

Anthony Comegna ([00:19](#)):

Welcome, welcome, everybody to another week of Ideas in Progress, where we are spending this week and next with another book on offer. This time we'll be speaking with Bart Wilson, Professor of Economics and Law at Chapman University, where he holds the Donald P. Kennedy endowed chair. He works with the Economic Science Institute and directs the Smith Institute for Political Economy and Philosophy.

Anthony Comegna ([00:45](#)):

Professor Wilson is yet another prolific author in the IHS network. He's participated in all sorts of our events over the years. His latest book, and our subject here for the next few weeks, was published with Oxford back in July. *The Property Species: Mine, Yours, and the Human Mind*.

Anthony Comegna ([01:06](#)):

Professor Bart Wilson, thank you very much for being here. As I think we'll probably cover this a little more in a minute, but this book is really, really sweeping and it's very elaborate. I was surprised to see it was so short, or I guess more accurately, as I was reading through it, I was surprised I had so few pages left to go because it was so complex and complicated. The amount of disciplines alone that you bring into the conversation here is massive.

Anthony Comegna ([01:35](#)):

So my first question to you is what made you want to write a book like this? Because this is really a huge scholarly undertaking. So I'm wondering what inspired you and what kind of literature did you see yourself responding to with this?

Bart Wilson ([01:52](#)):

Well, thank you for having me. I started thinking about this as a project, as a book project, about five years ago, but it's really kind of an outgrowth of the last 15 years of my reading and doing experiments on property.

Bart Wilson ([02:10](#)):

So in the mid 2000s, I'd been working with Vernon Smith and Sean Crockett and Erik Kimbrough on kind of building the foundations and markets from the ground up. One of the things we realized is that when we built our little virtual worlds, that people could only move things to other people. Because we were interested in how exchange worked and how that would come about.

Bart Wilson ([02:35](#)):

We asked ourselves, well, what would happen if we just made a little change to the world in which people can move things from other people? What happened was, all hell broke loose. Everything, things were flying all over the screens, and that surprised us. We weren't ready for chaos and basically no stability of possession at the beginning of any session.

Bart Wilson ([03:04](#)):

Then a few of them, we realized started to come to pull things together at the end. That caused me to start thinking about what do property rights mean? Because that would be the word that I would have used at the time. It's what every economist is taught. We talk about property rights.

Bart Wilson ([03:25](#)):

So being at George Mason at the time, was very open to reading philosophy as part of the economists there. So I started reading David Hume and John Block about property. I thought I was going to be reading about property rights, but I realized they only talk about property.

Bart Wilson ([03:48](#)):

The starting point for this kind of whole project was well there's property rights, and then there's property. What's the difference? How far back do these concepts go? Property rights, it turned out as a kind of very new idea. It's a late 19th century idea that really takes off in the 20th century, but property is a very old idea.

Bart Wilson ([04:11](#)):

Hume, Lock, and as I kept on reading, it goes way back. Romans thought about property. The Sumerians were writing about property. So property seems to go way back and I wanted to know what it was. At the same time I had been starting to work with primatologists and comparing non-human primates with humans and their decision-making in very simple games. So I was spending more time with biologists, and I was talking about working on property with my human subjects in the laboratory.

Bart Wilson ([04:46](#)):

I talked to them about what I was working on and raising questions. They always kind of pushed back at me like, "Well, dolphins have property and wolves have territories and baboons respect the harems of other male baboons." So they were always telling me well, property's all over the animal kingdom.

Bart Wilson ([05:09](#)):

I then had moved to Chapman University and been spending more time with friends in the humanities' college. There, I would hear things like, well, property is this Western European thing. It's very modern. So only kind of a small group of humans have property. The project, the idea of the book, was really just to sit down and like, well, how do I make sense of this very diverse sense of the Academy on what property is? And how is I, the social scientist, going to kind of go down the middle of this?

Bart Wilson ([05:42](#)):

Because my hunch was, before I really embarked on this, was that there's something to the biologist claim about this being in our genes, something had to be in the species for property. But also the idea and what humanities scholars or thinkers come to property is they want to think about things from culture. So they look at it and say, "Look, Western European culture is very different than many other cultures around the world." So that idea of property is kind of part of what it is to be Western European, not necessarily African and/or in hunter-gatherer societies.

Bart Wilson ([06:26](#)):

So I had these very diverse views in the back of my head and I wanted to explore what it was and how it came about. So what am I responding to? I'm responding to the idea that well, property rights is how economists always think about it, but that idea is very modern. My hunch was at the beginning, that property is very old, very ancient. So that can't be the starting place for this project. I got to go back further if I really want to understand what property is and why our species happens to have it?

Anthony Comegna ([07:05](#)):

Well, as I said to you before we started recording here, in my college days, I was a bit of what we might call today, a propertarian. I was just fascinated by all the different nuances of arguments libertarians have had about property and property rights and their implications and all sorts of things over the years.

Anthony Comegna ([07:24](#)):

That was sort of my entree into serious argument for different libertarian perspectives. But I think I've changed a lot in that. Though I have to say this, reading your book reminded me of at least one book that I've read in recent years, though it's much older than when I read it. Gordon Tullock's book, *The Economics of Non-Human Societies*.

Anthony Comegna ([07:50](#)):

Because like you said, you talk a lot about biology and make comparisons between human beings and other animals. As does that book. I'm wondering, do you see yourself in conversation with that thesis of Gordon Tullock's at all? That non-human societies do often hold to the same economic principles as human societies?

Bart Wilson ([08:12](#)):

Well, so Gordon Tullock was working on that project when I was a graduate student at the University of Arizona. So I sat in his office talking about that and went to seminars with him talking about that.

Bart Wilson ([08:26](#)):

That was always in the back of my head of what do we have in common with the rest of the animal kingdom? How does economics work with that? Then what's the relationship between property and the rest of the animal kingdom?

Bart Wilson ([08:42](#)):

So I think Gordon came across it as much more of a cost benefit, kind of calculus being spread across all species. So I think that's very important. I think the tack I came to come in this project was to think about more or less how our psychology works, how our minds work. That difference really came to be important to how I explained how property works.

Anthony Comegna ([09:15](#)):

Let's take a minute, by the way, to recognize, as I indicated before, all the different disciplines that are represented in this book. This is just my count, and I started to kind of trail off at the end because I realized there were all sorts of little sub-disciplines I could include in the list.

Anthony Comegna ([09:31](#)):

But we have legal theory, legal history, economics, political theory, certainly there's lots of philosophy. There's some history, there's linguistics. Physical and cultural anthropology, which are very different literatures, and there's intellectual history. As I said, there's probably lots of others we could add to that.

Anthony Comegna ([09:53](#)):

So how do you go about obtaining a certain amount of scholarly mastery in each of these massive fields? I mean, they give out degrees in each of these things. So how did you do that?

Bart Wilson ([10:04](#)):

Well, so the kind of standard way of doing research in the Academy is analysis. That you take something and you drill deeply, you narrow it and just drill very deeply down, and try to understand that. That kind of is the way the silos of the Academy work. You do your own little area.

Bart Wilson ([10:28](#)):

I was interested in more of a synthesis. If I wanted to kind of take what the biologists were telling me seriously, and I wanted to take what I was hearing in the humanities seriously, and then everything in all the social science in the middle, I needed to be able to pull across that. In order to say something that I wanted to say about how property works. Take the perspective of an individual who is embedded in a community, and that communities now have grown to be these big polities.

Bart Wilson ([10:58](#)):

So that's going to require, if I'm going to tell kind of a story of how property came about, what it is, and how it works, to kind of draw across these many different fields. So basically, I mean, the book is a combination of my reading over the last 15 years. I got tenure at George Mason and I started attending a linguistics class. I was interested in how language worked. I started working with primatologists.

Bart Wilson ([11:29](#)):

So I read what I need to read in order to solve the question at hand. That's something I learned from my colleague Vernon Smith, who always recommend to read broadly and then work narrowly. So I read a lot to work on this very narrow question of what property is and how it works? So I'm going to pull from what I needed to in order to kind of understand the story and the kind of book unfolded that way.

Bart Wilson ([11:58](#)):

The first part came before the second part in the sense of, okay, I think I've tied together the origins of property. That's when I started to need to read kind of legal theory and case, common law cases about property, to kind of put it to work and test it and see how well it worked out there.

Bart Wilson ([12:17](#)):

So kind of the other part of it is, as not being an expert in all these areas, is to run my ideas and run versions of the paper or chapters, by all the experts in these areas. So I had two particular Chapman Law colleagues who read my sections on there to give me feedback on it. Run the biology by my primatology friends and Matt Ridley. Run the linguistics by semanticist, and make sure that I'm on the same page.

Bart Wilson ([12:56](#)):

In particular, I mean, the book is an homage. The title is an homage to Terrence Deacons, who's a neuro anthropologist, who had a book called *The Symbolic Species*. If I'm going to use his idea and it's going to be core to my ideas, going to run it by him.

Bart Wilson ([13:13](#)):

So it's a big part of just kind of listening to people and testing things out. I mean there many other people. Sarah Squire, when I started reading kind of middle English poems, needed to make sure that I had a good handle on that. My colleague Brennan McDavid is a philology trained ancient philosopher. So I could run my Latin by her because it's been well, since high school since I actually was studying it.

Bart Willson ([13:48](#)):

So it's a matter of kind of drawing connections with other people and running your ideas by them and getting checks on your thoughts that way.*

Anthony Comegna ([14:01](#)):

Well, I'm really glad you took us there because we started out there talking about how broad a study this is in a disciplinary sense. But in some sense, I am a generalist too, as listeners of the show might be able to tell, but my niche area is in intellectual history.

Anthony Comegna ([14:21](#)):

So I went through your acknowledgements pages here. Let me just read the list of names that I marked off as a preface to my question here. So we have Vernon Smith who you mentioned. Matt Ridley, you mentioned. Deirdre McCloskey, Sarah Squire, Terry Anderson, Tom Bell, Jonathan Portier. By the way, these are just the names that I recognize. Josh Hall, Tony Hernandez, Brad Jackson, Peter Jaworski, Don Kochan, Mark Labar. Again, McCloskey, Molly McGrath, Sarah Squire, Vernon Smith, Ilya Somin, John Thrasher, Kevin Vallier, [Boz Vander Vossen 00:14:59], and Brendan Starkey among many, many, many others.

Anthony Comegna ([15:04](#)):

Now, my question is really, I'm sure you're aware that in let's say the classical liberal libertarian, however you want to phrase it, the movement community, there are broadly speaking, two camps related to property, property rights, the whole set of discussions around these concepts.

Anthony Comegna ([15:25](#)):

There are the, let's say Kevin Vallier, who think it's really important that we respect each other's property rights because we need to trust each other. We need to be able to function together as a good society. Then there are the folks who say you better stay away from my property, or I'll toss you out of a helicopter or something like that.

Anthony Comegna ([15:46](#)):

How do you position yourself within this classical liberal community? Not just the scholarly community, but the United States or the world community abroad? How do you see yourself entering into this set of dialogues? What contributions do you hope that you can make? Before we get into the nuts and bolts of your thesis and everything else here.

Bart Willson ([16:09](#)):

Well, I think of myself in the small class, small C small L, classical liberal tradition, starting with Adam Smith. I'm an economist. I've been working on Adam Smith for now also about 10, 15 years. He's kind of an inspiration for this project.

Bart Wilson ([16:28](#)):

He is an astute observer. If you read his books, he's watching people very carefully and trying to understand, put the connections between the movements of why people do what they do. So he's kind of a big influence on me.

Bart Wilson ([16:46](#)):

I think then more recently, I think myself, and this is a very [hiechian 00:16:52] enterprise, but I think this is very much, I think, [hiechy 00:16:55] and social science of integrating law, psychology, and economics. So I think that is kind of where I would see those kind of 20th century influences on me. Of course, Deirdre McCloskey had a huge impact on me from bourgeois trilogy, which I started reading in 2007, of thinking about the role of ideas and understanding economics. That it's a change of ideas. It was an appreciation of ideas that led to this great enrichment as she calls it.

Bart Wilson ([17:38](#)):

To think about it in terms of ideas is well, not the norm in economics. We want to have material explanations for everything and not to put it up into the realm of ideas. So that was very important for me to read her work on the bourgeois era to start thinking and be opening my mind to that, it could be about an idea. It could be about what's going on in the mind that really could understand and put together how property works.

Bart Wilson ([18:11](#)):

I would be very much a Smithyian, Hiechian, McCloskian social scientist. That's where I see. I mean, that's what I've read to get to this point.

Anthony Comegna ([18:25](#)):

All right, now let's get to the argument because like I said, it's very complex for such a short book here. So I really want to have you walk through it with the listeners. Because I'm sure even if they go out and buy the book, they're going to need to be walked through at least some of these sections. Just because again, the disciplinary spread is so thick here.

Anthony Comegna ([18:48](#)):

Now I'm really, really interested in a lot of the anthropological stuff and a lot of the biological material here. I'll put my cards out up front, I am more on the postmodern side of social sciences. I kind of think science is all bunk because it's always interpreted by somebody with a subjective frame of reference and everything else. They're familiar enough arguments and sure we could debate them, but whatever.

Anthony Comegna ([19:13](#)):

I love these arguments though, because I just find it's like exercise, intellectual exercise. So let's do some of that here. Why do you see tools, and tool use, especially compound tools as so important to the generation of the way human beings uniquely treat property?

Bart Wilson ([19:36](#)):

Well, so my claim, kind of the central claim I put right there on the first page of Chapter One, that property is a universal and uniquely human custom, but it's not just going to kind of jump out with homo

sapien somehow. Somehow there's got to be features of property, that you can see go back into our primate cousins.

Bart Wilson ([20:04](#)):

So if the custom part of this, it was important for me when I started realizing what I wanted to say in the book, was that property in humans is very much something we have to teach. If you think about in other animals, whatever you think about baboons and dolphins and squirrels and scrub jays, they don't have to teach their progeny how to kind of resist being dispossessed of something.

Bart Wilson ([20:39](#)):

That seems to be built in. That seems to be innate. That's part of, kind of what we share with the rest of the animal kingdom. But what I think is important to humans, and what we see is different, is that we have to teach our kids. That means it's a social process of transmitting it from one generation to another.

Bart Wilson ([21:01](#)):

Sociality of social processes being transmitted in the non-animal kingdom then is a great place to look, to see what do we have in common here? So a lot of animals will socially transmit how to acquire stuff. So dolphin cows will teach their calves how to forage for food in a particular way. Orcas also have different socially transmitted ways of getting their prey. Orangutans will transmit how to use tools to acquire food as well.

Bart Wilson ([21:43](#)):

So socially transmitting how to get stuff isn't what's unique about humans. It is about in humans, we socially transmit how not to do something. We have this abstract notion of not. No is how we teach all our kids when they just can't grab something around and call it mine. So the socially taught part was important to the story.

Bart Wilson ([22:12](#)):

When I kept on reading, well, what is it about primates and they're socially transmitted practices? Noticed that they're very flexible. You can take a tool, a stick can be used for a play thing. It can be used for defense. It could be used to get food out of a termite hill. So that primates are very flexible in their use of tools and also how they transmit it. So most tool use, outside primates is pretty much genetically transmitted.

Bart Wilson ([22:56](#)):

By that, I mean, say like a digger wasp picking up a pebble and pounding. Or a Badger pushing tree matter over a hole so that their gopher prey have to go out a different hole. But they don't have to be taught that, that's just part of what it is come from the genes being passed on. It gets transmitted to them that way how to use pebbles and how to push tree matter around.

Bart Wilson ([23:23](#)):

But primates, particular Capuchins and chimpanzees, we know socially teach their young how to use tools. They're not born with it. In fact, there's great evidence of these hammer and anvil tools of

Capuchins, of juvenile sites being very terrible, very bad at cracking, using the rocks to crack open the nuts to get the meat inside.

Bart Wilson ([23:49](#)):

If you look at the mentors in the tribe, they're very good at it. They're very efficient at it. Primatologist has observed actually juveniles pulling over their adults over to show them how to do it, to go through this process. So the social transmission of tool use is part of the primate line, but it's not part of the non-human, the non-primate lines of animals.

Bart Wilson ([24:18](#)):

So that part seemed to me a connection there. So that's how I kind of got the entry point of thinking, well, why is it? Why would it be tools that are as important? Now kind of common features of chimpanzees and humans when we use our tools, that when we poke around with a stick, we can feel what the stick is pushing at, at the end of it.

Bart Wilson ([24:48](#)):

So for example, a chimpanzee will take a big stick, bludgeon it into a termite hill and poke around to find where the open chamber is. Because termites don't make that easy for you, they got to move it around. So they can feel from the end of that big club, when they've hit that open area. Then they pull it out and then they insert a small slender stick in order to get the termites to walk out on it.

Bart Wilson ([25:18](#)):

That's brilliant in the sense of you don't want to have a bunch of termites flood your hand and start biting you. You put them on a little stick and they all have to come out one by one, and then you can pick them off. But what chimpanzees and humans both do is we can feel through the tool to the end of it, to sense what our environment is like.

Bart Wilson ([25:39](#)):

So think of take a cane, close your eyes, tap around. You feel the end of the table through the tool. So now I have two connections. I have that there's this tool use that seems to be socially transmitted through primates. We have this idea that we kind of feel through our tools to understand our environments around us.

Bart Wilson ([26:03](#)):

So that was the connection that I started to see why tools had to be important to property. I mean, you also have to throw out why we wouldn't want to start with territory? Why we don't want to start with land? Make arguments in the why I don't want to start with food? So I can go through that part.

Bart Wilson ([26:23](#)):

But the tool part was important because we have a connection between homo sapiens and other primates about things, which is important part of property, and that it gets socially transmitted, and that we have some common, rudimentary starting points of our psychology being similar. So that seemed to me kind of the entry point of why are important.

Anthony Comegna ([26:51](#)):

Well so-

Bart Wilson ([26:52](#)):

Go ahead.

Anthony Comegna ([26:53](#)):

All those other things that you mentioned, where you introduce the argument that you dismiss them with various counter-arguments, land, et cetera, those all seem like sorts of tools to me. At least in a manner of speaking. Land is a tool to produce food or to hunt game or whatever it might be, to stay the night in a warm place, et cetera.

Anthony Comegna ([27:16](#)):

But now what about self ownership? Which I think most of us probably think as primary in terms of property rights. It seems to me that again, in a manner of speaking, and you can tell me if or why I'm wrong about this, that animals do teach their young about the principle of self ownership, property in themselves. In other words, that it's worth defending their existence and their wellbeing.

Anthony Comegna ([27:44](#)):

So maybe elephants don't teach their young to use spears with arrowheads tied on to them with tight leather and all of that dried in the sun, whatever. But they do teach them how to defend themselves. So how is that not an example of animals embracing these sort of most fundamental or primary version of property ownership over the self?

Bart Wilson ([28:11](#)):

No one has to teach a bear that if you poke it, they're going to turn around and get upset at you and come after the threat. No one has to teach a two year old when they grab something in their hand and call it mine to get upset when you pull it out. So that's not taught.

Bart Wilson ([28:35](#)):

The reaction of having something kind of in your grasp, and then somebody trying to pull it out of there. What parents don't teach their kids, well, now you need to get upset. When something happens like this, you get very upset. You get red in the face and you go after them. No, no, no. That's all built into animals in general, to in a sense resent being harmed. So I think that's different. That's not teaching them a tool, in something like that. The teaching part in humans is when they can basically claim something as mine, and when they can't.

Bart Wilson ([29:21](#)):

That's not what's being taught in non-humans. That they can't do this. They learn from experience, if you're a chimpanzee, you better not go after the alpha male, you'll get beat up. But it's not a parent taking the juvenile through this process. Here go get beat up so you can figure out what's going on here and not do that in the future. No, they learn that just by trial and error.

Bart Wilson ([29:49](#)):

The key concept is not. Like when somebody says, "Mine" and you say, "No." Those are two abstract ideas that are being put together in a way that you're not going to get in a non human animal talking

about things. So I want to get very basic about thinking about these ideas. So I don't want to think about tools as an abstract thing, like I'm using land or whatever.

Bart Wilson ([30:19](#)):

I want to think of it, it's a physical thing that's an extension of my body. It's touched my body. It's part of my body in some way, and I'm using it because my morphology doesn't allow me to do something that I want to do in the natural world. That's kind of my starting point. I want to make sure I address that comment about self ownership.

Bart Wilson ([30:45](#)):

I think self ownership, or thinking about respecting my physical body and who I am, is kind of coming after property. That's an abstract idea of a property that we then came to apply to something else. But I don't think that property is the way to think about kind of respecting the integrity of this body. I don't think that's the starting point. I think that's an abstract way, or a metaphorical way of applying a very ancient concept to something very new, this notion of self ownership.

Anthony Comegna ([31:26](#)):

Well, I guess let's tease that out a little more because my follow-up question is sort of, again, the title of the book is *The Property Species*. You're making the argument that only human beings behave this way, delineating property so clearly, and in so many different ways and in such important ways.

Anthony Comegna ([31:45](#)):

I'm wondering what is the value in that project versus a project that sees property, perhaps more in that Gordon Tullock style of the economics of non-human societies, that sees property as much more universal? It's not just all human beings in the quote universe, but it's all animal species or all living forms that defend themselves, have some sort of understanding. Or maybe we don't want to use that word, but you know what I mean?

Anthony Comegna ([32:18](#)):

They have some sort of drive toward treating themselves as a valuable property. This is one of the things you get into, is the many ways people have used this word over time, the many different things it means. But why this project and not that slightly more universalist project?

Bart Wilson ([32:39](#)):

So yes, it's part of all animals to have this instinct to survive. Because you won't remain a species or an individual if you don't push that and have some responses for that. So I think that's a very primal part that we share with all of the rest of the animal kingdom.

Bart Wilson ([33:04](#)):

So early on, I think it's important to recognize that there are certain effects of properties. So humans are going to resist dispossession, just like a bear is going to resist dispossession. But I will make the argument that that's not the essence of what property is in human beings.

Bart Wilson ([33:26](#)):

That humans do something else, and that's in the origins and how we think about the thing itself. So I want to put the origin part in how our minds classify the external things of the world, and that is where we are different. Then that will explain how we do things very differently than any other animal. Because ultimately as an economist, I want to get to the point of how is it that we are the only species to trade one thing for another thing?

Bart Wilson ([34:03](#)):

The argument that you have to have this notion of mine and thine before you can get to that part. That explains then why you're not seeing chimpanzees as hard as primatologists have tried, to get them to trade things. So I think it's in the perception of the physical world itself, that we can now see the many different things that we do with things, you can understand that, in particularly the exchange of stuff.

Anthony Comegna ([34:41](#)):

Thanks for joining us, everybody, and remember that Professor Wilson's book is available right now. So jump on your favorite bookseller and be sure to check out *The Property Species: Mine, Yours, and the Human Mind*.

Anthony Comegna ([34:54](#)):

In the meantime, far and away, the best and easiest thing you can do to help the show here is to toss us a rating and review on your go-to pod catcher. So please, please, please take a moment to go ahead and do that. But in any case, we'll be back here next week with the rest of our interview with Bart Wilson, who is a Senior Fellow for the Study of Liberalism in a Free Society here at the Institute for Humane Studies, by the way. I hope you'll join us again for more *Ideas in Progress*.