

Consilience In And Through SETI

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Consilience In and Through SETI Edward O. Wilson has recently bemoaned the separation of the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, and made an eloquent plea for “consilience,” which he defines as “literally a ‘jumping together’ of knowledge by the linking of facts and fact-based theory across disciplines to create a common groundwork of explanation.” This is, of course, the old Enlightenment dream of the unity of knowledge updated by a distinguished biologist. In particular, Wilson thinks that now the time is ripe for a coming together of biological and social sciences. I argue that the search for life, particularly “intelligent” life, elsewhere in the Galaxy may offer a unique opportunity for moving toward a consilience between these branches of learning. To be sure, there have been major disagreements between SETI scientists and social scientists on assumptions about the nature of extraterrestrial life, strategies for detection and the like, which each side has been tempted to attribute to the intellectual shortcomings of the other. Nonetheless, SETI scientists continue to consult with social scientists and the latter are becoming even more fascinated by the prospects of discovering the ultimate “others.” However, the real challenge and opportunity for consilience would come if and when we make contact with one or more ETI. Then the task of not simply deciphering a message but ultimately of understanding alien forms of intelligence would strain our own, demanding an unprecedented consilience if we are to succeed in this enterprise.