

SUMMARY

NONZEROØ

ROBERT WRIGHT



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Summary of “Nonzero” by Robert Wright

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Learn about the driving forces of your destiny.

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Introduction

Have you ever gazed up at the stars or at the vastness of the ocean and felt small in comparison? Or have you ever reflected on theories like evolution and the Big Bang and thought about how amazing it is that we evolved from primordial ooze to reach the pinnacle of modern society? Or maybe you've asked questions like, "What is my purpose?" and "What's the meaning of life?" And who hasn't said something like, "It was fate!" or "Whatever is meant to be will be." Chances are, every human being has done at least one-- if not all four-- of those things at some point in their life. But what if we really knew the answers to these questions?

Robert Wright believes we can by learning more about non-zero-sum interactions between humans and society. But although this explains the book's unusual title, you're probably not familiar with non-zero-sum interactions, so let's take a closer look and learn more about what they mean! Put simply, a non-zero-sum interaction can be summarized as a win-win situation. And as we all know, win-win situations are those in which two parties each get what they want, even if they want opposite things. For example, let's say that I want Chinese for dinner, but you want Italian. We could fight about who most deserves to get what they want and arrive at a solution in which only one of us gets our way... but this would be categorized as a zero-sum game. In these situations-- where only one person gets what they want-- it's not a real win. The author explains that, from an economic perspective, this doesn't count as a win because the results cancel each other out. Because if you add one person's win to the other person's loss, the result is still zero.

But if, on the other hand, we compromise and pick up takeout from both the Chinese and Italian restaurants, that would be a win-win situation because it results in both of us getting what we want. Another example of a win-win situation would be pretty much any (fair) business transaction. If we imagine that I run an ice cream shop and you're a person who wants ice cream, then we have a win-win situation when you spend money at my

store and receive ice cream in return. Because I made a sale and you got some delicious ice cream for a reasonable price, we both benefit from the interaction and that's why it counts as a non-zero-sum interaction.

So, why is that important? Well, according to Wright, it benefits society when we collect more and more win-win situations throughout history. That's because we're literally putting positive actions and mutually beneficial transactions out into the world and creating a better society as a result. And over the course of this summary, we're going to learn about a few key non-zero-sum interactions and the core principles behind them that have driven human progress.

Sharing is Caring

We all heard that phrase in kindergarten, didn't we? The simplistic rhyme served to remind us that cooperation is a valuable skill and one which helps us to be considerate of others. And as we've grown older, the value of kindness, sharing, and connecting with others has been reiterated to us in a variety of ways. As a result, our worldviews have been shaped by these values; most of us would probably attest that we're basically good people who try to do the right thing. And this automatically influences our concept of problem-solving as well. For example, when confronted with a problem, most of us don't approach an issue by saying, "How can I find a solution that only benefits me?" or by intentionally thinking, "Who cares about the other guy? I'm the only one that matters!"

Instead, most people work to compromise or find a solution that benefits everyone. In fact, many people are even willing to sacrifice the solutions that would be most beneficial to themselves in favor of doing a kind deed for someone else. Put simply, whether we're aware of it or not, most of us are trying to find a win-win solution for everybody. And although it's easy to see how this would benefit the people we interact with and our society as a whole, you might not know that this logic transcends human problem-solving strategies. It didn't originate in the boardroom or the classroom; rather, this strategy is one of the foundational principles of life on Earth. That's because Earth started out with something of an "every man for themselves" mentality in the form of single-celled organisms.

But once these individual cells gained enough sentience to develop a form of self-awareness, they were able to communicate with each other (in the way of nonverbal, single-celled biological things) and they recognized that sharing really is caring. Or, put simply, to connect with other cells was to further their own self-interests. If one cell shared its resources with another and a few more cells responded in kind, they could create a powerful collective with more strength than any one cell possessed on its own. And that's how we get the variety of complex multi-celled organisms that we

have today! So, as you can see, the idea of collaborating to achieve a win-win situation is by no means a human invention. In fact, it occurred to nonverbal single-celled life forms before the idea ever struck us! This, of course, should tell us two things: firstly, that non-zero-sum interactions are vital for the survival of all living things. And secondly, if Single-celled life forms can do it, we definitely can!

Humanity is Evolving

At first glance, that statement might seem like something of a no-brainer. We have only to look back through history-- including very recent history-- to find immediate examples of human evolution in terms of social, cultural, and historical milestones! We already know that humans are constantly evolving. But for the purpose of this chapter, we're going to slow down and really consider that fact for just a moment. Humans are constantly evolving! When you truly pause to think about it, that's incredible, isn't it? It's incredible that we evolved from the days of neanderthals-- barely speaking, no concept of a written language, still marvelling at the existence of fire-- to the people we are today.

And if you find yourself suddenly wondering how we got here, then-- you guessed it!-- it's all because of non-zero-sum interactions! Just like the single-cell organisms we discussed in the previous chapter, human civilization evolved as people realized that it was smarter and more advantageous to join together and pool their resources. And as a result, we developed the ability to buy and sell, to establish businesses, to organize armies and defense systems. By connecting with each other, we orchestrated systems of government, travel, and trade. This also helped us develop languages and put our words into a standardized system of writing that everyone could learn! And although it might have been overly simplistic in the early days, with towns being named after the king who ran them, or streets with labels like "First Street," we were evolving. (And it gets even more impressive when we consider that these "simplistic," primitive societies also built the Seven Wonders of the World, like the pyramids and the Acropolis!)

And as we all know, we've only continued to evolve, growing beyond the age of simplicity to create advances in science and technology that only existed in our ancestors' wildest dreams. Although they might never have imagined the day would come, we now possess the ability to access any information

we want, any time we want it, and all on a device so small it can fit in our pockets! If you really stop to think about it, that's amazing!

These observations have motivated the author to speculate about the advances we can expect in the future as humanity continues to evolve. One possibility he suggests is that we might eventually evolve to form a new type of cohesive global unit. For example, if our evolution began with single-cell organisms uniting with one another, to human beings connecting to form civilizations, what's next? Is it possible we might one day develop humanity into a sort of singular collective, one which unites us even more? Would we perhaps integrate the human brain and the internet so that we developed new ways of uploading and sharing information directly from person to person instead of relying on devices? What if we were to evolve into one sort of united world brain, shared by everyone? What would that look like? Can you imagine doing that-- or is it as mind-boggling to you as our iPhones might have been to the ancient Egyptians?

Social Evolution is Also the Result of Win-Win Situations

So far, we've already talked about biological evolution and historical evolution, but what about the ways in which we've grown socially? How did we get from nonverbal organisms to a society with complex relationships? The author affirms that this is also the result of non-zero-sum interactions. That makes a lot of sense because if you've ever dated a narcissistic or overly selfish person, you already know that relationships don't go very well if one person is doing all the emotional labor. So, how did we evolve to develop mutually beneficial relationships? And how do we know when our relations with others are appropriately evolved?

To give an example of a successful relationship model, the author cites the story of an African tribe who operates under a blanket policy that they share everything with each other. So, whenever they hunt for food, they share any meat they catch-- not just between one family, but between the entire tribe. Why? Because, like those early societies and simplistic organisms, they've realized that banding together furthers the survival of the entire group. They also understand that no one can truly win at life on their own; you need a support system to strengthen you and get you through. And when you share resources and support each other, you're acknowledging that. It's also a kind and unselfish way of acknowledging that one day, you might need help from someone else and that you're prepared to give to them as you would hope they'd give to you.

And even though you probably don't invite your neighbors or your entire family to split a single burger with you when you go out to eat, societies show cooperation in different ways. For example, the American economy works closely with the economies of many other nations to create a sort of global trade system that relies on mutual dependence. Unsurprisingly, this is an incredibly risky system because it means that the livelihoods of multiple countries rely on each other. And as a result, if those relationships weaken or break down completely, entire countries might collapse.

So, while this system comes with plenty of risks, the danger can also be considered positive in that-- much like the African tribe referenced earlier-- it encourages mutual trust and collaboration. Just as the members of the aforementioned tribe recognize that they might one day fall on hard times and would depend on their neighbors for support, so entire countries are forced to recognize that they need each other to survive. This then increases positive relationships and strong trade agreements between nations who might not have gotten along under different circumstances.

It also encourages our societies and relationships to evolve in ways that we might not develop without this push. For example, because our global social, political, and economic structures are hinged on mutual dependence, we have to find new ways of working together and navigating conflicts. We set up different departments, for example, create new policies, and learn new strategies for conflict resolution. We learn to work in teams, to make sacrifices so that everybody on our team can win, and we make decisions based on the greater good. And last, but certainly not least, we've learned to incorporate tolerance of cultural differences and broaden our perspectives so that we can be accepting of those who are different from us.

The Evolutionary Benefits of Technology

It's no surprise that technology has been one of the biggest assets of the modern age when it comes to collaboration. Thanks to advances in modern technology, we can find long-lost relatives on the internet, learn via Zoom or Skype calls, and stay connected with friends through social media. We can access live news, share things as they happen, and stream unlimited content all with a tap of our fingertips. But in addition to the social benefits of technology, it has also proved highly beneficial in advancing our cultural evolution. Problems that would have been considered unsolvable in the age of the ancient Greeks are now easily resolved with the aid of modern technology.

For example, let's imagine that you're a local artist. Maybe you paint jewelry or make earrings or design your own line of greeting cards. And after years of creating a deeply personal business, pouring love into each item and selling it out of your home, you're now hoping to expand your reach by selling your creations in a local superstore. You've made an agreement with the store's manager; she says you can sell your crafts. She's also agreed to give you a fair portion of the profits in exchange for being allowed to keep her cut. You're both happy with this mutually beneficial arrangement because you get to sell your crafts and get publicity and she benefits from the increased revenue and exposure that comes from a collaboration with a local artist. All in all, it's another win-win and your life is about to progress in an exciting new direction!

Unfortunately, however, there are a couple of obstacles that might get in your way. First of all, what if the manager doesn't honor her word? What if your crafts start flying off the shelves and she decides to keep all of the profits for herself? Or what if she just doesn't put your goods on display at all? How would you confront her? How would you prove that she stole from you? And how can you be sure that you have a solid case when you're not at the store all the time and can't see everything she's doing? And if you wanted to make things even more complicated, let's imagine that the

manager speaks a different language and is frequently out of the country, making communication barriers even trickier!

To early shopkeepers in ancient times, these might have seemed like impossible hurdles. So impossible, in fact, that it might have seemed wiser to avoid expanding your business altogether. But thanks to the advent of modern technology, these problems can be simple blips on your radar! Today, we have security cameras, payroll software, collaborative apps, and instant messaging. We can learn enough about another language to easily communicate with someone and we can connect virtually across different time zones. All of these assets make it easier to work together, even in the face of challenges, which means that you can collaborate with peace of mind and easy access to conflict resolution solutions. None of this integration would be possible without collaboration and mutual dependence. And none of that would be possible without non-zero-sum interactions!

Final Summary

Human existence is complicated and it motivates us to ask a lot of hard questions like, “What is life’s purpose?” and “Does fate direct our lives?” However, the author acknowledges that our lives aren’t so much directed by the unseen and whimsical hands of fate as by the principle of non-zero-sum interactions. This principle of collaboration has actually been at the heart of life on Earth for longer than humans have even existed and it continues to guide our everyday lives. As a result, Wright posits that not only does this win-win system propel human beings toward positive evolution, it also suggests that our existence does have meaning.

Because although humanity has been set back by terrible tragedies and miscarriages of justice along the way, the world is often balanced by an overwhelming amount of goodness. This goodness is what motivates us to connect, collaborate, and share. And those principles are ultimately what drives our evolution. This tells us that our purpose is to connect with one another and work together to achieve positive change. And if you don’t believe me, just look at how many times we sacrifice for someone else’s good, give selflessly, or perform a random act of kindness. This proves that there truly is good in the world and that achieving win-win situations is our purpose.



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