Nonzero, from New Republic writer Robert Wright, is a difficult and important book—well worth reading—addressing the controversial question of purpose in evolution. Using language suggesting that natural selection is a designer's tool, Wright inevitably draws the conclusion that evolution is goal-oriented (or at least moves toward inevitable ends independently of environmental or contingent variables). The underlying reason that nonzero-sum games wind up being played well is the same in biological evolution as in cultural evolution. Whether you are a bunch of genes or a bunch of memes, if you're all in the same boat you'll tend to perish unless you are conducive to productive coordination.... Genetic evolution thus tends to create smoothly integrated organisms, and cultural evolution tends to create smoothly integrated groups of organisms. Admittedly, it's as hard to think clearly about natural selection as it is to think about God, but that makes it just as important to acknowledge our biases and try to exclude them from our conclusions. It is this that makes Nonzero potentially unsatisfying to the scientifically literate. Time after time we've seen thinkers try to find in biological evolution a drive toward complexity that might explain all sorts of other phenomena from economics to spirituality. Some authors, like Teilhard de Chardin, have much to offer the careful reader who takes pains to read metaphorically. Others—legions of cranks—provide nothing but opaque diatribes culminating in often-bizarre assertions proven to nobody but the author. Wright is much closer to de Chardin along this axis; his anthropological scholarship is particularly noteworthy, and his grasp of world history is excellent. Unfortunately, he has the advocates' willingness to blind himself to disagreeable facts and to muddle over concepts whose clarity would be poisonous to his positions: try to pin him down on what he means by complexity, for example. Still, his thesis that human cultures are historically striving for cooperative, nonzero-sum situations is heartening and compelling; even though its not supported by biology, its not knocked down, either. If the reader can work around the undefined assumptions, Wright's charm and obvious interest in planetary survival make Nonzero a worthy read. If the first chapter's title—The Ladder of Cultural Evolution—makes you cringe, the last one—You Call This a God?—will make you smile. --Rob Lightner

**Personal Review:** Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny by Robert Wright
QUOTE: "Non-zero-sumness is a kind of potential--a potential for overall gain, or for overall loss, depending on how the game is played."

This book is one of the most sophisticated, deep, documented, and influential I have ever read, right up there with Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge. Published in 2000, this book has NOT received the marketing promotion or the public attention it merits.

**THIS BOOK HAS SUBSTANTIALLY ALTERED MY PERCEPTION OF EVERYTHING ELSE.**

Historically rooted, this book takes a very long view, and discerns patterns in history that I find credible. In brief, cultural evolution is the advance in social complexity and the means of dealing with complex challenges facing dense complex social systems. It is rooted in the advance of technology with particular respect to the technologies of communication, transportation, and energy, but culture is itself a "technology" that is "at bottom a way of learning from the learning of others without having to pay the dues they paid."

This book has deep roots in Serious Games and is a very important and under-appreciated handbook for both Strategic Communication (SC) and for Information Operations (IO). In SC/IO terms, we cannot repress our own culture nor the culture of others, and we must endeavor to both assimilate "barbarian" cultural elements as they enter our society, and to diffuse the best of our cultural offering to all other cultures.

The author teaches me a new understanding of war and conflict and a new appreciation for "barbarians" that are not barbarians at all, merely different cultures that sense weakness or injustice in "our" culture and exercise a cleansing aspect. Bin Laden, with his opposition to the pathologically criminal "royal" family in Saudi Arabia, and the US military presence in Saudi Arabia--and the many others who oppose the US Government's bipartisan affection for 42 of the 44 dictators willing to do rendition and torture at our behest, can easily be perceived by those who are not ideologically-blinded to be such a "barbarian." Our elite system that has concentrated wealth and disenfranchised the middle class as well as the blue collar foreman class has hit bottom. We're bluffing with no gold in the bank, and he's calling. See the annotated bibliography that comes with Election 2008: Lipstick on the Pig (Substance of Governance; Legitimate Grievances; Candidates on the Issues; Balanced Budget 101; Call to Arms: Fund We Not Them; Annotated Bibliography).

+ Barbarians are the "mixmasters of culture" that also bring down zero-sum cultures (empires).

+ Oppression robs the "system" of time and energy that would otherwise go toward cultural evolution.
QUOTE: "In the great non-zero-sum games of history, if you're part of the problem, you'll likely be a victim of the solution.

This is a book that could be read a hundred times and still not be finished. I've done the best I could with a single pass. Some of my notes:

+ As connectivity increases, cultural evolution accelerates, mutates, and branches

+ Turmoil and conflict are good, lead to an "unfolding" of possibilities

+ Social self-organization is inspired by increases in complexity.

+ Evolutionary Psychology, especially Reciprocal Altruism, underlies Cultural Evolution.

+ SHARING INFORMATION IS THE ULTIMATE NON-ZERO ACT. On this point see my three favorite books:
  .....Infinite Wealth: A New World of Collaboration and Abundance in the Knowledge Era
  .....The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom
  Revolutionary Wealth

+ Social "safety nets" have been with us since time immemorial. Humanity displays a constant stubborn ingenuity that leads to incremental progress

+ Population density is in the author's view the primary builder of the social brain

+ Writing--and subsequent means of communicating and sharing information--made increased TRUST possible, and this has been vital to increasing non-zero options (recall the Nobel in the 1990's to the person who used game theory to show that trust lowers the cost of doing business).

+ ZERO-SUM (win-lose) does not require communications--kill or be killed. Communications is what enables zero-sum (win-win) options to multiply.

+ CORE POINT: When elites hoard both education and information, this leads to a concentration of wealth and power; spreading education and the means of communication (as Earth Intelligence Network has conceptualized, educating the five billion poor one cell call at a time, with free access to information via call centers in China and India, Brazil and Venezuela, Indonesia, Turkey, and Russia) distributes infinite wealth (without requiring the confiscation of existing concentrated wealth).
+ As early as 600 A.D. monarchs were discovering that market incentives worked better than top-down command and control in achieving general prosperity and protection objectives.

QUOTE: One key to the resilience of this giant multicultural brain is its multiculturalness. No one culture is in charge, so no one culture controls the memes (though some try in vain). This decentralization makes epic social setbacks of reliably limited duration; the system is 'fault-tolerant,' as computer engineers say."

+ People come and go, keep your eye on the memes.

+ "One key to culture's greatness is its indifference to local politics."

+ Printing press lubricated protest and alternatives, so also the Internet (and the cell phone).

+ Adam Smith's invisible hand depends on the invisible brain (this is one reason I place so much emphasis on eradicating data pathologies and information asymmetries such as characterize Wall Street, the International Panel for Climate Change, and imperial or dictatorial governments).

+ The author shares with Buckminster Fuller (Critical Path the concept of TIME-ENERGY, with information being an input, an output, and an inherent attribute of both.

+ The lower cost of information sharing is optimized ONLY when the broadest possible portion of the population is literate and engaged.

In the organic portion of the book, where the author entwines mental-cultural-human evolution with biological evolution:

+ "Each new species opens up a new 'design space.'" I wonder in passing if all the extinct species served their purpose, or if we have lost future opportunities for morphing.

+ "Our species is the link between biosphere and what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called the 'noosphere.'"

There are two short appendices, one on non-zero-sumness, the other on social complexity.

See also:
Conscious Evolution: Awakening Our Social Potential
Integral Consciousness and the Future of Evolution
Collective Intelligence: Creating a Prosperous World at Peace
The Genius of the Beast: A Radical Re-Vision of Capitalism