

## Life's purpose: Yale psychiatrist explores how evolution could influence the meaning of life



s a young mechanical engineering student, and later as a medical student, Yale's Samuel Wilkinson became fascinated with what science — particularly theories of evolution — might tell us about the meaning and purpose of life.

In a new book, "[Purpose: What Evolution and Human Nature Imply About the Meaning of Our Existence?](#)," Wilkinson, an associate professor of psychiatry at Yale School of Medicine, integrates principles from many scientific disciplines, from evolutionary biology to cognitive psychology, to create a framework that suggests not only that there is an overarching purpose to human existence, but what that purpose *is*.

In an interview with Yale News, Wilkinson discusses what inspired his fascination with understanding life's purpose, how nature instills in humans a "dual potential," and the evolutionary forces that spur us to be our more altruistic selves.

"When you combine the concept that we are free to choose with the dual potential of human nature, to me this strongly implies that life is a test," said Wilkinson, who is also director of the Yale Depression Research Program. "The purpose of life is to choose between the good and evil impulses inherent within us.

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**In your book you dive deeply into what evolution can tell us about the meaning of life, but can you tell us a little about the evolution of your interest in and desire to write a book about these fundamental life questions?**

**Samuel Wilkinson:** The idea for the book stems from an existential crisis I experienced as a medical student 15 years ago. I was concerned that some of the lessons of science and evolution conflicted with some of the beliefs I have, that most people have, that life has value, meaning, and purpose. It's hard to describe what happened, but the idea for the book came together as I studied these topics more in depth.

**You recognize in book there are inherent conflicts in human beings that shape both individual and societal issues. Can you discuss a few of these and how they helped shape your world view?**

**Wilkinson:** Initially it was off-putting when I heard phrases like "survival of the fittest" and what it implied about human nature, which is that at our core we are selfish. I resisted the idea that that is the essence of

our nature. I totally acknowledge we have a capacity for selfishness, but in other ways we also have a deep capacity for altruism. In a way that was unexpected to me, evolution has shaped us such that we are pulled in different directions. This is a core example of how nature has left us conflicted, what in the book I call the “dual potential” of human nature.

**If we don't have free will, doesn't it make those choices between good and evil, selfishness and altruism, irrelevant and therefore meaningless? Aren't choices just expedient responses to our environment?**

**Wilkinson:** Certainly, I agree that different circumstances influence our decisions, but there's compelling data showing how our conscious thoughts also influence our behavior. I like the metaphor from [social psychologist and writer] Jonathan Haidt of the elephant and the rider. The “elephant” is the automatic or intuitive aspect of our behaviors that we can't easily control and may be heavily influenced by our environment. The “rider” is the rational and deliberate part of our behavior that we can control. The rider is holding the reins of the elephant and can direct the elephant to stop, go, or turn, but only when the elephant doesn't have strong desires of his own. The trick is to lead the elephant to places where he will be on his best behavior. If you're trying to kick a drinking habit, it's best not to let your elephant wander into a bar. Once inside, it's going to be very difficult to control an alcoholic elephant. Understanding which contexts and situations lead us to behave in better ways is a critical goal of social science.

Notwithstanding the complexities of how we make decisions and the different forces that influence those decisions, when you combine the concept that we are free to choose with the dual potential of human nature, to me this strongly implies that life is a test. The purpose of life is to choose between the good and evil impulses inherent within us. This seems to be written into our DNA.

**OK, so a meaningful and purpose-driven life depends upon the choices we make between our dark and more enlightened natures. Tell me why evolution may have shaped and encouraged more positive choices?**

**Wilkinson:** In my mind, the best way to think about this comes down to what biologists call the “levels of selection.” This leads us to ask the question, survival of the fittest *what?* Is it survival of the fittest *individual*? Or survival of the fittest *group* or *family*? We are very social creatures, and to me the evidence is compelling that evolution has acted on more than just the individual level. Moreover, when you think about the kinds of social traits that these different levels of selection would produce, they are in opposition to each other. Two influential biologists — Edward O. Wilson and David Sloan Wilson — summed it up nicely: “Selfishness beats altruism within groups. But altruistic groups beat selfish groups. Everything else is commentary.”

**What kinds of contexts or situations will help us be happier?**

**Wilkinson:** Focusing on our personal relationships. Unfortunately, humans are not very good at predicting what leads to enduring happiness. We seem to have cognitive illusions that status or acquisition of goods

will lead to satisfaction. But social science data repeatedly show that, beyond having enough for our needs, this sort of happiness doesn't really last. Moreover, focusing too much on ourselves can be damaging to our personal relationships. In a counterintuitive way, serving others often leads to more happiness than pursuing things for ourselves. Yet no one walks around thinking, *If I could only find more people to help today, then I could be happier!* But the evidence suggests such thinking would be more psychologically accurate than our natural intuitions.

At least in certain contexts, it really does seem to be true that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

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