

Better all the time

by [Greg Peterson](#) in the [May 24, 2000](#) issue

*Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*, by Robert Wright

A recent trend in popular science writing can be described, with only a little injustice, as secularized systematic theology. Impressed by the sheer scope of the sciences and their potential for helping us understand ourselves, writers such as Robert Wright use science to make claims not only about the nature of the world, but also about the human condition. Somewhere, usually toward the end of the work, God inevitably makes an appearance, albeit stripped of the more robust trappings of religious faith.

Wright's thesis in *Nonzero* is simple: Intelligent life was destined to emerge and achieve technological sophistication. Both natural and human history are characterized by ever-increasing levels of cooperation that lift biological and cultural evolution to ever higher planes of sophistication. In short, there is a purpose to the universe, we are it, and every day is better than the day before.

While most readers will be taken aback by the sheer audacity of this claim, Wright's ebullient writing style, command of the literature, and interspersions of careful analysis into his sweeping claims make him quite persuasive. Wright is also clearly conscious of the history of ideas of social progress, from social Darwinism to fascist and communist claims about human destiny. He avoids many of the pitfalls of these past claims while dealing with the current criticisms of progressivist approaches.

Wright argues that human history has been characterized by a long and, despite a few minor setbacks, inevitable climb toward increasing levels of cooperation and technological sophistication. That we now fly about in airplanes and communicate by e-mail is the happy result of millennia of cultural evolution. Wright makes this case mostly through historical narrative and anecdote, emphasizing the social forces that have required new levels of cooperation and technological innovation.

Taking a broadly functionalist view of history, Wright finds something positive to say about nearly every tortured epoch. For example, in the chapter "Our Friends the Barbarians" he argues that not only were those who sacked Rome not so barbaric,

they also served a positive function by destroying a collapsing empire and spreading the empire's cultural achievements far and wide. Similarly, the scientific revolution was inevitable. The only interesting question about it is who got there first.

This rosy take on history may annoy many professional historians. Indeed, Wright paints with such a broad brush that accepting his ideas requires many leaps of faith. Claims about the inevitability of the scientific revolution, for instance, are immensely contentious. Wright's rather brief treatment of this and other important epochs only papers over the difficulties.

Natural history, too, is characterized by ever-increasing levels of cooperation and sophistication. Evolution shows an ever-quickening tendency toward more complex and brainy life forms, culminating in mammals and, finally, human beings. Humans, or something very like them, were destined to appear in the course of natural history.

Wright reaches this conclusion because he sees biological and cultural evolution as dominated by a single force: nonzero-sum cooperation. According to game theory, organisms often find themselves in zero-sum situations. Because there are only so many rabbits in the forest, if I hunt them all there will be none left for you. I win, you lose. By cooperation, however, we can create a nonzero-sum game. If we band together, we can hunt mammoths--something impossible to do alone. In nonzero-sum situations, we all win.

Wright sees nonzero-sum cooperation not only as the key to human and natural history, but as a basic law of the universe. In the long run, the universe favors cooperation over competition. It has an altruistic streak. At this point God-language enters the picture. Wright is chary of any robust theological conclusions, but he does suggest that the directionality of history may indicate a higher purpose. He frequently invokes Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

Wright's panegyric to progress will fall on many deaf ears. The 20th century, plagued by two world wars, genocide and potential nuclear apocalypse, was not conducive to progress theories. But it would be a mistake to dismiss Wright's thesis. The universe is a strange place, and one of the strangest things about it is that we are here to remark upon it. It is perhaps time to reopen, in a chastened fashion, the debate about progress, just as the anthropic principle in physics has reopened arguments about design. If Wright is correct, such an investigation will not only be rewarding but may hold a few surprises as well.