

Title: "Faith and Science Symposium: A Lilly Fellows Initiative"

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Overview:

E.O. Wilson's book *Consilience* (1998) not only revives the term "consilience," but also offers a significant departure from its earlier uses in the philosophy of science. Wilson proposes that our understanding of all disciplines, including the humanities, may be greatly enhanced through consideration of the laws of physics and their subsequent manifestation in chemistry and biology. "Consilience," then, refers to what Wilson views as the common foundation underlying each avenue by which humans attempt to understand aspects of their world, including themselves; he views the world as governed by a limited number of natural laws that are therefore relevant to all disciplines ranging from physics to the creative arts. "The search for consilience," Wilson proposes, "is the way to renew the crumbling structure of the liberal arts" (13).

The word "consilience" has a long history, particularly within the philosophy of science, and carries its own assumptions: rational, empirical, systematic, objective. In his book *Life's a Miracle* (2000), the American poet and writer, Wendell Berry, offers a critical response to Wilson's ideas about consilience. While Berry admits he is not expert on science, he nonetheless forges an alternative vision to Wilson's, which animates his examination of the claims of modern science and informs his view of human life, sustainable human community, technology, and the role of liberal arts education. Berry writes, "The uniqueness of an individual creature is inherent, not in its physical or behavioral anomalies, but in its *life*. Its life is not its "life history" . . . Its wholeness is inherent in its life: not in its physiology or biology. This wholeness of creatures and places together is never going to be apparent to an intelligence coldly determined to be empirical or objective" (40). The lively "dialogue" between Wilson and Berry takes shape around the meaning and purpose of human life.

The philosopher and ethicist John Haldane engages in a thought experiment in an effort to develop an account of what it means to be human. He first asks us to imagine three perspectives on human life from the standpoint of a thoughtful observer in the thirteenth-century. From this standpoint, he establishes the three perspectives as 1) the view from *above* (Stoicism ["minded cosmos"] vs. Christianity [God/Lord]); 2) the view from *below* (Aristotle's natural philosophy (science), hierarchy of living forms, fixed species, creaturely embeddedness); and 3) the view from *within* (human thought, human fallibility, sin and brokenness). Haldane makes clear, of course, that we are a long way from this thirteenth-century model of the universe. Vast domains of this older model are considered obsolete or held in suspicion. (John Haldane, "Three Perspectives on Human Life," Lecture, Franciscan University of Steubenville).

Haldane then asks us to consider these three perspectives on human life—the views from above, below, and within—from the standpoint of an educated contemporary observer of the world, who now must work out an account of the human in light of the developments in

evolutionary biology, human genetics, physical science, quantum theory, neuroscience, among other areas of scientific inquiry. This thought experiment prompts a range of enduring questions (e.g., How do we pursue belief in God in an age of advanced science? What is human distinctiveness? How do we understand moral and ethical actions in human life? What is human nature? Is there a human nature? Is there free will?)

To engage faculty members in a consideration of these and other questions, we are proposing the “Faith and Science Symposium: A Lilly Fellows Initiative.” The “Faith and Science Symposium” will be a mini-conference for 20 mid-career faculty members to be held at Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill (KY). This mini-conference is designed to foster an interdisciplinary dialogue across lines of specialization. The goal of the program will be 1) to renew and enliven a sense of Christian calling among faculty; 2) and to enlarge the intellectual, religious (Christian-Wesleyan), social, and moral context for “pressing thought toward a just complexity” (94), as Berry writes, and cultivating redemptive human action.