Extracting Morality from the Moral Sense  
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Character and the Moral Sense: James Q. Wilson and the Future of Public Policy  
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Section 1 of chapter 1 of The Moral Sense advances the thesis that we have a moral sense that is the product our innate endowment and our earliest familial experience. Section 2 of chapter 1, entitled “Morality vs. Philosophy,” begins with these words:

“At one time, the view that our sense of morality shaped our behavior and judgments was widely held among philosophers. Aristotle said that man is naturally a social being that seeks happiness. Thomas Aquinas…argued that man has a natural inclination to be a rational and familial being; the moral law is, in the first instance, an expression of a natural – that is innate – tendency. Adam Smith wrote that man is motivated by sympathy as well as by self-interest, and he developed a moral philosophy squarely based on the capacity for sympathy.”

But, says Wilson, “modern philosophy…represents a fundamental break with that tradition.” He’s right, the philosophy of the 20th century did break with it. But he seems not to have understood why. Marx and Rorty, whom he cites, were irrelevant; Ayer’s 1936 view that because moral statements are unverifiable they are merely ejaculations or commands, didn’t last. Today I will sketch why the break between philosophy and morality occurred, how the break is connected to the larger cultural diminishment of morality Wilson decries, and how his social scientific approach addresses both the philosophical and the cultural diminishment of morality of the last 100 years.

The tradition of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Smith recognized the existence of moral facts, knowledge of which provided reasons for action. The philosophers who broke with the tradition did so because they believed the questions, What are moral facts? and How do they provide us with reasons for action?, raised by the tradition, can’t be answered. A
moral fact, these modern philosophers contended, must provide a reason for all relevantly situated rational agents to act in a certain way. The authority of morality is tied to the generality of these reasons. Many facts provide reasons for acting without themselves being moral facts. The fact that I can afford tickets to a sporting event gives me a reason to attend in order to support my local team, but only if I am interested in doing so. Since not everyone shares my interest, and there’s no reason they should, this fact isn’t a moral fact. A moral fact must provide reasons for action that aren’t conditional in this way. If you are morally obligated to do something, your obligation isn’t conditional on any renounceable interest, sentiment, or preference of yours.

Do any facts provide categorical, rather than merely conditional, reasons for action? Consider three candidates: (i) the fact that lying or breaking a promise subverts the very trust that makes one’s lie or promise possible, (ii) the fact that one who shirks one’s share of the burden of a collective effort from which one benefits asks others to do something that one refuses to do oneself, (iii) the fact that securing a modest benefit to oneself may, in a certain case, harm others. These will all count as moral facts if they provide reasons for all agents to refrain from the behavior in question. Do they? Imagine a rational being who lacks concern for others, who expertly calculates benefits for himself, and who always acts accordingly. Because the three facts just mentioned are unconnected with this agent’s goals, they won’t, in and of themselves, count as reasons for him. To be sure, a race of relentless interest-maximizers might sometimes need to cooperate to achieve mutually beneficial ends. In such cases they may behave cooperatively. But they won’t behave morally, because genuine affection, loyalty, trust, reciprocity, openness, and obligation will be absent.
This thought experiment shows that some facts we commonly take to be moral facts don’t provide reasons for all conceivable rational beings to act. How then do they provide us with binding reasons to act? How do facts that can be known without one’s taking any particular motivational stance toward them – facts with no necessary connection to ultimate interests the knower -- count as genuinely moral? Couldn’t you and I know my three facts, while understanding our individual interests perfectly well, without taking them to provide us with binding reasons to act? If the answer to this question is ‘yes’, then, the idea that we have genuine other-regarding duties in the sense of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kant – duties that can’t be shirked by adopting different motivating interests -- is a fairy tale. That, more or less, is what many 20th-century philosophers believed. But James Q. Wilson didn’t. Instead, he set out to find, using social science, the basis in human nature from which duties do arise.

But how, you might ask, could he possibly succeed? Since reasons for rational action must depend on motivating interests that can, in principle, vary from one rational agent to another, no mere facts can provide all such agents with reasons to perform other-regarding actions. In short, there is no objective morality that binds all possible rational agents. This conclusion was, I think, plausibly taken to be a conceptual truth by many 20th-century philosophers. And if it is a conceptual truth, it can’t be overridden by science. So, where, in moral philosophy, do we go from here?

We start by recognizing that there is more to morality than rationality. We don’t need an objective morality for all possible rational beings. We do need one for normal, rational human beings. If Wilson is right, our human genetic endowment, our early family experience, and the unalterable circumstances of the human condition provide us
with a motivational base that ties us by bonds of affection, social affiliation, and mutual interest to our fellows. This is the raw material that generates reasons for other-regarding action, the authority of which can, in principle, be recognized by normal human beings. To discern what these reasons are, and what specific actions they enjoin, is to construct a moral code, which goes beyond what Wilson attempted. His job was to show that the such a construction is possible by demonstrating a naturalistic basis, which he calls the moral sense, on which objective morality is founded.

In doing his job, he repudiates Freud and embraces Darwin. Because cooperation promotes survival, we have been bred, by natural selection, to be social animals. It is not just that we need and want what others can provide, and so are forced by self interest to depend on them. We are also disposed to form powerful cognitive and emotional attachments to them. Parents are innately disposed to protect, nourish, and love their babies. Children naturally love, imitate, and emulate their parents and others with whom they are intimate. As children we form reciprocal bonds of affection and trust in which our well-being is intertwined with theirs. Entering into games and collective activities with others, we learn the rudiments of fairness, which involves adhering to common rules and earning rewards proportional to the value of our efforts.

This fusion of natural sentiment with rational principle gives birth to morality. Sentiment infuses our participation in games and collective activities with those we like and admire, and whom we wish to be liked and admired by in return. Often these individuals will be models of the people we hope to become. The accepted rules governing our activities with them are impersonal principles that apply to anyone who occupies a given role in the effort. Because these rules define the commonly accepted
terms of participation in a mutually beneficial undertaking, it is in the self-interest of each participant to obey them. But they are much more than prudential directives. Because the participants are often comrades bound by ties of social affiliation, rule violations carry psychic risks beyond the loss of the purely self-interested benefits secured by participation. Violations of the rules governing interaction with one’s socially affiliated fellows are affronts to one’s comrades, to one’s friendship with them, to one’s image in their eyes, and to the person one wants oneself to be. With this, instrumentally useful rules obeyed to secure the benefits of group action become principles to be honored even when no one is looking. This is the crucial point at which sentiment, social affiliation, and recognition of mutual interest are incorporated into the broad principles of general application that constitute morality.

This account of how Wilson’s moral sense may generate embryonic moral principles defining obligations to family and friends is only the beginning. More is needed to explain how broader obligations are generated -- to one’s community, to one’s country, and even to all human beings. The task can be accomplished only by recognizing (i) that we are beings that construct our own identities in relation to others, (ii) that in doing this we often must rely on others for guidance about who we are and whom we wish to become, (iii) that the most successful way to secure this guidance requires being open to and caring about others, and trusting them to feel similarly about us, and (iv) that to build the relationships we need we must internalize, and be seen as internalizing, universal rules of reciprocity that encompass not only the ancient principle Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, but also its corollary, Be the kind of person that you want and expect others to be.
That, in a short space, is my sketch of a philosophically defensible construction of an objective morality based on Wilson’s moral sense. But more is at stake than abstract philosophy. The *cultural conception of morality*, which changed drastically in the 20th century, is also at stake. Today the leading transmitters of culture in the West -- the universities, the news media, and the entertainment industry among them -- have largely given up on morality as a domain of objective fact the knowledge of which can be advanced by reasoned argument informed by the empirical study of human nature. As my late colleague, Dallas Willard, put it, they have given up on the reality of moral knowledge. These cultural institutions haven’t given up their moral passions. The passions are too deep for that. But because they no longer believe in moral knowledge, they don’t subject our moral passions, or theirs, to the rational scrutiny they require. By removing reasoned argument and scientific inquiry from the equation, they have coarsened our passions, made them more unreasonable, generated intolerance where there should be civility, and deprived us of our best means of *enhancing* our moral sense. This cultural phenomenon is, I think, what concerned Wilson in the section of chapter 1 entitled *Is everything permitted?* Of course, everything isn’t permitted, but it is important to *know* and *explain* why it isn’t. I hope my elementary sketch of how genuine moral obligation can arise from the innate moral sense Wilson identifies illustrates how philosophers and social scientists together might use his work as a starting point for combating the cultural diminishment of morality he deplored.