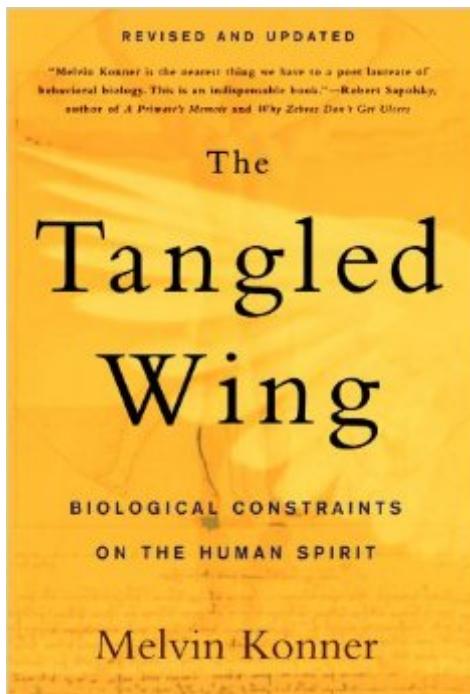


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The Tangled Wing: Biological Constraints On The Human Spirit



Synopsis

A vital updating of a seminal work of science First published to great acclaim twenty years ago, The Tangled Wing has become required reading for anyone interested in the biological roots of human behavior. Since then, revolutions have taken place in genetics, molecular biology, and neuroscience. All of these innovations have been brought into account in this greatly expanded edition of a book originally called an "overwhelming achievement" by The Times Literary Supplement. A masterful synthesis of biology, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy, The Tangled Wing reveals human identity and activity to be an intricately woven fabric of innumerable factors. Melvin Konner's sensitive and straightforward discussion ranges across topics such as the roots of aggression, the basis of attachment and desire, the differences between the sexes, and the foundations of mental illness.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I don't know how I managed to miss this one for so long (there was an earlier edition from the 1980's; this one is completely updated). Konner is a physician and anthropologist. He wrote this as an attempt "to show what an integration (of evolutionary psychology into the whole of social and behavioral sciences) might look like." It consists of an in-depth survey of the literature on the "science of human nature," and research into the biology of human "frailties" such as fear, lust, and love. He provides a very useful perspective as a cultural (?) anthropologist with great knowledge of the hunter-gatherer way of life and an understanding of the varieties of cultural expression. He

frequently waxes poetic and uses substantial references to literature and the arts, of which I sometimes missed the point and which was prone to cause me to become distracted from the primary narrative as well. But give him credit for trying. Also, many chapters seemed to have no internal structure and felt like a random list of findings relevant to a subject. But I was extremely impressed with the impeccable referencing (accessed online), especially his personal recommendations for further reading. What piqued me the most was his conclusion and final...tirade? His penultimate chapter starts with a tour of the dazzling new world created by the sequencing of the human genome but suddenly veers into a thorough and absolutely fact-based litany of why we are headed toward a Malthusian disaster if business continues as usual. He even updates Barrington Moore, Jr.'s targeting of "the attractive upper middle class mother, driving a station wagon full of happy sunburned children" (now it's an SUV and the kids are sunscreened) as the ultimate culprit in causing human misery.

This is a long thick book. The main text is close to 500 pages. Reading it is not easy. I find it necessary to make serious attempts to stay focussed in reading the book. At times it can be repetitive. But if you are lucky enough to read it through back to back, the gain will be immense. The plan of the book is as follows: An introduction warns the reader not to romanticize exotic cultures. Part 1 (Ch. 1 to 8) explains clearly that at least the foundation or scaffolding of our behaviors are determined by our genes. BUT at the same time, genetically related wirings of the brain CAN be modified by the environment. In this part of the book some basic neurology related to human behavior is discussed. Part 2 (Ch. 9 to 15) explores basic human emotions, urges and behaviors. The psychology, neurology and biochemistry are all discussed. I am a practising physician, and I am most rewarded by the chapter on "Gluttony". I now know why my patients have difficulties in losing weight. I am surprised that I was not taught about all these in medical school! These chapters can at times read tedious but as I have said they are very rewarding indeed. Part 3 (Ch. 16 and 17) reminds the reader (even though grounds have been covered throughout the earlier chapters) that in spite of the importance of genes in influencing over behavior, NURTURE is also important. The author somehow seems to change the focus of the book and speculates upon the future of human beings and whether we are still able to save ourselves from self-destruction through follies. Part 4 (Ch. 18) gets even further away from the earlier chapters. It is very moving.

Melvin Konner's The Tangled Wing is a shining example of the way science is done. The depth of scholarship is truly inspiring - Konner remarked that there were originally two hundred pages of

notes, "the meticulous preparation of which added at least a year to the project" (they were published online to keep the cost of the book down). Warning: after reading this book, the methodology of other authors might seem pathetically underwhelming by comparison. The next two books I read as part of my master's degree in engineering management seemed ludicrously speculative by comparison, with poor or nonexistent empirical support. A joke, in short, made all the more laughable due to the stark contrast with the depth of scholarship displayed in *The Tangled Wing*. Scientific authors often have to trade off between popular appeal of their books and usefulness to the academic community. Konner settled that compromise more on the academic side, but I wouldn't say this book is wholly inaccessible to those outside the academic community (my education is in engineering, but that didn't stop me from enjoying it). If you don't mind wading through a little jargon about neurotransmitters and brain regions, there are plenty of fascinating gems to be discovered. And laymen might be just as impressed by the methodology of a real scientist as they are by the discoveries garnered thereby. There is a chapter about weight regulation titled 'Gluttony' that I found particularly interesting. This is a deceptively complex topic that is subject to much pseudoscience and uninformed opinion, so it is refreshing to see the bright light of science shone upon it.

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