

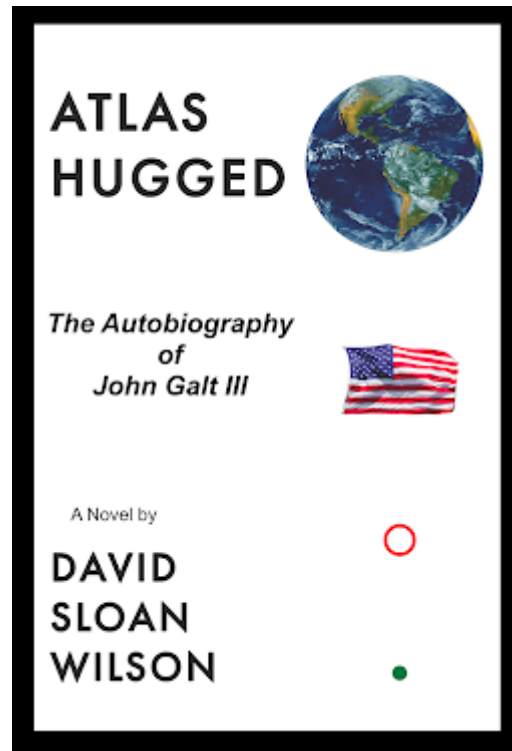
101 Questions for David Sloan Wilson, on *Atlas Hugged*

Velikovsky of Newcastle

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WARNING: SPOILER ALERTS!

(Maybe read the novel first.)



Atlas Hugged is gifted, not sold, and available only at : <https://atlashugged.world/>

Distinguished Professor David Sloan Wilson is an evolutionary biologist, anthropologist, author of many popular nonfiction books and papers, and now also - novelist!

1. David, for those new to it - in a nutshell - what is: *Atlas Hugged*? It is a critique of the “Greed is Good” individualism championed by Ayn Rand in the form of a sequel to her novel *Atlas Shrugged*. It is also a positive vision of a whole-earth ethic and how it can be achieved. I would classify it as “hard science fiction”, in which the science is good enough that something like what happens in the novel could actually happen in the real world.
2. The *preface* of the novel *Atlas Hugged* explains its origins (and, some of its: function, history, mechanisms, & development!), but - can you briefly recap your novel’s *origins* for us? In short, Why Did You Write This Book ...What were your main goals? I like your clever allusion to Tinbergen’s Four Questions! Readers who aren’t already in the know will need to read my nonfiction book [This View of Life](#) 😊. On my main goals for writing *AH*, part of my day job is to rethink economics from an evolutionary perspective and otherwise help people become “wise managers of cultural evolution”. Creating a fictional parallel universe in which a worldwide cultural transformation takes place in 100 days was a ton of fun, especially since my Dad (Sloan Wilson) was a novelist and I have always been tempted to ply his craft. Finally, storytelling is a way to explore what can

happen in the real world. Writing *Atlas Hugged* and my real-world change efforts are thoroughly intertwined over a seven-year period.

3. When did you personally first “discover” or hear about and read, Ayn Rand’s 1957 novel, *Atlas Shrugged*? Rand’s heroic portrayal of individuals is famous for appealing to idealistic young people at the dawn of their adult lives—but I was not among them. Like my character John Galt III, I am an empath whose first impulse is to think that people should do well by each other. That led me to critique individualism in all its forms as a scientist, including but not restricted to Rand. I concentrated on her essays in *The Virtue of Selfishness* before I read *Atlas Shrugged*, as I recount in the Epilogue of *AH*.

4. What was your first reaction, to reading *Atlas Shrugged* (Rand 1957)? That it stunk! Many have commented that it is a terrible novel when judged purely for its storytelling, including the climactic speech that goes on and on forever. The fact that it is so bad and yet so widely read is something that we can hopefully return to, since there are 97 questions left to go 😊

5. ...And, your thoughts on it, since? Has your view on it, ever changed? It still stinks! And it does not need to be read prior to beginning *Atlas Hugged*!

6. Is *Atlas Shrugged* (by Ayn Rand) a mean-spirited novel and worldview? Actually, it’s more complex than that. Rand lived through the worst of Russian communism before emigrating to the United States. The Soviet economy was a genuine disaster, so Rand can be forgiven for idealizing capitalism. Also, like the metaphor of “the invisible hand” (Adam Smith 1759), in Rand’s imagined world, behaving selfishly benefits the common good. That makes it a moral worldview, even if it doesn’t play out that way in the real world.

7. You note in the preface of your new novel that *Atlas Shrugged* (Rand 1957) has sold 7 million copies... What effect has it had, on the wider world? Paradoxically, the answer is simultaneously “a lot” and “not much”. Legions have fallen under the spell of her worldview, including influential economists and politicians. But if Rand never existed, the intellectual tradition of individualism would still be just as strong. It is *individualism* that must be critiqued and replaced, not just Rand.

8. For those who don’t know Rand’s 1957 novel, can you explain the meaning of the term “Atlas Shrugged”? Rand credits all of the achievements of the world to a small band of “doers” besieged by “moochers”. The main protagonist of *Atlas Shrugged* is John Galt, a brilliant engineer who causes a strike of the doers so that the moochers can be brought to their senses. This is like the mythological figure of Atlas shrugging the earth from his shoulders.

9. So apart from the obvious satire on ‘Shrugged’, the title ‘Atlas Hugged’ has a few meanings, and allusions... Can you talk about that? ...And, did you consider any alternate titles, to: *Atlas Hugged*? Of course, hugging signifies nurturing and giving to others, which is so contrary to the ethos of *Atlas Shrugged* that the very word “give” was banned from the vocabulary of the utopian society founded by John Galt I. *Atlas Hugged* was so apt as a title that I never considered another one. I have even gone so far as to gift the book for whatever the reader wishes to give in return, rather than selling it for a fixed price. For this reason, it’s available only at www.AtlasHugged.world. Eat your heart out, Amazon!

10. The politics in your *Atlas Hugged* goes beyond, “Left wing” and “Right wing”... Could you elaborate? This is a very important point, in the real world in addition to the novel. The wise management of cultural evolution does not fall into any political or economic camp. It avoids the excesses of both laissez-faire capitalism and centralized planning. The more that policymaking is based on science (therefore evolution), then “right” becomes “the right way” and “left” becomes “left behind because it doesn’t work”. As for the real world, so also for the plot of *Atlas Hugged*.

11. Are there good and bad, human: Values? (e.g. *Selfish or Anti-Social* values, vs. *Pro-Social or Altruistic* values?) **One point to make is that values need to be evaluated at multiple levels. What's good for me can be bad for my family. What's good for my family can be bad for my clan. All the way up to what's good for my nation or corporation can be bad for the earth. This simple and compelling reasoning leads to the necessity of a whole earth ethic—and the placement of the earth on top of the stack of symbols representing the True Objectivist Movement in *AH*. This is in contrast to the false Objectivism of Ayn Rand (and Ayn Rant in the novel), which worships the sanctity of the individual.**

12. ...Or is it as simple as: *Competition*, versus *Co-operation*... (?) **Again, this dichotomy is complicated by multilevel selection theory, where agents cooperate at one level to compete at a higher level. Positive cultural evolution requires better practices replacing worse practices, which is a form of competition. What matters is the criteria that define what wins—the target of selection must be the global common good.**

13. Are there 'good' and 'bad' kinds of *competition*, in evolution? And likewise for: *co-operation*? **Yes, on both counts. Organisms are replete with competitive processes that are good for the organism, such as the adaptive component of the immune system. And I co-edited a whole book titled "[Pathological Altruism](#)".**

14. In the first webinar on *Atlas Hugged* you said that a healthy biological organism is all about: co-operation. And, the evolutionary worldview allows us to see *society as an organism*. But then there's: cancer! ...Are some ideas like cancer? **Yes! Rand's Objectivism is described as a cancerous creed in *AH* and cancer is woven throughout the narrative. I am not just hurling insults with this analogy. Cancer biologists use words such as "cheating" to describe the disruptive behaviour of cancer cells, which makes it valid to use words such as "cancerous" to describe disruptive behaviours in human society.**

15. Where do our Values and Morality come from? ...How do we each get them, & can we change them? **Morality, almost by definition, is oriented toward the welfare of others and society as a whole, at least for those who are inside the moral circle. There is an innate component, including such things as the formation and enforcement of norms, but the actual content of the norms can be very flexible.**

16. And - how does John Galt I (John Galt the First), a character whose story you continue in *Atlas Hugged*, demonstrate this, in your novel? (...*It seems: he goes through a "long dark night of the soul" - with the accident, and Beth the country nurse bringing him "back to life" - in more ways than one...*) **John Galt I indeed experiences a transformation in his values, from a taker to a giver, with the help of Beth, a plain looking woman with a strong and beautiful soul.**

17. So, in *Atlas Hugged*, John Galt I has an epiphany, and, has a *complete reversal of Values/Morality!* ...Can that ever happen, in real life? **One insight of modern evolutionary science, amply represented in *Atlas Hugged*, is that all people are evolving entities in their own right. This means that we are all capable of change, even transformational change. The phenomenon of being "born again" is real and need not be restricted to a religious experience.**

18. As an aside, that section of the story (the 'John Galt I and Beth' section) is like, an *inversion* of Stephen King's great horror story, *Misery* (the book, and movie). Have you ever seen/read it? (Or, is it just coincidence.) **No! I'm actually quite poorly read in fiction!**

19. So, John Galt I sees how Beth selflessly cares for and 'serves' others – and, also cares for *him* – and, the scales fall from his eyes. (They also bond empathically, over both feeling "stalked", of course...) So, John Galt I has a *complete reversal* – he truly *changes* his character / morality / philosophy / worldview...! Sees: the error of his ways! One reading, or 'moral' (or 'lesson') from that great subplot in *AH*, was: *The healing power of selfless love* (Altruism). ...*Is that what you intended?*

(Is that how you wanted readers to interpret, all that?). **One point is that John Galt I's worldview had to completely collapse before he was able to be "born again" as a giver, with Beth as a model. That whole chapter was vague in my mind until I wrote it. I'm pleased with how it turned out and glad that you liked it also.**

20. And, since John Galt I *totally reverses himself* morally, ethically - his whole value system and worldview - one would expect, Rand-fans would: *dislike* that? ...Have they? **AH hasn't made it onto the radar screen of Rand fans yet. I'm not going to second guess their response and hope that at least some are in the mood for a respectful intellectual workout.**

21. *Is Rand's 'Objectivism' Philosophy "system" (as dramatized in Atlas Shrugged, especially in John Galt's long 70-page radio-broadcast speech) – actually, a "Philosophical System"–? If by a philosophical system we mean something that can be justified by science and reason, then the answer is "no", despite Rand's pretensions. However, her system does quality as a worldview that motivates action, similar to a religion. In AH, both Christianity and Objectivism are described as "stylized universes" that provide a sense of right and wrong, but only by making use of adaptive fictions. The Holy Grail for both John Galt III and his lover, Eve Eden, is to find a way "to tell right from wrong without peering through a tissue of lies".*

22. Tell us about the Philosophical system behind *Atlas Hugged: "The Evolutionary Worldview."* (& Feel free to 'compare & contrast' any specific key *points of difference*, with Rand's 'Objectivism / Individualism'). ...Or, are they simply: *inversions/mirror-images* of each other? **That's a tough question to answer in a short space! Spiritual seekers are often humorously portrayed as naively searching for the secret of life, as if such a thing could be uttered by a wise man in a cave in a single sentence. Yet, hard scientists love to say that "nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution". It that's not the secret of life, what would be? But the possibility that evolutionary theory can provide the secret of life in the spiritual sense—something like Buddhism's Fourth Noble Truth (a path to end suffering)—that's new.**

23. What did Rand's 'Objectivism' get all backward, about the Spencerian (*not* Darwinian! As you show in the book, *This View of Life*, 2019) idea of: "survival of the fittest"–? **The famous chicken experiment can answer that question! In a breeding experiment, when individual hens were selected for egg productivity, what actually got selected was bullying behaviour. In other words, the most productive hens achieved their productivity by suppressing the productivity of other hens, resulting in a strain of psychopaths. This problem was solved by selecting whole groups of hens for their combined productivity. Spencer never got that and neither did Rand. See my nonfiction book *This View of Life* for more.**

24. In the novel, explaining "the secret of life" - Professor Howard Head says that evolution is just: "*VARIATION; FITNESS CONSEQUENCES; HERITABILITY*". ...Is it really *that* simple? **In some respects, it really is that simple! That's how Howard Head, my fictional avatar in AH, was able to get his students to make intelligent guesses about infanticide during the very first lecture of his "Secret of Life" class. That is based on my own experience in my "Evolution for Everyone" class. More generally, a recurrent theme of AH is that the most profound insights are elementary in retrospect.**

25. Is there anything that *doesn't* evolve? ...In biology, or, in culture? **Absolutely! Non-living processes don't evolve. In living systems, the visual metaphor of an adaptive landscape illustrates that evolving from one adaptive peak to another can be difficult because it requires descending into an adaptive valley. There are many senses in which evolution does not occur or occurs only with difficulty.**

26. How do you define ‘Culture’? (As: different Disciplines seem to define it, differently.). **Something like “learned behaviour transmitted across generations” will do as a first cut. I’m a big fan of sticking close to everyday meanings of key words.**
27. Is Ayn Rand’s ‘Objectivism’, actually ‘Objective’? And, (as was claimed by Rand) based on: science, reason, facts, truth, and the Enlightenment values? **No! And this is also true for other secular worldviews, including the “New Atheism” of Richard Dawkins and others. Secular worldviews don’t invoke gods by definition, but they can depart from factual reality in many other ways. A secular worldview that scrupulously respects the facts of the world is the Holy Grail sought by John III and Eve in *AH*, and also my own objective in real life**
28. So... Is Rand’s “Objectivism”: ‘fake news’? **When the phrase “fake news” is invoked nowadays, it implies two things: First, that it departs from the truth; and second, that it serves the interest of the fake news teller. Based on what we have already covered, most worldviews make use of adaptive fictions, so Objectivism is by no means alone in that regard. What makes Objectivism objectionable is not just that it is fake news, but that it is cancerous fake news.**
29. What has happened to *the societal norms of truth-telling*, over the past few years/decades? Why so? **Norms of truth-telling remain strong in some contexts, such as scholarship and science, responsible journalism, and court procedures. They are eroding in between-group conflict situations, when coming out top trumps (yes—him) everything else.**
30. And, how can it be fixed? (...What can we each *do about it*, in our everyday lives?). **It begins with a personal commitment, which was John Galt III’s first breakthrough: to treat factual reality as sacred and never succumb to the mosaic artistry of his father and grandmother. It continues by expecting it in others, with consequences for transgressions. This can be difficult when a norm is being asserted but becomes easier when the norm is in place. All of this is in progress for norms prohibiting sexual bullying (the Me Too movement) and could take place for expanding truth-telling norms, as it does in *AH*. In fact, as of this writing, President Biden is attempting to re-establish the norm of truth telling in political life after the battering it has received from Donald Trump.**
31. Presumably, if you were writing the novel over a seven-year period, it overlapped with all your other work. Did they “cross-pollinate”? **Did they ever! Since a real-world change effort requires imagining something that doesn’t yet exist, it’s not so different from fiction writing. A lot of my scholarly reading found its way into the novel—especially in the chapter titled “The Trek”—and what I write about cultural catalysis in the novel is little different than what I try to accomplish in real life.**
32. What were some of your own favourite novels - both in youth, and as an adult? (& Why?) i.e. Which fiction writers did/do you admire? **I read a moderate amount of fiction as a youth but seldom have time for it now because of my heavy nonfiction reading load. My real education in fiction was from my father, who spoke about it all the time as I was growing up. Through him I gained a sense that a good novel must combine a compelling story with a serious exploration of ideas. Two of my favourite authors—also admired by my father—are Joseph Conrad and Isaac Bashevis Singer. I still remember my father commenting that Singer’s novels are great because you can empathise with all of the characters—even the villains. I strove for that kind of compassion in *AH*.**
33. Likewise, what is/are, some of your own favourite: Movie/s? **I’m even more of a lightweight as a moviegoer than as a fiction reader! I enjoy the popular movies and allude to them in *AH*, such as *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*--even *The Karate Kid*, *Thor*, and *Wonder Woman*. On the serious side, some that blew me away include *Children of a Lesser God*, *The Fast Runner*, and *Looking for Sugarman* (a documentary).**

34. Favourite song/s or music? (Eve and John Galt III listen to country music, in the truck radio...). **I like most musical genres. Chopin, Benny Goodman, Ray Charles, Celtic, all kinds of folk. No particular penchant for country—except on the car radio while driving!**
35. Tell us about your 2007 paper on 'Health and the Ecology of Altruism' (Wilson & Csikszentmihalyi, 2007) in the book: *Altruism and Health: Perspectives from Empirical Research* (ed: Stephen G. Post, 2007). ...What did that study show, about: Altruism? **I've been lucky to collaborate with some of the greatest minds of our age. Mike Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced "Chick-sent-me-high") is famous for his book "Flow" and pioneering the Experience Sampling Method, which involves signalling people at random times during the day, prompting them to report on their immediate experience. Using one of his big databases, we studied the experiences of people who differed in their altruistic proclivities. We predicted that altruism would lead to healthy outcomes only when altruists interact with other altruists; otherwise, they suffer from exploitation from non-altruists. That is what we found.**
36. So, given the benefits of the 'core value' of Altruism in the novel, are you suggesting: reading *Atlas Hugged*, can make you healthier? 😊 (...Assuming, the reader adopts any of its lessons / messages!). **I believe that AH can make the reader healthier by providing a realistic vision of a future free of self-imposed suffering. But this requires getting involved in bringing about something like what happens in the novel. Happiness requires an interaction between the individual and his or her social environment. Givers are not happy when they are besieged by takers!**
37. By contrast – is, reading *Atlas Shrugged* (or probably, anything by Ayn Rand) *literally hazardous to your health*? **Reading Ayn Rand is hazardous to the health of society, and therefore everyone's health in the long run. That said, it can feel exalting and be profitable over the short term. Is a cancer cell proliferating at the expense of normal cells, happy?**
38. In the light of the new Discipline known as 'Heroism Science'¹ (eg: *The Joseph Campbell special issue of The Journal of Genius & Eminence, on the 30th anniversary of his death*, 2018) - Who are your own personal heroes, and why? **If I were to pick a single person, it would be Elinor Ostrom. Her story has the elements of a hero's journey, including a humble beginning, a great heart, and overcoming adversity to achieve greatness. She is another person with whom I have been honoured to work. Readers can learn more about her [here](#), where I actually describe her path as like Frodo's journey in *Lord of the Rings*.**
39. You reference *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter* in the novel. Why so? **You have already mentioned Joseph Campbell, who stressed the universality of mythic themes, with the movie sagas as modern versions. I also make use of the same mythic themes in AH: An exiled son rebelling against his father's evil empire; a virtuous queen in John's mother; a wise master in Howard Head; even a powerful wizard in Abraham Baryov. The fragility of science and scholarship is described as like the Fellowship of the Ring surrounded by Orcs, and the Lodge biological station is described as like the Hogwarts School in *Harry Potter*. Eve is described as like a proud Amazon queen and John regards sticking to the truth as a veritable Thor's hammer. These elements of the plot make for a good story and establish familiar points of reference with the reader. At the same time, I try to rise above simplistic renderings of good heroes battling evil villains, to achieve Singer's plane of writing where the reader can empathize with all of the characters.**
40. At the risk of spoilers, tell us about some of the *real-life people*, that some of the characters in the novel *Atlas Hugged* are based on (e.g., Howard Head, Ron, Omar, Peter Murchin, etc). **Howard Head is my avatar. Ron is based on my redneck neighbour and friend, Ron Rose. Omar is based on my former PhD student, Omar Eldakar. Some of my colleagues, such as Peter Turchin and Tom**

¹ For example, see: <https://on-writering.blogspot.com/2017/07/heroism-science.html>

Seeley, make cameo appearances with thinly disguised names, along with public figures such as Bill Moyers, George Will, and Natalie Angier. Of course, I freely altered them to fit the story, including my own avatar, Howard Head. Fiction is a form of mosaic art, where you can clip the “tiles” as much as you want to create a good fit. That’s what makes it so liberating!

41. If people wanted to explore more of their work (the real people), is it online? **Google the names of the scientists I just listed and you’ll find plenty. More generally, as you know, the epilogue of *AH* provides a guide to the scientific foundation of the novel.**

42. Why: Satire? (And, in conceiving the novel, did you consider, alternate approaches/styles?). **In your own comments on *AH*, you say it combines a number of genres: science fiction, romance, roman à clef (representing real characters in fiction), epistolary (a story told through the exchange of letters), mystery story, philosophy, science, politics, and hero’s journey adventure. Interestingly, your list doesn’t include satire! I didn’t have any of these genres in mind when I wrote *AH*, which shows how much I’m not a literary scholar. When it came time to publish, however, I learned that it is important classify the book as an academic critique, satire, or parody of *Atlas Shrugged* to avoid being sued! Luckily, *AH* authentically fits these categories, especially the category of academic critique. To make double sure, I took out liability insurance 😊.**

43. What other (literary / popular culture/ anything) *satires* do you admire, and, why? **Sorry to disappoint, but I am not well read enough to answer that question!**

44. Can you briefly summarize your scientific career? (For those, who may not yet know your work.). **Son of novelist. Became scientist to escape father’s shadow and indulge love of nature. Discovered evolution, much like the character of John Galt III. Gravitated toward the subject of how niceness can evolve. Became like the character of Howard Head. Left the Ivory Tower to work in real-world settings. Co-founded the Evolution Institute, which is a “character” in *AH*. Just founded a new non-profit called [Prosocial World](#), with the mission of bringing about what happens in *AH*.**

45. Can a novel – or, a nonfiction book - *change your life*? (...Have any, changed: Yours?). **Yes! Every person has a symbolic meaning system inside them that is chock full of stories. Those stories influence how they act, just as much as their genes. Most of the time, we imbibe stories that affirm our current worldview and therefore does not result in change. But sometimes a new story—fiction or nonfiction—moves you into new territory in terms of how you see the world and therefore how you act. Thinking of our symbolic meaning systems as like our genes is a powerful metaphorical transfer.**

46. Why don’t even more people know about (and, share) “The Evolutionary Worldview”? (...What has impeded its spreading ‘virally’, to date, in culture?). **At numerous points in *AH*, The Enlightenment is described as still a work in progress: The advent of science in the 17th century, the development of the physical sciences in the 18th century, Darwin’s theory of evolution in the 19th century, the synthesis of biological knowledge in the 20th century—and the synthesis of human-related knowledge in the 21st century. That’s how historians will look back upon our time, but living it appears pretty slow! Fortunately, there is such a thing as cultural catalysis, which can accomplish in years what otherwise would require decades or centuries. That’s what happens in *AH* and is actually starting to happen in real life. I’m optimistic about evolutionary thinking spreading “virally”, as you put it.**

47. You have combined Science and the Arts in writing *Atlas Hugged* - Tell us about the idea of ‘the unity of knowledge’ (aka, “consilience”)...? (For those who may not know?). **The unity of knowledge asserts that all branches of knowledge can and should be inter-relatable. E.O. Wilson, with whom I have also been honoured to collaborate, popularized the concept with his book *Consilience*. The most important question to ask about consilience is: Why is it so hard? Why does**

knowledge become so fragmented in the first place? In *AH*, Howard Head compares academic knowledge to a vast archipelago—many islands of thought with little communication among islands. The result is *mutual incomprehension*, similar to species that become genetically isolated from each other on islands.

48. How can “The Evolutionary View” (also known as ‘*This View of Life*’ - in which, there is: grandeur – as Charles Darwin noted) *unite* all domains of knowledge - and, all academic Disciplines? **Not just all academic disciplines, but all domains of practical knowledge. In *AH*, the first workshop organized by the Evolution Institute is on the concept of society as like an organism. This concept has arisen again and again in cultural “islands” that don’t communicate with each other, such as political science (e.g., Hobbes’ *Leviathan*), religious communities (e.g., the body of the church, united under the head of Christ), and business (e.g., the word Corporation is derived from the Latin for “body”). In addition to not communicating with each other, none of them are aware that for...the...first...time...in...the...history...of...ideas (as Howard Head forcefully puts it), the concept of society as an organism can be placed on a solid scientific foundation. Bringing them together and providing opportunities for them to interact is a form of catalysis that would not otherwise have happened in decades or centuries. What takes place in the novel needs to take place—and is taking place to a degree—in the real world.**

49. And - Why is this a good thing? **First, it is important to stress that *diversity* is a good thing. Cultures must be different from each other to adapt to different environments and for every problem that needs to be solved, variation must be oriented around the problem to compare and select better practices. A traditional culture should command the same kind of respect as a biological species. But mutual incomprehension is seldom a good thing. If you are bleeding and ask me for help, only to discover that I speak a different language than you, you would wish for more mutual comprehension.**

50. What is your own favourite (or the “best” in your view) line, of prose, in *Atlas Hugged*, and why? **Gosh! Keep in mind that I spent seven years polishing the prose of *AH*, so it is hard to pick a single line. But here is one I am particularly fond of, describing the sexual climax of John and Eve the first time they make love: “I threw my arms around her in a massive hug and we both made grunting noises in a final paroxysm of movement, as if some beast within us that long predated language had been authorized to speak.”**

51. What is your own favourite line of dialog, in *Atlas Hugged*, and why? **You are cruel to make me choose! But the dialogue between John and Howard at the end of “The Second Breakthrough” chapter stands out. It’s a bit lengthy so I won’t quote it here.**

52. Who is your favourite character in *Atlas Hugged*, and why? **This is like asking me to choose a favorite child! But Eve stands out as the primordial woman, a mover and adventuress who has every color running through her veins.**

53. What is your favourite “moment”, or scene in (or, part of) *Atlas Hugged*, and why? **The book has more than one plot, each with its own climax. The “Recluse” and “Homecoming” chapters are stories unto themselves. But I’ll nominate the duel of speeches between John Galt III and his father John Galt II, in part because this is portrayed as the climactic scene throughout the book, similar to the duel between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader in *Star Wars*. Yet, when the scene actually takes place, it is both anticlimactic in terms of what the reader might have expected and climactic in a different and more satisfying way. At least that’s how I intended it.**

54. How did you come up with, or write the love story in *Atlas Hugged*? **John’s relationship with Eve is fashioned largely after my relationship with my wife. How lucky can a guy get? The fictional relationship is highly idealized, of course, but it is founded upon mutual respect for each other’s work. This illustrates a more general theme: the need for individuals to become part of something**

larger than themselves to achieve fulfillment. John and Eve devote themselves to each other. Members of the True Objectivist movement devote themselves to the stack of symbols: the dot, the circle, the American Flag, and the Earth. As an aside, when my wife Anne and I were apart early in our relationship, we really did write to each other on powder blue airmail envelopes.

55. How about the other love story, with Angelina? Angelina started out as a minor character, just one of the group of journalists who visited John in his cell. Turning her into a second love interest was one of those “Of course! *That’s* how it must be!” moments that I experienced repeatedly while writing the book. Not only did this create dramatic tension, but it enabled me to portray John as transcending sexual desire, Buddha-like. Someone I had in mind in this regard is the scientist and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), who had close relationships with women who begged to make love with him, and who by all accounts kept his vow of celibacy.

56. What part of *Atlas Hugged* was the most fun to write? & Why? I was amazed by how much fun the whole book was to write, compared to nonfiction writing, which I also love. It was so engrossing that I turned to it at every spare moment—airplanes, airports, hotels, evenings, weekends. In between, the story lived and developed inside me like a lifeform. My personal experience affirmed that we are a story-telling species; something that I also think about academically.

57. And, the least fun? (Or “the hardest” to write?) ...Why so? The “Enough” chapter was challenging because it was narratively complex. It was the first chapter to depart from a strict chronology, so I had to move back and forth in time and weave three narrative threads together into a strong braid. The “Trek” chapter was tough because I had to pack in a lot of material about cooperative economies made possible by the Internet Age that I was only just mastering academically.

58. What writing (&/or creativity) advice would you give to: aspiring novelists? My Dad’s advice to me was that if I wanted to be a successful writer, I should do something worth writing about. So it begins with the subject matter. Also, a large part of good writing is about smooth information transfer—more economics than style. Don’t use twenty words if ten will do. Actually, I spent a bit of time on that last sentence. The first version was twelve words and I whittled it down to eight! That’s the kind of attention I pay to every sentence and the flow of every sentence and paragraph to the next. That makes me a slow writer, but fortunately, I love the process, the way that any craftsperson loves working on their craft.

59. What writing (&/or creativity) advice would you give to: aspiring scientists? Writing well can be a decisive career asset. Imagine a smart non-expert as your reader rather than an expert. Convey information in the form of stories whenever possible. In my newest non-fiction book, *This View of Life*, the theme of every chapter is conveyed in a series of story-like episodes that build upon each other. If you read my articles in peer-review journals or books published by academic presses, you’ll see that the prose is not much different than my books written for a general audience. Everyone appreciates clear writing and thinking.

60. Can you be an *artist* (e.g. a fiction writer) and a *scientist*, at the same time? (For: anyone thinking that they are “mutually-exclusive career paths”...?). Yes, please! I know a lot of scientists who engage in the arts on the side and try to integrate art with their professions as much as possible. One artist who seriously engages with science is [Baba Brinkman](#), who makes a living rapping about science. The more unity of knowledge is achieved, as discussed in earlier questions, the more accessible scientific knowledge will become, making it easier to express that knowledge through the arts. Of course, *AH* aspires to be an example.

61. Namely was C P Snow right, about “The Two Cultures” (Sciences & Arts) problem? I have an essay on this topic titled [“The One Culture: Four New Books Indicate that the Barrier Between](#)

[Science and the Humanities is at Last Breaking Down.](#)” It was commissioned by the *New York Review of Books*, but the editors were so horrified by what I wrote that they paid me and declined to publish it! This tells us that the two cultures problem still persists—but doesn’t need to. The unification of knowledge will prevail!

62. In the novel, you discuss a new currency (True Dollars), and *negative interest rates*—! Where did these ideas come from? And, how do they work? **The economy that is part of the New Objectivism movement, complete with its own currency and negative interest rates, is all based on nonfiction material that I have been reading about, which can take place in the real world and to some extent already is. One book I can recommend is [Rethinking Money: How New Currencies Turn Scarcity Into Prosperity](#).**

63. How could *real world change for the better* be brought about, as you illustrate in the novel? What are the things we can each do, right now, in our everyday lives? **The correspondence between what takes place in the novel and what I am attempting to accomplish with many others in the real world is closer than any other novel that I know. I encourage anyone reading these words to visit www.prosocial.world, where they will find a framework for individuals (the dot) to form into appropriately structured groups (the circle) to work at higher scales (the American Flag), all for the benefit of the whole earth. The first step (from the dot to the circle) will produce a double benefit. Individuals will thrive in a cooperative group environment and they will be more efficacious at a larger scale than they can be on their own.**

64. What are the *criticisms* of the novel – and, of its Philosophical System (namely, The Evolutionary Worldview, or “This View of Life”) that you can anticipate, or predict, or *probably expect*, ahead of time? (And - from which: demographics / audiences / critics?). **Well, since I am hitting Individualism, Rand’s particular version of it, and the neoliberal economic version of it pretty hard, at some point I expect them to hit back. But so far, the discourse around AH has been very constructive. Constructive discourse includes disagreement—it wouldn’t be very interesting if it didn’t—but in a way that leads to progress rather than entrenchment. Visit the [Atlas Hugged website](#) for links to a growing number of dialogues with really stellar people.**

65. What is an example of something you included in the novel, in order to render those predictable (or: “kneejerk”?) objections - or criticisms - *invalid*, ahead of time? **Here is how John Galt III disabled his father’s evil empire in the novel. First, he succeeded in re-establishing the norm of truth telling, so that his father couldn’t just endlessly dish out fake news. Then, the battle shifted to a contest between orthodox economists and a new breed of economist, for which John III and Howard Head were well prepared. Then there was an actual demonstration of a well-functioning economy during the trek. All of this could happen in the real world and already is to a degree.**

66. What things make life worthwhile, (&/or gives it: meaning) for you? **Like John III, I am an empath. The bit about John III following his mother around saying “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” is what my mother said about me when her marriage to my father was falling apart. Also, I need a life that is worthwhile both locally and globally. A good home, a nurturing relationship with my wife, kids, friends, and our dog Lizzie, time spent outdoors—in addition to working to change the world.**

67. Are they the same as for John Galt III, in the novel? **For the most part! Howard Head also! Both of them find working at the global scale exhausting and revel in the joys of everyday life—like splitting wood.**

68. If others are *searching for meaning (or purpose, or, goals) in life*, what do you suggest? **Become engaged in nurturing and appropriately structured groups working toward something that has meaning for you.**

69. You have written on religion in *Darwin’s Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (2002)... What are the good and bad points of: Religion? **The good news about religions is**

that they can create well-functioning communities with a strong sense of purpose. The bad news is that they often require beliefs that depart from factual reality and succumb to the evils of us vs. them. But everything I just said about religious meaning systems also goes for secular meaning systems! We need to begin with the study of all meaning systems, with religions a variety.

70. You talk about *the problems of suffering, and evil* (and, Buddhist solutions) in the novel. What solutions to these problems does Science offer? (Since as Howard Head notes in the story, “Evolution does not make everything nice!”). **John III’s second breakthrough is to realize that the first and second noble truths of Buddhism, the truth of suffering and craving as the cause of suffering, is true for all of nature, not just the human condition. Yet, if you want to find a world free of self-imposed suffering, just look inside any healthy organism. Turning the world into a single organism therefore becomes the fourth noble truth—a path to end self-imposed suffering. This reasoning is sound in real life in addition to the novel.**

71. Could Science ever *become* a religion? (...Why, or why not?). **If we define truth-seeking as the God of science, then in every other way it qualifies as a religion. Almost every key word associated with religion, such as sacred, worship, and spiritual, and soul, can be given a secular formulation. These themes are woven throughout AH.**

72. Do you think Science & Enlightenment Values could (or, even should?) ever ‘replace’ Religion, for humanity? **We need to recognize a baby and a bathwater in both of these. The baby of Science & Enlightenment Values is a commitment to factual knowledge. The bathwater includes the hubris that individuals can reason their way to solutions by pure logic. The baby of religion is strong and purposeful communities. The bathwater is wanton belief in adaptive fictions. What we want is a meaning system that scrupulously respects the facts of the world and provides the strong communities and sense of purpose that religions are known for. This is possible in principle.**

73. Can you speculate (possibly, wildly) on where *Homo sapiens* might evolve to, in: 100, and 1000, and 1 million years? **If the vision of AH came to pass, then *Homo sapiens* would evolve into a global superorganism, closely coupled with the rest of life on earth. There would be a huge technological component, but there would also be a vibrant local social life like a Hobbit shire. Democratic governance would prevail at all levels. Technology would be in the service of human welfare and not its master.**

74. What are the key dangers to humanity, right now, and in the future? (...Could we go extinct? Why, and How?). **The danger is not extinction but societal collapse, environmental degradation, and domination by authoritarian regimes, which has already taken place in many parts of the world. Just look at some of our current hell holes and imagine your life as like that.**

75. Has anyone yet compared your *Atlas Hugged*, to, E O Wilson’s *Anthill: A Novel* (2010)? Both seem semi-autobiographical. (It gives the reader: interesting insights into the author, how they think, and see the world.) **Not yet, and I haven’t read the novel myself.**

76. Darwin wrote many works - but never wrote a novel - and it seems, in later years, he came to be repelled by fiction. What’s your favourite work by Charles Darwin, and why? **For substance, I would choose (unsurprisingly) *Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man*. But his autobiography is by far the most charming, accessible, and insightful about Darwin as a person.**

77. If people want to get into Charles Darwin, where should they start? Would it be your book: *Evolution For Everyone* (2007)? Or even *Atlas Hugged*? **For a modern introduction to evolution in relation to human affairs, then try my latest nonfiction book [This View of Life: Completing the Darwinian Revolution](#), which is so parallel to AH that I made the covers look the same. For a biography of Darwin, try Janet Brown’s two volume [Voyaging](#) and [The Power of Place](#).**

78. Weird speculation: Do you think Darwin would have liked *Atlas Hugged*? I think he might be mystified by it! The whole individualistic background that *AH* critiques would be alien to him, just as the Victorian assumptions of his age are alien to us.

79. You recently did a long interview on: *Multi-Level Selection, Memes, and Western Values* (ToE: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3fG96gvgLU>)... Why is Multi-Level Selection a new paradigm of thinking/viewing, in science? **MLS theory begins with Darwin, went through a dark age in the 2nd half of the 20th century, and is now becoming recognized as central to evolutionary thought, especially in the case of human genetic and cultural evolution. At the time, its rejection was regarded as a great intellectual achievement, but in retrospect we can see it as merely the advent of Individualism in evolutionary biology, along with economics, the social sciences, and everyday life. In other words, at the same time that economists were trying to explain everything in terms of utility-maximizing individuals, evolutionists were trying to explain everything in terms of fitness-maximizing individuals and their genes. The revival of MLS theory therefore is part of the waning influence of individualism.**

80. Where did the idea of MLS come from - how did it come about? **Darwin realized that in any given social group, individuals who we would call prosocial (exhibiting altruism, charity, honesty, etc.) are vulnerable to individuals we would call self-serving (selfishness, avarice, treachery, etc.). If so, then how can prosocial behaviours evolve? Because groups of individuals who behave prosocially toward each other outcompete groups of self-serving individuals who cannot cohere. As I put it in the most famous meme I ever coined (with E.O. Wilson in a 2007 article): "Selfishness beats altruism within groups. Altruistic groups beat selfish groups. Everything else is commentary." It's that simple!**

81. How is MLS layered into the novel, *Atlas Hugged*? **It's integral, although never mentioned by name. It is represented by the stack of symbols on the cover, which represents the True Objectivist movement. Individuals (the dot) are nested within groups (the circle), which are nested within intermediate levels of governance (represented by the American flag), which are nested within the whole earth. What takes place at all of these levels need to become aligned with each other.**

82. Do we humans *select* 'good' ideas, and *de-select* the 'bad' ones? (And if so, why did 7 million people buy: *Atlas Shrugged*? ...What were they thinking?). **We need to distinguish between local and global to answer this question. Evolution selects traits (including ideas) that are locally good, compared to other traits in the vicinity. These same traits can be bad more globally. It's like all those folk tales where somebody gets to make a wish, only to regret their own wish. This is why evolution needs to be managed to achieve good global outcomes.**

83. Is this process, the 'evolutionary algorithm' of: *Blind Variation, and Selective Retention* (BV-SR), in culture? **What makes any process Darwinian are the three ingredients of variation, selection, and replication. The inclusion of the word "blind", however, requires a lot of unpacking. The idea that evolution has no purpose; that variation is always blind and only the environment does the selecting, was part of the modern synthesis, which was based on Mendelian genetics. It never made sense for human cultural evolution and isn't even entirely true for Mendelian genetics. We need to get comfortable with the concept of *conscious evolution*.**

84. Again, on - *Do we humans select 'good' ideas, and de-select the 'bad' ones?* And if so, why did 73 million Americans vote for Donald Trump (even though he still lost the election)... That's 10 million *more* than voted for him, in 2016 ...What were they thinking? **Again, we need to distinguish between local and global. The "Us vs. Them" dynamic is easy to understand from an evolutionary perspective. As the economist Robert Frank puts it, life is graded on a curve. What matters is who comes out on top. Absolute welfare has nothing to do with it. Those who shake their head in**

wonder over why people behave self-destructively at a global scale are not employing evolutionary logic.

85. Have you seen the (widely-panned, and widely-avoided) movie trilogy they recently made of *Atlas Shrugged* (2011, 2012, 2014)?² ...& Either way: Why do you think it flopped, at the movie box-office? (The budget was \$35M, and the box office was, sadly, \$9M.) **No, but I can make two guesses why it flopped! First, the basic storytelling of *Atlas Shrugged* leaves much to be desired. Fans love it for the worldview that it conveys, not for the storytelling. Second, that worldview is becoming outdated.**

86. What's the difference between: Natural, Artificial, Sexual, and Unconscious selection? **A textbook would say that natural selection is what the environment selects and artificial selection is what people select. But with sexual selection, members of one sex select the traits of the other sex, so is that natural or artificial? And the concept of self-domestication (individuals selecting each other for cooperative behaviours) is becoming a hot topic, including for human evolution. It gets pretty complicated!**

87. Do all 4 kinds of selection occur in both Biology, *and*, in Culture? **Cultural evolution is like genetic evolution in its fundamentals. Both are variation/selection/replication processes that adapt individuals and groups to their environments. There are also important differences, however.**

88. When things evolve, do they necessarily get "better"? **Only locally! A cancer cell is "better" when it proliferates more rapidly than normal cells. Evolution has no foresight. It is merely a process based on differentials!**

89. What stuff did you *cut out of* (or 'de-select', from) the novel, during: writing/re-writing/editing? And, why? **There was very little that I first wrote and then removed from *AH*—in fact nothing. On the other hand, the entire writing process was evolutionary and involved the selection of some directions over others, with much of that unconscious. This is what I call an "Of course! That's how it must be!" moment.**

90. Are there any "hidden themes" in *Atlas Shrugged*? (That, many of us, won't necessarily pick up on, without them being pointed out? You do mention some of the core Themes, in the *Appendix*.) **There are lots of secondary themes, although I wouldn't call them hidden. And I didn't plan each and every one of them beforehand. They emerged more organically as the story developed. A reflection on size is a theme, for example. Eve is as small as John III is large, but that gives her an advantage in many respects and she is always quick to cut him down to size. A reflection on race is a theme. Eve has every color running through her veins and I make sure to both include ethnically diverse characters and to describe them as physically beautiful (Omar, Sudhindra, Angelina). If Eve is defined by her genes, it is as a mover and adventuress, which has nothing to do with her skin color. The more diverse my fictional world became, the more opportunities I found to reflect on various themes.**

91. There's a lack of consensus on what the definition of a 'Theme' even is, in literature... Any thoughts, or preferences? (Or, a personal definition? Of: "Theme", in literature). **Dividing literature into themes is a scholarly exercise. As someone who is frankly not very well read in fiction, much less scholarship on fiction, I didn't give themes a second thought. As it turns out, I combined numerous themes, as you have observed!**

92. One of your doctoral students, Jon Gottschall, wrote a great book: *The Storytelling Animal* (2012). Did the analysis of narratives in that book have any influence on *Atlas Hugged*? (And, from an evolutionary perspective, why do we humans love *stories/narrative* so much?). **For sure! Despite**

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlas_Shrugged_\(film_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlas_Shrugged_(film_series))

what I just said about not being a scholar of fiction, I do think and write seriously about the nature of storytelling and all of the arts from an evolutionary perspective. I had this very much in mind while writing *AH*. Someone else who thinks deeply about storytelling from an evolutionary perspective is Brian Boyd, who is also a foremost scholar of the novelist Vladimir Nabokov. I did a podcast with Brian on *AH* that I highly recommend to your readers, along with our conversation. You can find it on the *AH* website.

93. Your academic - and popular book - writing prose style has often been praised for its accessibility, narrative throughline, and what Pinker calls "classic style prose". How did you learn to write like that? And, if you have read it, what do you think of Steven Pinker's writing manual, *The Sense of Style* (2015)...? **I haven't read that one either! My main influence is my father, not only for what I learned from him but also as proof that one can make a living as a writer. Also, it was natural for me to take a novelistic approach to science writing, which wouldn't occur to most scientists. Everything else was practice, practice, practice, made easy by the fact that I enjoy the process. It gives me great pleasure to write something that is enjoyable to read. The same kind of pride as someone who makes a fine piece of furniture.**

94. Have you written/published, short (fiction) stories? **Nope! And I never expected to write a novel until the idea of *AH* fell into my lap. Now that I have tasted the pleasures of fiction writing, however, I might be tempted again...**

95. What was your process, in writing the novel: Did you do an outline first, or 'exploratory drafts', or what? **An outline of the narrative arc was very firm in my mind; so much that I didn't need to write it down. But at a finer grain, the writing was more exploratory and unpredictable. In other words, evolutionary.**

96. During that 7 years of writing the novel, did you ever feel any 'pressure' (of: high reader expectations), given your father's novels? **My father loomed very large in my boyhood and I became a scientist in part to escape his shadow. I can view him more dispassionately in adulthood, but to write a novel is a kind of homecoming and to have it well received is gratifying beyond measure.**

97. What's some little-known fact, that (maybe) most people don't know about you? **My default assumption is that most people don't know me at all! The vaudeville comedian Jimmy Durante had a great one-liner about his huge nose: "I'm not in "Who's Who", but I am in What's That"! That's how I feel in front of audiences that are often encountering both me and the evolutionary perspective for the first time.**

98. What are some of the most interesting and important *new discoveries* in Science, in general? **I'll let Howard Head answer that one for me: "For ... the ... first ... time ... in ... the ... history ... of ... ideas, the concept of society as an organism can be placed on a solid scientific foundation."**

99. *Atlas Hugged* suggests: "False Objectivism is The Sanctity of the Individual. But True Objectivism is The Sanctity of the Earth as an Individual." ...So, what are your thoughts on Gaia Theory, as per James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis? **Good question. Lynn Margulis has earned a place in history for her symbiotic cell theory, which proposed that nucleated cells evolved not by small mutational steps from bacterial cells, but as symbiotic communities of bacteria. This was the first documented example of individuals evolving from groups. But she was somewhat uncritical about invoking the same concept at higher scales, all the way up to the whole earth. Likewise, Lovelock's concept of Gaia comes in a weak and strong form. The weak form is that that the earth's atmosphere is heavily influenced by biological processes. That's true for sure. The strong form is that the whole earth is a big superorganism, like a nucleated cell writ large. That is emphatically not true. What's true is that the whole earth can function as a single organism in principle, but this**

is something that humans need to bring about. It is up to us to bring the strong form of Gaia into existence.

100. In *Reflections on the Art of Living* (1991), Joseph Campbell (author of: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) said: "Today, the planet is the only proper 'in-group'." ...So, you would agree? **This is an aspirational statement, something that we should all take to heart and work toward. Nobody could think that it is currently the case, especially at this moment in history, when in-groups appear to be growing smaller (e.g., factionalism, nationalism) rather than larger. AH charts a path, through fiction, to get where Joseph Campbell is pointing.**

101. What's next for you? **Mostly trying to bring about the vision of AH in the real world through my new non-profit organization [Prosocial.World](#), which all revenues from AH are used to support. The online magazine [This View of Life](#) attempts the same kind of catalysis as the workshops in AH. And our practical method of working with single groups and multi-group cultural ecosystems is like what happens during the trek. Like my character John, however, I am careful to balance my world-changing efforts with a pleasant home life in the country with my wife Anne and dog Lizzie.**