

I couldn't say why it took me a decade to read *Conscilience*, but I am happy I have. Aesthetics and their evolutionary purpose are but one of the very many Wilson attacks in Conscilience. Each chapter could serve as its own primer to a unique field of knowledge. While incredibly in depth, they really couldn't be more than primers, as Wilson focuses as much attention on the unanswered questions in these fields as he does on the scientific mysteries that have been solved. His purpose surely isn't to offer an encyclopedic history of science but to open up discussion of how different areas of knowledge can destroy some of the extant limitations on particular fields. When Wilson describes artificial intelligence towards the end of the book's sixth chapter, which deals with the mind and how we understand the functioning of the mind, he discusses how AI is limited both by limitations in how we understand the human mind and by the need for other important aspects of the mind, suggesting, for example, the need for artificial emotion models to complement AI. Ten years after publication, these questions of so-called AE are very much a focus of researchers exploring ways to emulate the human

mind in computers.

It is a fitting moment in my life to read *Conscilience*. As I delve into science writing I feel Wilson has reminded me of the fascination with science I once felt as a child, but long ago wandered away from as I pursued intellectual pursuits steeped in the humanities. His writing is intellectual candy, tasty enough that it made me crave more. It was almost too sweet. I found myself wandering from his central theme of conscilience as my mind wandered with each new topic presented. I had no idea I would learn about the (then) latest research in dreams, that I'd see the linkage of historic moments such as the French revolution with the emergence of science, that in this era of specialization I'd see an author critiquing reductionist thought. *Conscilience* offers an environment flowing with a richness evocative of what I imagine it might be like to live within a masterpiece painting, vibrant and deeply textured with myriad hues, capturing and directing light to distant corners.

Wilson couches the evolution of scientific thought, and his concept of conscilience in tremendous historical depth. The evolution of fields of knowledge such as art, biology, social sciences is richly described. Wilson's level of detail in this regard reminds me of Daniel Boorstin's *The Discoverers*, although Wilson delves deeper than Boorstin's straightforward historical narrative to actually explain why the particular western-oriented conception of of science is important. Writing at a time of incredible political correctness, Wilson also goes out on a limb to challenge postmodern relativism and its tendency to treat “the general scientific culture...as just another way of knowing, and, moreover, contrived mostly by European and American white males.” but he does so without fully discounting postmodernism's contribution to knowledge, just as he recognizes previous limitations in enlightenment and romantic worldviews. “They say to the rest of us:,” he writes. “Maybe, just maybe, you are wrong. Their ideas are the sparks from fireworks explosions that travel away in all directions, devoid of following energy, soon to wink out in the dimensionless dark. Yet a few will endure long enough to cast light on unexpected subjects.” Wilson's coupling of such luxuriant prose with deep respect for even flawed human thought make *Conscilience* the compelling read it is.

I also found the book incredibly important to read now, as I just finished my major feature, and as I participate in this specialized journalism program. As my feature involved new research in artificial intelligence, the aforementioned discussion of AI held special meaning for me. But I was also struck thinking how many of my sources at USC's Institute for Creative Technology specifically praise the institute for its own model of conscilience. The entire reason the center is able to do innovative research is that it actively seeks perspectives on their research challenges, such as the creation of virtual humans, from incredibly diverse fields. ICT doesn't just rely on computer scientists, engineers and graphics experts; it also engages education scholars, business professors, psychologists, game theorists and creative minds in the film and video game industries. It is as good a practical model of conscilience as I can think of off-hand.

Moreover, As Wilson described the reductionist approach scientists take and the paralyzing consequences of similar reductionism in the humanities and academia (the idea being that with so many specialized scholars we lose big-picture thinking), I thought of how we in the specialized journalism program have discussed the problems with a generalist's approach to the field and have been urged toward these reductions. But what do we lose as specialists in science writing, or immigration, or arts? It's an interesting question, for one of the strengths of our science writing seminar, for example, is the range of backgrounds each of us approaches the subject from. Drawing on the various experiences we have had, we create a discussion that offers each of us a richer perspective on the world and a bigger vocabulary (in a literal and figurative sense) from which we can draw to research and tell the stories we will tell as science writers.