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Interview with David Sloan Wilson
Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Biological Sciences and Anthropology
State University of New York at Binghamton

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Opening quotation excerpt:
I'm sure you've heard the acronym, WEIRD – Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and Democratic – and the fact that virtually all scholarship and science take place in WEIRD societies. And so we've been mistaking our culture for human nature. And it turns out that our culture, as people like Joseph Henrich at Harvard University have shown, is very peculiar. If you actually measure worldwide cultural diversity, you find that WEIRD cultures are weird. And so this is amazing. We have to actually comprehend cultural diversity and then, you know, how do these other cultures think, especially indigenous cultures.

David Bollier: My guest today is David Sloan Wilson, the renowned evolutionary biologist and scholar of cooperation. Throughout his long and distinguished career, Wilson has brought anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and religion to thinking about evolutionary theory. He has also been a leading figure in multi-level selection: the idea that natural selection doesn't occur only [01:00] at the level of genes and individuals, but among groups and even ecosystems as well. Evolution is not just competition among individual organisms, it's also about group cooperation.

When Wilson encountered Lin Ostrom's scholarship on the commons in 2009, he realized that her eight design principles for successful commons are highly relevant for the cultural evolution of humanity.

He worked briefly with Ostrom before her death in 2012 and has continued to explore how prosocial behaviors, as he calls them, can tamp down competition within groups and spur more effective levels of development.

Now Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Biological Sciences and Anthropology at the State University of New York, Binghamton, Wilson has been exploring how evolutionary thinking can be applied to real world circumstances, such as neighborhoods and cities and beyond.

He's published a book with two co-authors, *Prosocial*, to explain how members of groups can align their interests and achieve shared goals. And he's co-founded the evolutionary [02:00] nonprofit Prosocial World, where he edits the group's online magazine *This View of Life*. Wilson has even ventured into writing fiction with his recent book, *Atlas Hugged*, a response to Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged.*

David, thanks for joining me today. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

David Sloan Wilson: Thank you, David, and for your long and informative introduction.

Bollier: Well, maybe we should start with how, as an evolutionary scientist and biologist, or interest in those topics, you got interested in cooperation. How did you come to see this as a focal point for some of your studies?

Wilson: Well, it was one of the topics that was a hot topic when I became a graduate student. That was in the 1970s. And one message I want to convey is how much has happened during the last 50 years, basically, the span of my career. You're familiar with the concept of individualism. This idea, which has been the dominant intellectual tradition for the last 70 years, at least in Western societies, that the individual is a fundamental unit; [03:00] that everything must be explained in terms of individual self-interest. This gripped economics, that's what neoclassical economics is; it gripped the social sciences, it was called methodological individualism; and it gripped my field of evolutionary biology when I was a graduate student, and it was called the theory of individual selection. And the idea that groups could evolve as adaptive units was admitted as a theoretical possibility, but one which almost never happens.

The great figure on this was George C. Williams. He wrote a book called *Adaptation and Natural Selection*, which was regarded as clear thinking on the central concept of adaptation. And that became the basis for Richard Dawkins much more famous selfish genes [*The Selfish Gene*].

And so it was against that background that I entered the field, and my family wasn't religious. Not at all. My dad was an atheist, but they were still warm, nurturing people.

And so the idea that cooperation or altruism cannot evolve in the natural world offended my sensibilities. I think that I'm probably an empath [04:00] by nature. And so that became one of my challenges to say "That's not true." That it is possible for altruism to evolve. And so that became one of my topics, only one. That's the one I'm best known for, but also, you know, the whole classic questions about how do species coexist, diversity, and also individual differences within species. We tend to think of a species as occupying a single niche, but if you look more closely, you see that there's important individual differences, and those differences are often adaptive.

Personality differences, for example. Why do populations exist as a mix of shy and bold individuals? Can we explain that as a kind of an ecological specialization within species, similar to the differences between species?

So the wonderful thing about evolution is that it's a passport to the study of all subjects. So anyone who acquires evolutionary training, they can pick and choose their questions and

organisms they can study beetles on Monday and fish on Tuesday and competition on Wednesday [05:00] and altruism on Thursday. So that's one of the delights about being an evolutionary biologist.

And then during the last 50 years, all of that, which was really confined to biology up until then, started to expand to include all things human. And so now I could study beetles on Monday and religion on Tuesday and economics on Wednesday and philosophy on Thursday, and so that's been my passion ever since.

Bollier: You seem to be suggesting that maybe culture has a certain role in how we pursue the scientific method. It's not simply a cut and dried affair in that many of the cultural influences and insights that we see may have something to say to the scientific inquiry.

Wilson: Sure. I think that when we think of cultural diversity as like biological diversity, that all the cultures in the world have in some sense… the reason they're different is because of a combination of isolation and adaptation to their respective environments gives a view of culture which recognizes much more diversity.

This…I'm sure you've heard the acronym, [06:00] WEIRD – Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and Democratic – and the fact that virtually all scholarship and science takes place in WEIRD societies. And so we've been mistaking our culture for human nature. And it turns out that our culture, as people like Joseph Henrich at Harvard University have shown, is very peculiar. If you actually measure worldwide cultural diversity, you find that WEIRD cultures are weird. And so this is amazing. We have to actually comprehend cultural diversity and then, you know, how do these other cultures think, especially indigenous cultures. So it's a wonderful time to be alive in terms of these ideas, which I think were kind of formulating and now are just expanding like crazy. I think what I'm sensing is just that people are beginning to learn about this and, and there's an expansion phase in terms of the sheer number of people that know about it and are working with it in their own ways.

Bollier: Do you feel then that you are on the outskirts [07:00] of mainstream science in the sense of bringing these different perspectives? Because I know many conventional scientists would regard this as importing contingent, normative values or social attitudes towards the science and like to regard science as some isolated citadel of objectivity. But it seems like there is this larger movement, especially as the world becomes more integrated, as we understand that there's a pluriverse of cultures out there, to approach science in a different way and maybe things aren't as essentialist as previous generations thought.

Wilson: Yeah, it's a minefield. There are dangers on all sides. And with science, I think you have to tread a middle ground between acknowledging that there are facts of the matter: there is a world out there that exists apart from our existence; there is a body of knowledge that we should call scientifically validated and factual, and this is where we stand upon that.

If we don't do that, then we're lost in an abyss of fake news. For a long time, the postmodernist movement in academia was one that just said, you know, “Anything goes, [08:00] any culture has its own legitimacy.” But now people are just saying anything they want in order to advance their interests. We realize that we really have to have some kind of solid ground of fact, but we have to be very humble about it.

And we have to realize that actually there's so much that is provisional. And so to hold both of those, to be humble and still assertive about the facts of the matter, is the tight rope that one has to walk. And it is possible to do so, in my opinion.

David Bollier: Well, let's talk a little bit about some of your specific ideas about cooperation within the evolutionary context. Maybe we should start with multi-level selection as a framework that you've developed for understanding how cooperation can and cannot succeed.

Wilson: Sure, and I'll try to connect the dots as fast as possible with Lin’s [Ostrom] work. So multi-level selection begins with Darwin, and at first Darwin thought that he could explain all [09:00] examples of design that had been attributed to Creator, but gradually he realized that a very important class of behaviors he could not explain, which is everything prosocial, everything that involves extending yourself to the benefit of others, or one's group as a whole, actually places the prosocial individual at a disadvantage compared to the less prosocial individual. Because after all, if natural selection is about surviving and reproducing better than others, how can we explain behaviors that benefit others at the expense of oneself? That's altruism plus much more.

And so that was a problem for Darwin, and the solution was not hard to find. It's that natural selection also takes place at the level of groups, that a group of cooperators or a group of pro-social individuals would robustly outcompete a group whose members cannot cohere. And so I summarize this with Edward O. Wilson, the other Wilson, in an article that ended “Selfishness beats altruism within groups. Altruistic groups [10:00] beat selfish groups. Everything else is commentary.” It's that simple.

Bollier: Why don't you unpack those two very succinct phrases and [describe] their far-reaching implications.

Wilson: Sure. Well, if you imagine a single group and a pro-social individual within the group who is doing unto others, basically, and another individual in the same group who is not doing that, accepting social benefits without providing them. Natural selection is all about differences.

Who's most fit? In this case, it's the selfish individual that's most fit. So selfishness beats altruism within groups. And I think this is such an important message because so often we're exhorting people to be altruistic, to be compassionate, and we say you'll benefit if you help others, you know, benefit your yourself. We all want to pull together. We're all in the same

boat. But what that ignores is the vulnerability of being pro-social, the vulnerability of extending yourself to others and social causes [11:00] of all kinds. And I think we have to take that vulnerability into account if we're going to encourage people to be prosocial, we have to provide environments that make it safe to be prosocial.

It's so very simple, and that's what Elinor Ostrom's core design principles do. For everyone out there who's familiar with them, and I'm sure we'll be listing them. If you imagine a group that strongly implements the core design principles, it's hard to misbehave. It's hard to misbehave.

And so, therefore, when you enter that environment, you can perceive that easily enough, and you can open up, you can express your pro-social impulses to the fullest, and it will work well. Just that simple, David. It's incredibly simple in retrospect. Commonsensical.

The mystery is why it was obscured by other ways of thinking.

Bollier: I was going to say, the other ways of thinking have become so entrenched and normal that people have trouble entertaining this idea, which is, as you say, very simple to understand [12:00] and simple in its logic. They have trouble adopting that.

Do you have any thoughts on, you know, why that's been such a difficult framework to get out of and to comprehend that cooperation has a functional role?

Wilson: Well, I think it gets us back to cultural diversity and also mental diversity. One of the insights of evolution beyond multi-level selection is called dual inheritance theory, and what it notes is that in our species we have two streams of inheritance.

One is the genetic stream, like all species. But the other is a cultural stream of inheritance. And in that cultural stream, our worldviews, our meaning systems, everything in our heads, plays the same role as our genes. So let me just expand upon that.

So every person has a collection of genes – that's called their genotype. And those genes influence how they behave – that's called their phenotype. And always the genotype results not in a single behavior or a suite of behaviors, but it's flexible. Everyone is flexible. Genes provide us with flexibility to a degree. [13:00] So we all have a behavioral repertoire that causes us to behave this way in this situation, that way in that situation, all animals do. It's called phenotypic plasticity.

But that repertoire is limited. And if you're going to go beyond it, you have to change your genotypes. Genetic change is required for phenotypic change beyond this limited repertoire. Now, everything I just said for genes also goes for our worldview.

So every person has a worldview, every one of us that, like our genes, informs what we do, how we act. All of our worldviews provide a certain amount of flexibility. We all have a repertoire. They all cause us to perceive certain things and to process that information in certain ways. They make sense, they're sense-making, and they provide us with a kind of a repertoire. But to go beyond that repertoire requires changing the way we think. And so, we have to change our inner selves in order to change our outer ourselves, each and every one of us.

And it's against that background that you can get worldviews, [14:00] such as the neoclassical economic worldview, that, by virtue of how it causes us to think, it makes the core design principles fade away. It perceives individual level competition as a good thing. It causes a C.E.O. for example, to rank all the staff members and fire the lower 20% every year. That's called 'rank and yank'…as a good policy. Or to maximize quarterly earnings, or to follow Milton Friedman and say, "The only responsibility of a business is to make profits for its shareholder." Those are the instructions that are implicit in that particular worldview. And it's that which makes it basically something as commonsensical as Ostrom's principles. Nothing is commonsensical all by itself; that's what you can say. Only against the background of other beliefs.

And that's why it's so important to have theory change, worldview change. Our vocabulary about this is disorganized. We're only just forming a vocabulary [15:00] around what we mean with meaning systems and worldviews, and so on. With some others, I coined the term symbo-type to stress the real comparison with genotype.

So all of us have a genotype and a symbotype. That's just new jargon for our worldviews.

Bollier: Just to elaborate on that: Does that mean the configurations of relationships are symbiotic relationships that determine our fitness, for example? Is that what you mean by that?

Wilson: Yeah, I think so. Maybe I could ask you to elaborate a little bit on that.

Bollier: Well, I mean, as somebody who thinks about the commons a lot, I'm often struck by the distinctive configurations of peer governance and provisioning that a given community will evolve in their particular geography or history or cultural identity. And I'm just kind of amazed at the distinctive, almost unique, character of it, while it, of course, is not totally unique, it varies, it has characteristics of others. [16:00] So it's like the hand you're dealt or the genes that you're born with are distinctive configuration that maybe has some evolutionary value in itself, at least as a cooperative strategy.

Wilson: Yeah, there's so much, and I'm always in a podcast such as this, David. I feel like I'm, you know, acting like a fire hose. I'm just, you know, I'm spraying too much information. And I often call the evolutionary worldview of toolkit to stress its pragmatic value. And

there's a number of tools in the toolkit that take some time to learn the different tools. And so, for example, not everything that's out there is adaptive.

There's a whole non-adaptive side to evolution. A lot of stuff we do isn't good for anybody, not you, me, or anybody. Especially, we have this idea of mismatch: that even if we're well adapted to the past, that doesn't mean that we're well adapted to the future. A great example of this, just to make it a more concrete, is a distinction between tight cultures that have evolved [17:00] to be really good at collective action over the short term.

So if you're a culture with a history of warfare or pandemics or natural disasters or intensive agriculture that require just a lot of coordination, then you're expected to do certain things, and if you don't, there's punishment. Those are called tight cultures.

Other cultures in more permissive environments evolved to basically have a lot more flexibility in terms of people within the culture want to do – it's their right. These are liberal cultures, they're called loose, and they're adaptive in certain environments.

So just like species, you know, if I were to study species along any kind of environmental gradient, I would be able to explain the differences between those species. We're explaining differences between culture in the same way.

Well, here comes the Covid pandemic and around the world there's a need for all societies to respond collectively to this pandemic. And my colleague Michele Gelfand was on hand to study how well did they do? And it turns out that there was a sevenfold difference [18:00] in mortality. Seven times that greater in loose cultures than in tight cultures. Tight cultures were pre-adapted for this, loose cultures were not, and that manifested as a sevenfold difference in mortality. Most of our cultures, I'd say all of our cultures, are mismatched to the present. That means there's an imperative to change.

All of us must find ways of changing to adapt ourselves to the present and future. So one thing that means is that evolution must be conscious evolution. We must consciously evolve our futures. If we don't do that, then evolution will still take place, but it will result in problems, not solutions.

Another part of the intuition, David. Here I go again, spraying our listeners like a fire hose, but evolution doesn't make everything nice. Not in nature and not in cultural evolution. Often results in outcomes that benefit me, but not you, us but not them. Our short term benefit, not our long term benefit.

[19:00] And so if we want evolution to lead to good outcomes, we must align evolution with our valued goals, with our normative goals. We must be conscious about evolution. And so these are all things which do become intuitive, but when first encountered, I wouldn't be surprised if it's just like, "What's going on here?"

Bollier: Well, it raises for me the question of how tight is this relationship between biological evolution and cultural evolution? Can those be potted onto each other? How much does cultural evolution adhere to the principles of biological evolution that you've encountered?

Wilson: There is definitely differences. You might say, for example, compare mammals with their internal skeletons, with insects with their external skeletons, they're all organisms, they're all well-adapted, but they're very different from each other. And so if you look at the genetic inheritance system and the cultural inheritance system, then they're very different from each other. But in the broadest sense they're similar. [20:00] And the way they're similar is with the three key words of variation, selection, and replication.

That's what defines all Darwinian processes. Any processes whereby things vary and those differences make a difference, and there's a replication of traits across time, will result in this winnowing process. What ends up as a result of that process was going to be adapted to its environment.

So, the whole concept of adaptation, the fit basically between what we do and the consequences of our actions. BF Skinner called this selection by consequences. And the kind of open-ended learning that he studied, which is common in many, many animals, is, you know, animals behave every which way, and some ways are more rewarding than others, and they end up ramping up those behaviors. And so the way the rat behaves in the Skinner box, by pressing the lever, it was selected by consequences, and it has a utility.

So at that level, interpreting our own actions [21:00] and the actions of our cultures, that's what's general. And we don't have to say a lot about mechanisms in order to get the insights from that.

Bollier: This maybe is a good time to segue into your book *Prosocial*, in which you tried to articulate some of the prosocial behaviors within an evolutionary frame of thinking. Maybe you could situate your work in that regard and how you tried to spring off of evolutionary thinking to develop the ideas of prosocial.

Wilson: Now we can bring in Lin [Ostrom] in a stronger sense. I met Lin just before she won the Nobel Prize at a workshop. The workshop was titled, “Do Institutions Evolve?” So it was about the social sciences.

It was 2009. That was the 150th anniversary of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and the 200th anniversary of his birth. And so, Darwin events were taking place all over the world. This was in Italy, and Lin Ostrom was one of the workshop participants. So it was the first time I met her. I was pretty familiar with her work, but it didn't really have impact on me.

But seeing her and being with her, [22:00] it made me realize how closely her core design principles, and more generally, her concept of polycentric governance mapped onto multi-

level selection theory. And I saw that there was…for that reason that those core design principles could be generalized. And one thing about Lynn's work as you know, David, because you're deeply familiar with it, it originated in the context of common pool resource groups.

That sort of confined it. Confined it. To this day. That's still the major application…is common pool resources. When she won the Nobel Prize in economics, she was a total outlier. Most economists had never heard her name and they were shocked that someone from political scientists had won their prize. And she remains an outlier.

Bollier: I think that the year 2009 was a bit of an outlier in economic history as well, coming on the heels of the 2008 financial crisis. So perhaps that was an influential factor as well.

Wilson: Yeah, that's right. That's right. And you know, the economics profession, realizing, you know, our symbotype, our worldview is just not fit for this world. [23:00]

But in any case, what I could see from my own evolutionary perspective is that all groups need these core design principles. That the cooperation itself is like a common pool resource because that's how general this dilemma is that Darwin faced. All groups need the kind of protections that Lin had found for common pool resources.

Bollier: Let me just inject for those listeners who are not as familiar with those core design principles. Let me just quickly tick through them in a general way so we can have a better fix on those.

She talked about the need for clearly defined boundaries for a community, so they can know who's participating in it and who's not, what resources are theirs and what not; about the congruence between the rules they make and the local conditions so that they're adapted to the circumstances. She talked about collective choice arrangements, the operational rules for participating in the commons and managing the resources.

She talked about monitoring, how people have to self-monitor, [24:00] how the rules are applied and how the resources are used. And she talked about graduated sanctions, meaning if somebody violates the rules, it's not as if they're expelled from the group immediately, but there's a series of increasingly more stringent punishments or sanctions.

And she talked about having quick and effective conflict resolution mechanisms. Also a minimal recognition of the right to organize; that people can have a certain sovereignty for developing their own rules, notwithstanding the state or other larger authorities.

So those are among them that help members of group align their interests and work towards shared purposes in managing shared resources.

Wilson: Thank you, David. So happy to have you do that, not me.

Bollier: Well, I mean, I obviously, it was a very quick and dirty reductionist version but…

Wilson: We generalized the language just a little bit; we didn't have to change much at all. And then I realized that it could be a coaching method and right away I was starting to work in my city of Binghamton. I was leaving the ivory tower, at least putting one foot outside [25:00] the ivory tower. And my first two applications were of a school for at-risk youth that was being started in our public school system and a design your own park project where neighborhoods can turn a neglected space into a neighborhood park. These were my first two applications, and they worked out pretty well.

And so then the idea that we might do this anywhere in the world, not just Binghamton, became the basis of *Prosocial*. So if you read that book, what you'll find is basically a presentation of the core design principles that anybody can learn about and employ in their groups.

But that's only one of two pillars, David. So let me introduce the other pillar. We might think of the design principles as all about governance within a group, cooperation and governance within a group. And the last two design principles extend that to between group relations. So there's a very important point here. The same principles are needed to govern relationships between groups, in addition to within groups. And so there's scale independence.

These same ideas explain [26:00] the behavior of nations and the global village, just like individuals in a real village. And so there's this tremendous conceptual simplification that we could be thinking at all scales and all contexts. It might be a school; it might be a neighborhood; it might be a common pool resource; it might be a business; it might be a nonprofit; it could be any collection of individuals who are trying to do something together. So it's multi-context, multi-scale, and we were trying to turn this into a coaching method.

But then there's another whole part of this, which is adaptability: How flexible are you to change? You might be governing yourself very well in in the current moment, but how do you change? And so there's an adaptability part of this, which is provided by another collection of disciplines called contextual behavioral science. So without going into that in too much detail, you can coach people in their adaptability, and groups in their adaptability, their flexibility [27:00] in addition to their governance.

And so those are the two pillars of our practical change method to this day that we offer our groups of any kind. So that's what Prosocial World is. Our vision is to consciously evolve a world that works for all using these tools.

Bollier: The subtitle of your book puts it nicely '*Using Evolutionary Science to Build Productive, Equitable, and Collaborative Groups*.' And I might just squeeze in there, you wrote this with your two coauthors, Paul W.B. Atkins and Steven Hayes.

Wilson: And they're the ones that represent the contextual behavioral science. This is basically the therapeutic tradition. You might have heard of mindfulness-based therapy, which is quite similar to mindfulness based spiritual practices.

It turns out that some of those at least, are very effective and scientifically validated, and we can think of them as adaptability. If you're flexible, then not only can you roll with the punches and adapt to what comes your way, but you can also envision your own future [28:00] and you can step into your own future. And so we're back to a form of conscious personal evolution, therapy as conscious personal evolution. But then the same thing for groups, groups need therapy and training just like individuals. So it's a wonderful generalization of all of this.

Bollier: Well, tell me about some of your experiences in bringing these ideas to actual groups. Because often the implementation is a more gnarly, complicated endeavor than developing the theory in the first place. Tell me about some of the contexts that you've applied these ideas [in] and the groups that have used them.

Wilson: Yeah, happily. One point to make, if we go back to the Regents Academy, I want to dwell on this combination of inner and outer.

That, on the one hand, we need to work on how we think about the world, that's super important, that's our cultural genome right there. And on the other hand, the institutions, the norms, the external structure of the world is equally as important. And in the case of the Regents Academy, we more or less worked on the outer part.

We created the school day, basically the [29:00] school environment, to implement those core design principles. What does that mean? It means that the students who had flunked all of their courses the previous year to get into this school, you had to be flunking out of the normal school and almost certain to drop out of high school.

And so those were our students and we could accommodate 60 students. So we recruited 120. We randomly chose 60, and now we have a comparison group. So there's a little bit of science. So if our school works we'll know that it works because we'll have something to compare it to. I mean, let's at least be that scientific.

And then we made sure that the school was physically isolated. These students would be isolated from the other students. So we found a physical facility so that they weren't mingling with the other students. We had their own staff, their own little staff, their own principal, and so on and so forth. And then we called it the Regents Academy, and we concentrated on that.

We had, you know, tee shirts and stuff like that. So now I'm in the Regents Academy. Put a little prestige and status in front of it. Engage the students in what happens [30:00] to them during the day. That's the third core design principle. Decision-making should be fair and inclusive. So it is not just that you're told what to do. And that's, you know, that's what's so toxic about businesses and schools. You walk into it, you just bossed around. Who likes that?

So one of the best things we did was after a while the student said, “You know, we want to do something our way.” And we said, “Okay, let's take Friday afternoon and that'll be Fun Friday. What do you want to do on Friday afternoon?” And so it went on like that.

And so the students then walked into the social environment. And without being instructed in the core design principles, they just saw that it was a safe environment, that it was nurturing. One of the teachers said, “First and foremost, these students led very, very hard lives. If you just have them tell you their stories, you could realize how hard their lives were.”

Lacking in all the core design principles, and I like to use the parable of the turtle. Like, you know, the turtle pulls into its shell and dangerous environments and comes out of its shell in safe environments, and we're all like turtles. And so these students were like turtles, [31:00] [used] to spending most of their time inside their shells.

They walk into the school, they look around and they say, “Gosh, I can come out of my shell.” And they did. And one of the most amazing things about that experience is that the primary effect placed in the first quarter of the year, it wasn't like gradual. It was like right away that they came out of their shells and then they began to learn and so on and so forth.

So there's one application. But there's a sad ending to the story because despite the fact that it worked beautifully during its first year and that we had the numbers to show it, it still only lasted three years.

Why? Because there was a new school superintendent who basically wanted to do things her way, and she had the authority to do it. And so higher up the scale, we had a violation of CDP seven: Authority to self-govern.

And so, so many programs end that way: they work, but they're killed off by the larger social system. And I'm sure you have your own stories along those lines.

Bollier: Well, I was thinking of this while you were telling that story – the recurrent problem [32:00] is that many dominant political authorities, be it the state or corporations or others, have their own ideas of staying in control, and they frankly are hostile or indifferent to the ideas of collective action or coming out of your shell.

They want compliance. They want discipline. They want their ends served. And so in some ways this becomes a political discussion. I would put it in terms of the culture of commoning, of stewarding what you love, coming into conflict with the established political order. That becomes another conversation entirely it seems.

Wilson: Well, but it's an essential one to have. What it shows is that you can't really fix things. Well, it shows, first of all, you can fix things at a small scale, as we did in that case, but there's still vulnerable to disruption, higher up the scale. And so the long haul solution is this larger scale.

There's an example, David, that I've recently encountered thanks to Raj Sisodia, who's one of the founders of the Conscious Capitalism movement. [33:00] And so that movement is businesses that have converged upon a kind of a philosophy of conscious capitalism that includes quite a few of these.

You might say that it's like an independent convergence. And Raj, I'm working with him quite closely now, put me onto the example of Microsoft of all things, and its three CEOs: Bill Gates, I mean, Steve Ballmer was the second, and then Satya Nadella was the third CEO. So that was the standard hypercompetitive mode, but not so Satya Nadella. He had a completely different ethos, and because he was CEO, he could actually propagate that through the organization. And the organization had a transformative change. His book was called *Hit Refresh* and actually became a player again, whereas they were being marginalized. And so it is a wonderful example of how the top-down structure, which for the most part you have to go beyond [is] actually useful if it becomes enlightened. It can become useful, which is pretty interesting. [34:00]

Bollier: I think it's fascinating how there have been a number of waves over the decades of attempts to, what shall I say, revamp corporate culture, or to make it more humane and collaborative, more teamwork. Peter Senge one could cite, I'm sure a long list of such people. But at the same time, they are working within a capitalist framework, and I'm sure that if the Microsoft team, even under conscious capitalism, if they're not delivering the quarterly results, Wall Street's going to punish them.

And there is that market capitalist context for that behavior. Tell me how you imagine this being transformative in a more structural way.

Wilson: Well, we know, I think, David, we know each other pretty well, and I know that you're very knowledgeable about these things and so you know about such things as benefit corporations and so on.

And I've been told that actually it's not really legally mandated that companies have to maximize their short-term profits. It's perfectly possible for a company to evolve an ethos.

So, you know, triple bottom line or define their mission. And you have examples, [35:00] large and small. Unilever is an example, a larger example.

So what that means is that the scope is there. And also, we are not anti-competition in all of its forms. I think that that's one of the nice things about multi-level selection. It's competition in the right places rather than the wrong places. All forms of cultural change are a kind of competition. If something is first rare and then becomes common, then it out-competed whatever else it displaced. And so what we need are competitions for the right thing, for prosocial behaviors. And then market economies and everything, all the positive things that are said about entrepreneurship and so on and so forth, are valid.

Bollier: You could say that there's a competition like that going on right now spanning the spectrum from B Corporations to transition town movement to new types of cooperatives, platform cooperatives. There's a whole range of things that I looked at in my book, *The Commoners Catalog for Changemaking*. I think maybe it's an open question, who's going to prevail in those and [36:00] who can stabilize their modality through law or politics or other means. That's the competition already underway.

Wilson: Yeah, and so that's what we're doing. These are the folks that we work with and that we're eager to introduce *Prosocial* too, including some of the ones that you name. Take the transition town movement. It would be one. It originated in England, probably 15 years ago, I believe. Spread internationally. That's great. I hope we have that success.

And yet, if you look at them, and if you look at the average one you find, it's just not even up to the task, I'm sorry. But it's a group of beleaguered volunteers that have come to the edge of their limits. They don't have lots of technical capacities. They don't have a lot of flexibility. I'm not disparaging them by this.

And you could say the same thing for…look at the Charter for Compassion would be another one that started with Karen Armstrong, the spiritual writer. She won the TED Prize. [37:00] She used the money to form the Charter for Compassion. What's that? It's basically cities sign a charter and so that's a statement of belief. Then they form little chapters, and so there might be 700 chapters in the Charter for Compassion. Well, that's great. I hope we can do that well. But just like the transition town movement…

Bollier: And here's where my own biases of being an activist for decades and having done the Washington experience and the public policy experience come in, where ultimately those powers and state power need to be grappled with, or at least a protected carve out made to have an armistice, you might say, with what the state, as aligned with capital, generally wants.

And so I find that this is a challenge that I'm focused on often in terms of advancing the commons. It's a fascinating time, but we have unfortunately the urgency of climate change

and other environmental issues that require this to move faster than perhaps we're prepared to do. But I think it's a robust landscape out there.

Wilson: So two points to make, David, on your points [37:00], are very important to emphasize: that what Elinor Ostrom demonstrated for common pool resource groups was that they varied in their implementation of the core design principles. Only some implemented them on their own without needing to be coached. And then there were the rest of them, and that will be generalized. If you look at any example, any context. And if you look at many groups, you will find a bell-shaped curve is what you will find, and there will be a high end of that curve, groups that are doing things super well because they've converged upon the core design principles. And then there's the rest of the group. And so that's what you find again and again, and that's why some kind of coaching or something is necessary to engage all of the groups, because even the groups that do well don't necessarily clearly understand the ingredients and so on and to use natural variation to identify those better groups and learn from them, the solutions that they've converged about.

So there's a whole process that needs to be orchestrated basically. [39:00] So what you have currently is you do not have the full variation selection application process. You do have variation, but you do not have the means to identify it, replicate it, and iterate it. That's what has to be built.

Bollier: I totally agree, and I think it's one reason why I'm so interested in enabling infrastructures to help normalize and support these types of broadening and normalizing the types of commoning, so the various variations can rise to the top, get a foothold, and perhaps propagate more fully.

I regret that I couldn't have more conversations with Elinor Ostrom about the macro structures that she saw as important. She did talk about polycentric governance, but that has never really been applied or built out in a more systematic way, or the political implications probed. So for me, that's the fuzzy edges of a lot of our thinking here.

Wilson: Yeah. And I think that it's up to us to carry on that work and, and that it's possible to do so, due to this conceptual simplification. [40:00] Let me give you one other example, David. It's over in Sierra Leone, and it was not by us, it was by a German foundation called Commit and Act, which operates in Sierra Leone.

And at first they were working with the Ebola epidemic. And so there you have the wicked problem of a disease which is spreading on the basis of cultural practices because that was a very touching culture. The funeral rituals were one of washing the body and kissing the body and so on. It was a deeply distrustful culture. It was in the middle of a civil war. They had no trust in the medical authorities and dang if this nonprofit didn't come in and work with the villages to clarify their values and what they could do internally. And they came up with a

solution, which was to substitute a symbolic body in the form of a banana trunk for the real body so that they could complete their funeral ritual without risk of infection.

This was an idea that emerged and then it was spread by coordinators [41:00] and so on to other villages. And this had an impact in stemming the Ebola epidemic. More recently, they turned to the problem of female genital mutilation. And this is a problem that to westerners is just horrifying. How could anybody be doing this?

But if you look at it in context, you see that it's part of very old traditions, part of what it takes to become marriageable in those cultures. And so it's a very complex situation and dang if they didn't call together people from the culture to, in the same way, come up with their own solution. And very recently there's been a laying down of knives. And so this is what it means for cultures to be responsible for their own evolution, to develop the flexibility. And for this to be done by many organizations that basically acquire the toolkit to do this.

Bollier: What would you say would be this strategy or trick by which this transformation or adaptability was achieved? Because that's sort of a pervasive need. [42:00] What opened them up to entertain and move to different ideas?

Wilson: What it is, and this is the basic operation of acceptance and commitment therapy and training. First, we begin by clarifying our values. What's really important to us and how would we behave on that basis?

And then it examines what's currently getting in the way, [42:00] preventing us from doing these things. In a therapeutic standpoint…just imagine that evolution in our lives have caused us to adapt in ways that are protective, protects us from harm, but not in a way that's aligned with our long-term goal. So you might want to have a great relationship with your partner, but at the same time, you might want to control them. You might be afraid that they're leaving. You might want to be a cooperative, but you might also want to advance in the office. And so selection is actually pushing you towards things that are adaptive in a narrow sense, but they're not aligned with your valued goals. And so that's what the alignment is taking place.

First of all, you have them clearly in mind. That's your target of selection. And then you find out basically the symbotype, [43:00] phenotype connection. What would you actually do? So that's your behavioral target of selection. And then you begin to look inside your head, what's pulling you away from that and how do they manifest as counterproductive actions? And then you notice all of that, and then you use that as a way to reinforce your valued behaviors, and this can be better done by a group than by an individual because groups, of course, have all kinds of reinforcing mechanisms.

Bollier: In some ways having the group vehicle for having these conversations is strangely the missing ingredient often. Because I think American culture, for example, and its failure to

grapple with its history with Native Americans or African Americans and slavery. We don't have many vehicles for truth and reconciliation and moving beyond to a new place.

Wilson: Yeah. And a truth and reconciliation process is like that. I think that it's very much an independent convergence on…That's a point to make: These good practices, good governance practices, and good change practices arise again and again and again. [44:00] You could think of them as convergent cultural evolution. But they're trapped within their respective silos or boundaries. Just like Elinor Ostrom, a great idea trapped inside a disciplinary boundary.

So also we have truth and reconciliation. You know, maybe you could say it started in South Africa and it was based on probably long-term, traditional practices. So it's a great idea trapped inside cultural boundaries. And I think one of the great contributions of the evolutionary perspective is that it transcends those boundaries. It dissolves those boundaries and now we can begin to see them as something that could be employed in many more situations than before.

Bollier: Well, that's a wonderful way to conclude our conversation and give it a nice capstone because you've really sketched the way evolutionary thinking can give us a more expansive perspective on the challenges we face beyond something either that small group based, or you might even say, merely political, important as that is, and that we can have a broader perspective about living systems in their diversity [45:00] and the symbiosis that goes on within it.

Wilson: Yeah. Great, David, thank you. Thank you very much. And if I might end by encouraging our listeners to check out Prosocial World and also a branch of Prosocial World called the Prosocial Commons, which is designed for anybody to come in and learn more no matter what your current state of knowledge.

And also, that just recently we're starting to work with the main society for the commons, the International Association for the Study of the Commons at the organizational level. And so exciting things are taking place, and I think that anybody out there listening who wants to learn more, we're providing ways to do it. And not just passive learning, but active learning where you could get involved and you could pretty quickly turn this to your own interests and potentialities. That's what we're trying to do.

Bollier: David, thank you for pushing the boundaries on all this and trying to open some new frontiers of thinking in the commons world.

Wilson: Okay. And thanks to you, David, for your great work, and I hope we have a chance to work more closely together as well. [46:00]