

**Scott Soames**  
**Is There a Social Science of Morality?**

The *Moral Sense* is an ambitious work that aims to reshape the ways in which many of us -- philosophers, social scientists, educated men and women generally -- think about fundamental moral matters. Its central philosophical thesis is that there is such a thing as empirical knowledge of moral facts, which can be deepened, advanced, and made more systematic by social scientific research. Its central social scientific thesis is that we have a moral sense consisting of a complex set of social dispositions relating us to our fellows that is the product of our innate endowment and our earliest familial experience. Although the moral sense does not yield a detailed or comprehensive set of universal moral rules, it can, Wilson argues, provide a factual basis relevant to the moral assessment of agents, their acts, and their policies in widely different circumstances.

The first challenge to this message is philosophical. Wilson was well aware that his view of the sources of morality in human nature was not widely shared by leading philosophers of the twentieth century, though it was, of course, shared by some of their distinguished predecessors. About the latter, he says:

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. (2-3)

However, Wilson also recognized that this perspective on moral philosophy was, when he wrote those words, no longer widely shared. Thus, he immediately added:

Modern philosophy, with some exceptions, represents a fundamental break with that tradition. For the last century or so, few of the great philosophical theories of human behavior have accorded much weight to the possibility that men and women are

naturally endowed with anything remotely resembling a moral sense. Marxism as generally received...is a relentlessly materialistic doctrine in which morality, religion, and philosophy have no independent meaning...If Marx hinted at morality without examining it, much of modern philosophy abandoned morality without even a hint. Analytical philosophers took seriously the argument that “values” could not derived from “facts,” and tended to relegate moral judgments to the realm of personal preferences not much different from a taste for vanilla ice cream. In 1936 A. J. Ayer asserted that since moral arguments (unlike the theory of gravity) cannot be scientifically verified, they are nothing more than “ejaculations or commands,” “pure expressions of feeling” that have “no objective validity whatsoever.” (3)

Fortunately, these words, which were already a bit dated when written twenty-one years ago, are now even more so. Although moral non-cognitivism is still a leading position in analytic philosophy, its present forms are less extreme and more sophisticated than Ayer’s, and its ascendancy is far from universal. Nevertheless, Wilson was right in saying that the moral philosophy of much of the last century did break with tradition. He was also right in identifying the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between fact and value as being largely responsible for the break. What he didn’t see quite as clearly – and what I suspect many of his readers and colleagues in the social sciences have difficulty seeing – is how any social scientific results could possibly revive an apparently defunct tradition of moral thought. Thus, the first step in evaluating the paradigm-shifting aim of *The Moral Sense* is to clarify what the fact-value distinction is, what it is not, and how its significance for moral inquiry may indeed be influenced by what the facts about human nature turn out to be.

The tradition of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Adam Smith took for granted the existence of moral facts, knowledge of which provided reasons for action. The philosophers who broke with that tradition did so because they believed the questions, *What are moral facts?* and *How do they provide us with reasons for action?* 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. Impressed by Kant's distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives, they tended to tie the authority of morality to the generality of these reasons. Many facts provide reasons for acting without themselves being moral facts. The fact that practice is necessary to become proficient at playing the piano gives me a reason to practice, but only if learning to play well is among my valued ends. Since not everyone wants to play the piano, 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 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 what one refuses to do oneself, (iii) the fact that benefiting oneself will, in a certain situation, 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 any concern for others, who coldly calculates benefits for himself alone and always acts accordingly. Because the three facts just mentioned are unconnected to his 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 co-ordinate their actions to achieve mutually beneficial ends. In those cases they may behave in a way that outwardly appears to be cooperative. But they won't, thereby, behave morally, because they will opt out

whenever they can enjoy the benefits without incurring the costs of participation, and because genuine affection, loyalty, trust, reciprocity and obligation will be absent.

This thought experiment suggests that some facts we commonly take to be moral facts don't provide reasons for *all conceivable rational agents* to act. How then do they provide *us* with binding reasons? How do facts that *can be known* without one's taking any special motivational stance toward them, facts with no *necessary connection* to the ultimate ends of the knower, count as genuinely moral? Couldn't you and I know facts (i) – (iii) above, while understanding our own interests perfectly, without taking them to provide *us* with reasons to act? If the answer is 'yes', then the idea that we have other-regarding duties in the sense of Aristotle, Aquinas, Smith, and Kant – duties that *can't* be shirked by adopting different motivating ends -- is a fairy tale. That, more or less, is what many 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers believed, and what a substantial number of philosophers still do. But James Q. Wilson didn't believe it. Instead, he set out to find, using social science, a basis in human nature capable of undermining that belief.

But how could he possibly succeed? Surely, reasons for action depend on motivating values and interests. If these can, in principle, vary from one rational agent to another, it follows that no mere *facts* can provide *all such agents* with reasons to perform other-regarding action. In short, there is no objective morality that binds all possible rational agents. This conclusion has, I think plausibly, been taken to be a conceptual truth by many philosophers and social scientists for a hundred years. And if it is a conceptual truth, it can't be overridden by science. Thus, the question for Wilson is *How could any conceivable empirical findings possibly revive the lost tradition in moral thought?*

The answer is that what is impossible -- an objective morality for *all possible rational beings* -- isn't what we seek. What we seek, and what the tradition tried to provide, is an objective morality for all normal, rational *human beings*. If Wilson is right, our 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, in his view, is the raw material that generates reasons for other-regarding action, the authority of which can, in principle, be recognized by every normal human being. To discern what these reasons are is not, by itself, to determine what specific actions they enjoin in the myriad different circumstances in which they are present, nor, for that reason, is it to adopt a detailed moral code. One can accept Wilson's contention that facts about human nature provide an objective foundation that grounds moral assessments, while recognizing, as he did, that many evaluative conclusions about actions and agents in specific circumstances will be only partially determined by whatever facts about human nature we may discover. To demonstrate the existence of an innate moral sense is not to provide a recipe for what is to be done; it is to provide a factual framework within which rational, empirically informed debates about what should be done can take place.

In making his case, Wilson repudiates Freud and embraces Darwin. Because cooperation promotes survival, we have, he argues, 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 impelled 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, nurture, and love their babies. Children naturally bond with parents, while imitating and

emulating, not only their parents, but also others with whom they are intimate. In their early years they form reciprocal bonds of affection and trust in which their well-being and self-conception is intertwined with others. Entering into games and collective activities, they learn the rudiments of fairness, which involves adhering to common rules and earning rewards proportional to the value of their 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 who we hope will like and admire us in return. Often these companions will be models of the people we wish to become. The rules governing our activities with them are typically 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 more than prudential rules of thumb. Because the parties 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 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 point at which sentiment, social affiliation, and recognition of mutual interest are incorporated into the binding commitments and broad principles that constitute morality.

This sketch of how Wilson's moral sense may generate embryonic moral principles defining obligations to family, friends, and compatriots is only the beginning. Much more is needed to explain how broader commitments are generated – to casual acquaintances, to strangers one encounters, to one's community, to one's country, and even to all human beings. Although Wilson says comparatively little about this, I suspect that progress can be made 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, impersonal 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 you want and expect others to be*.

This is the moral and intellectual landscape into which Wilson's *The Moral Sense* fits. In what follows I will add some detail concerning four key points: the multiple distinctions between fact and value, the social and psychological content of Wilson's postulated moral sense, his reasons for taking the moral sense to be included in our biologically based human nature, and the scope and limits of the morality that might emerge from such a moral sense.

### ***Fact, Value, and Human Nature***

In the last chapter of *The Moral Sense* Wilson discusses the origin of his thinking, as well as that of many others, about the distinction between fact and value.

Students of philosophy will recall the moment at which they first acquired doubts about the possibility of saying anything meaningful about the good life. It was when

they read, or heard about, David Hume, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher who set himself the task, taken up also by Adam Smith, to find a basis for morality that was independent of revealed religion.

In this *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume wrote that in every book of moral thought that he had so far encountered, the author would at some point make an imperceptible but vastly important change. At one point he would be asserting that something *is*; in the next breath he would assert that these things *ought to be*. For example, the phrase, “men make and keep promises” suddenly becomes, “Men ought to keep promises.” I learned from Hume, as did legions of my fellow students, that this transition is impossible; one cannot infer an “ought” statement from an “is” statement; in modern parlance, one cannot infer values from facts. It is logically untenable.” (237)

Wilson here repeats the conventional understanding of Hume’s widely accepted doctrine about the relationship between statements of fact and value. But, Hume interpretation aside, matters are not quite that simple.

Wilson rightly suggests that what is standardly meant by the slogan “One cannot infer ‘ought’ from ‘is’,” is that one may not validly derive an evaluative *ought*-claim from a factual premise, because the former is not a *logical consequence* of the latter. But this too needs interpretation. In formal logic, whether or not one sentence is a logical consequence of another never depends on the subject matter introduced by any nonlogical words -- words other than ‘all’, ‘some’, ‘and’, ‘or’, ‘not’, ‘if, then’ and ‘=’. Thus ‘Jim ought to do x’ fails to be a logical consequence of ‘Jim promised to x’ for the same trivial reason that ‘The ball is red’ fails to be a logical consequence of ‘The ball is crimson’ and ‘Jim doesn’t know that he won’t win’ fails to be a logical consequence of ‘Jim intends to win’. In each case, the conclusion contains nonlogical words not contained in the premise. This is enough for the close epistemological relationship between them not to qualify as “logical.”

The notions we need are necessary and a priori consequence. A proposition Q (expressed a sentence) is a *necessary consequence* of a proposition P if and only if it is



*impossible* for P to be true without Q being true – if and only if for any state w that it is possible for the world to be in, if P would be true were the world in w, then Q would be true were the world in w. Proposition Q is an *a priori consequence* of proposition P if and only if it is possible to determine that Q is true, if P is, *by a priori reasoning alone, without appealing to empirical evidence to justify one's conclusion*. The natural interpretation of Hume's admonition is that no claim about what an agent ought to do is both a necessary and an *a priori* consequence of any factual claim or claims.

The main reason many have accepted the admonition is summed up by the Humean phrase, “*Reason is the slave of the passions*,” which means that reason selects the means to our ends, while desire provides the ends and so moves us to act. Suppose, for the sake of argument, we add the assumption that *it is true that one ought to do x only if one has some potentially motivating reason to do x*. Next we ask whether the proposition that Jim ought to do x is both an *a priori* and a necessary consequence of the claim that he promised to do x. The thought that it isn't is dictated by the ideas (i) that nothing we know *a priori* about Jim conclusively determines that his promising to do x gives him a motivating reason to do x, and (ii) that no matter what the actual facts about Jim and his motivational state may be, he could have existed (and promised to do x) while lacking any motivating reason to do x. If this is correct, then the claim that Jim *ought* to do x is neither an *a priori* and nor a *necessary* consequence of the premise that he promised to do x. If this result generalizes to factual premises and ought conclusions generally, then one cannot, *in this sense*, validly derive *ought* from *is*.

However, we still have not made contact with Wilson's thesis that humans have an innate moral sense that provides an objective basis for some moral judgments. Since

his thesis is an empirical hypothesis, it isn't knowable *a priori*, which means that it has no bearing on what are, and what are not, *a priori consequences* of propositions about human agents like Jim. Although the situation is a little different with *necessary consequence*, the differences aren't significant for our purposes. It is plausible to suppose that anyone who is human is necessarily human, and also that certain features of our innate endowment are necessary to being human (in the sense that loss of them in any possible future evolution would result in new, nonhuman organisms). But it is not plausible to suppose that all features of our innate human endowment are necessary in this way. Since it is unclear how much of Wilson's posited moral sense might fall into this category, we are well advised not to rely on unsupported speculation about it. To this extent, there is *no conflict* between a Wilsonian moral sense and an orthodox Humean distinction between 'is' and 'ought', or, more generally, between fact and value.

Wilson does *not* argue that some 'ought'-statements are necessary *a priori* consequences of factual statements. He argues that statements about the innate moral sense of human agents provide *evidential support* for some statements about what, in the main, normal human agents should, or shouldn't, do. The sources of this support are other-regarding ends and interests that are inextricably linked in normal human agents with more narrowly self-regarding concerns, and so beyond their power to renounce. Depending on the situations in which we find ourselves, these other-regarding motivators provide us with moral reasons for action. It is not required that they be the only reasons bearing on an act; often they are not. Because we typically have many, often conflicting, reasons, it is not required – in order for something to count as a moral reason for acting in a certain way – that we actually act in that way. Nor is it required that one consciously

recognize or acknowledge each reason one may have. It is enough that one's fundamental ends and interests would be furthered by performing the act.

Wilson doesn't specify the truth-conditions of any evaluative statements, let alone of contentious claims about what we ought to do in difficult cases. Nevertheless, it is useful to sketch a framework for assigning such truth conditions in order to illustrate how natural facts about other-regarding aspects of our basic motivational make up might provide *empirical evidence* for certain moral claims – particularly those involving what is required of, or best for, most human agents in normal circumstances. Here is a provisional picture. To say that an act is a moral duty is to say that it is one such agents morally ought to perform. To say that an act is morally wrong is to say that they morally ought not perform it. To say that an individual agent A ought (or ought not) to do x in a particular circumstance C is to say that, given the facts in C, A has more reason than not to do (or not to do) x -- where such a reason provides grounds for thinking that one's ends and interests will thereby be advanced. In this framework, factual statements about the ends and interests of agents provide evidence for claims what agents ought, or ought not, to do.

Sometimes the *oughts* and the *reasons* are merely prudential, and the ends and interests are not, primarily, other-regarding. But sometimes the *oughts* and the *reasons* are moral. To say that A *morally ought* to do x is to say that A has stronger *moral reasons* to do x than not to do x. Here, the ends and interests advanced are those arising from one's social attachments to others. Typically these involve commitments that have become part of one's self-conception and inseparably intertwined with one's narrower concerns. Although moral reasons of this sort are often powerful, there is nothing in

Wilson, or in what I have so far said, that tells us how, exactly, to evaluate the *strength* of reasons for action. Nor is there anything that tells us how we should weigh moral and non-moral reasons against one another when they conflict. But these shortcomings may not be insurmountable. One natural strategy would be to apply the machinery of decision theory to extract utility and probability functions reflecting agents' preferences and "degrees of belief", which, in turn, generate "expected utilities" of different possible actions. Given all this, the strength of an agent's reasons for doing x in circumstance C might be defined in terms of x's expected utility – where 'utility' is broadly understood as subsuming all fundamental interests of the agent, including the other-regarding ones. Indeed, models of this sort are now the subject of intense investigation in formal epistemology, practical reasoning, and metaethics.

That said, the point of this abstract sketch is not to advocate any existing theory. The point is to illustrate how empirical Wilsonian claims about social attachments that arise from our genetic endowment and our early childhood experiences could, if true, provide scientific evidence supporting moral assessments of agents, their actions, and their policies. With this we turn to the content of Wilson's moral sense.

### ***The Social and Psychological Content of the Moral Sense***

Wilson divides the content of his postulated moral sense into four virtues: sympathy, fairness, self-control, and duty. By 'sympathy' he means our sensitivity to and concern for the well being of others with whom we are in contact. By 'fairness' he means the disposition to engage in rule-governed conduct based on reciprocity (you help me and I will help you), equity (equal or proportionate rewards for equal or proportionate contributions), and impartiality (disputes settled by disinterested third parties in accord

with rules known in advance). By 'self-control', he means the ability to resist temptations not only to advance one's own long-term interests but also to keep promises, honor commitments, and reciprocate affection. By 'duty' he means the disposition to honor commitments and obligations even when it is not in one's narrow self-interest to do so.

The interaction between virtue and self-interest is complex. Were the virtues not distinct from self-interest, they would not be virtues. Were they not intertwined with self-interest, we would never acquire them as character traits that motivate action. Because most people admire other-regarding behavior it is generally in one's interest to develop a reputation for being sympathetic, honest, fair, and reliable. Because we are always observing and judging others, the most reliable way for one to acquire such a reputation is by exhibiting the virtues we want others to believe we have.

As the economist Robert Frank puts it in his excellent analysis of how we signal a reputation to others, people will accept your behavior as a sign of honesty or duty only when it would be costly to fake it. [Frank (1988)] . If it is very costly to fake it, you can't fake it; the reputation you then earn for honesty or duty corresponds exactly to reality. You *are* dutiful. (102)

This is why it is normally in one's interest to acquire the habits of virtue. Although these habits won't always redound to benefit of one who has them, they usually will. Even when they don't -- when acting morally requires genuine self-sacrifice -- there are compensating rewards. Because virtuous agents have cultivated their natural sociability, developed commitments to others, and internalized duties, their ultimate goals have expanded to include contributing to the welfare of others, honoring their commitments, living up to their idealized self-conceptions. Thus, the degree to which their goals are realized is measured in part by their contributions to the welfare of those they care about, the extent to which they have honored their commitments, and the degree to which they have lived up to their conceptions of the persons they most wish to be.

Such compensations are *not* a higher form of selfishness. To be selfish is to lack other-regarding ends; to be unselfish is to have such ends and to act on them. The ends that motivate us are the things we desire; they must not be confused with the satisfactions we feel when we get what we desire. Of course, we feel satisfied when we achieve our ends, whether they be other-regarding or merely self-regarding. But *satisfaction* isn't what we desire; it is the feeling we have when we get it. Behaving morally involves desiring to well-being of others and acting on that desire.

For Wilson, the well-spring of moral behavior is our natural sociability.

Conscience [the awareness of duty], like sympathy, fairness, and self-control, arises...out of our innate desire for attachment, and thus acquires its strongest development when those attachments are the strongest. People with the strongest conscience will be...those with the most powerfully developed affiliation. (105)

In illustrating this thesis, he uses psychopaths as a kind of control group.

[T]he psychopath is the extreme case of the nonsocial personality, someone for whom the ordinary emotions of life have no meaning. [Cleckley 1976] Psychopaths lie without compunction, injure without remorse, and cheat with little fear of detection. Wholly self-centered and unaware of the emotional needs of others, they are, in the fullest sense of the term, unsocial...If man were simply the mere calculator that some economists and game theories imagine, this is what he would be. (107)

Several psycho-biological results are taken to suggest a biological basis for this socio-moral disability – for example, the lack of certain involuntary physiological responses, including those detected by a polygraph when normal subjects lie and those associated with fear or apprehension caused by painful shocks following a recognizable stimulus (106-7), defects in role-playing ability (108), and thrill-seeking as compensation for under arousal (108). The circle is closed by contrasting psychopaths with ordinary agents.

By turning these findings upside down we can depict the features of men and women that dispose us to acquire a conscience. We are fully social beings: we have genuine emotions and can sense the emotional state of others. We are not so greatly in need of excitement that we are inclined to treat others as objects designed for our amusement. We judge others and expect to be judged by them...To a degree that varies among

individuals, but to some degree in almost all of us, we develop a visceral reaction to the actions that we contemplate, experiencing internally and automatically the prospect of praise or blame...Of special importance is fear: our memory of unpleasant consequences begins to arouse our apprehension even when no consequences may occur. In this way our conscience is shaped. (108)

Having focused on the connection between conscience and social affiliation, Wilson follows up by reviewing research on our earliest and strongest attachment, the bond between parent and child. Citing research on subjects ranging from gentile rescuers of Jewish Holocaust victims, to civil rights and campus activists in the 1960s, to more recent conservative activists, he argues that a strong sense of duty is correlated with unusually strong parent-child relationships. Studying American airmen imprisoned in Hanoi during the Viet Nam war, he notes the incredible power of social attachment in the most extreme circumstances, which called for resistance to prolonged, brutal torture.

Duty...meant honoring an obligation to behave under duress in a way that signified how much the prisoners valued their comrades and how little they valued their captors. The key rule was unity over self. Fidelity arose out of a social connection and could be defined and preserved only by keeping that connection alive [which involved tapping coded messages to one's fellows, each in solitary confinement]...A tiny and remote chance that one would be honored intangibly by one's comrades was more valuable than a high and immediate chance that one would be rewarded materially by one's enemies...When guilt and fear are one's only emotions, fear can be tolerated more easily if guilt can be overcome, and that in turn requires some signs, however faint, that one is not alone and that one's comrades, however distant, share a set of rules by which guilt can be assessed. (113)

The importance of social affiliation to morality is evident. But does it have a biological basis?

### ***A Biological Basis for Morality?***

Wilson's story begins with the well-documented, unlearned pro-social behavior of infants that elicits corresponding unlearned nurturing responses on the part of parents and other adults. These are attributed to a more general mechanism based on an innate disposition for attachment arising from natural selection. Although attachment is

common to all species that nurture their young after birth, it is especially strong in humans because of the extraordinarily long period in which the human infant and growing child requires parental care. This disposition to form strong affective attachments is not limited to its role in generating the bond between parent and child, but generalizes to relationships formed with siblings, unrelated playmates and adults, and even to other animals. (See Wilson's discussion of pet owners on pp. 127-8.)

In addition to underlying these bonds of affection, our native sociability underlies aspects of morality like fairness and duty that operate beyond affectionate relationships. This is possible, Wilson maintains, "because sociability...animates the kind of family life in which people can learn at a very early age that play requires fair play, that if help is expected help must be offered, and that pleasant feelings come from observing certain rituals and pangs of fear or remorse are felt if they are omitted or degraded." (132) Finally, he argues, our natural sociability is embedded in the most ancient parts of our brain that evolved well before those responsible for language and high-level reasoning.

What is striking about the new findings...is that the emergence of a moral sense occurs before the child has acquired much in the way of language. The rudiments of moral action – a regard for the well-being of others and anxiety at having failed to perform according to a standard—are present well before anything like moral reasoning could occur. (130)

If the essential elements of social behavior...had to be learned or were produced by the higher and later-to-evolve parts of the brain...then it would be difficult to imagine how the species could have survived...And if somehow only the higher parts of the brain were involved in sociability, they would often be overridden by the more urgent, primitive demands of fear, hunger, sex, and anger. (131-2)

The theory suggests that many of our self-seeking impulses can be kept on a short leash by some of our more social ones because both derive from the oldest, most "primitive" part of our nervous system. Put another way, sociability does not require a modern brain and may not even require (although it can be advanced by) language. Mating, rearing a child, and defending it against predators may express some of the more "primitive" – that is more instinctive – aspects of our nature. (132)



Given this theoretical background, one would expect to find some universal moral tendencies, even if they don't amount to exceptionless moral rules. According to Wilson, we do find these in norms governing the organization of societies around kinship patterns (15-16, 19, 158), norms mandating marriage as an institution in which responsibility is taken for child care and collective economic well being (15-16, 158-9), prohibitions against infanticide (20-23), prohibitions against unjustifiable homicide and unprovoked assaults (17, 141-2), taboos against incest (17-18) plus rules requiring promises be kept, property respected, and fairness in one's dealings with others (141-2). In many of these cases, exceptions are made for special circumstances, certain standard excuses or justifications may be recognized, and the precise contents of the admonitions or injunctions are subject to some variation. To take just one case, the great majority of documented cases of culturally permitted infanticide (in the anthropological literature Wilson cites) involve either a scarcity of food, deformed infants, or uncertain parentage. Moreover, infanticide rarely occurs after the first few hours of life (when bonding occurs), and almost never after the first month.

There are, of course, also important cross-cultural differences to be explained, including those involving the extent to which individuals internalize universalistic moral rules that extend beyond their own communal group. One of Wilson's hypotheses deals with the difference between individualistic child-rearing cultures (like American culture) and cultures in which families rather than individuals, and in particular adults in families, are more central (as in Japanese culture). In the former, children develop strong peer-defined, peer enforced rules of fairness as a result of being encouraged from an early age to play with friends and acquaintances and to make their own decisions. The result,

Wilson suggests, is a greater extension of sympathy to unrelated outsiders, a more impersonal rule-based conception of fairness, and a greater deference to universalistic standards of justice. By contrast, he argues, less individualistic child-rearing cultures emphasize preserving the honor of the family and avoiding shame, while defining obligations more in terms of kinship, social position in the local community, or membership in an ethnic group. The result is still an other-regarding morality, but not one that extends to all human beings. (154-5)

### ***The Scope of Morality and the Limits of the Moral Sense***

The contrast between the moral concerns of more versus less individualistic cultures presents an obvious challenge. If morality arises from a universally shared innate moral sense, why do we observe the different moral conceptions of societies at different times and places, and how, if at all, do we resolve the differences between them? In assessing this challenge, the first thing to do is not to exaggerate it. For one thing, not all differences need to be resolved. The fact that different cultures solve a moral problem differently needn't always mean either (i) that they were motivated by different ends, or (ii) that at least one of cultures got things wrong. Sometimes what is morally required may not be a unique action or pattern of actions, but some action or pattern from a class of morally unranked alternatives. For another thing, not all alternatives are equally available to different cultural actors. Different levels of knowledge, different resources, different economic or social conditions, as well as differences in climate and geography can limit available actions and determine different moral outcomes in different circumstances. Finally, the same action can have different results, and so receive different moral evaluations, due to non-moral differences in the environments in which it is

performed. These factors don't undermine the moral significance OF Wilson's universal moral sense.

Nevertheless, there is an important challenge in the neighborhood that Wilson does at least implicitly recognize. The challenge is expressed by the tension between the following two sentences from his chapter "The Universal Aspiration."

The most remarkable change in the moral history of mankind has been the rise – and occasionally the application – of the view that all people, and not just one's own kind, are entitled to fair treatment...For Americans, as for a lot of people everywhere, morality governs our actions toward others in much the same way that gravity governs the motions of the planets: its strength is in inverse proportion to the square of the distance between them. (191)

Why does the existence of a universalistic moral aspiration constitute a challenge to Wilson? According to him, our moral sense develops out of the attachments and sympathies generated from our earliest childhood experiences with parents, siblings, relatives, close friends and companions. These are the ones with whom our interests and identities are intertwined, the ones to whom we are instinctively connected, and the ones to whom we are, in the first instance, morally committed. As we grow older, the circle is typically enlarged, but the difference between the moral significance of those inside the circle and those outside remains. Up to a point, this is not an explanatory problem for Wilson. Our moral duties to those who are near and dear are genuinely different from, and often more urgent than, our duties to arbitrary members of our species. What must be explained is how our duties manage to extend beyond our limited sphere and to encompass, at least to some degree, all of mankind.

What is remarkable – indeed what constitutes the most astonishing thing about the moral development of humanity – has been the slow, uneven, but more or less steady expansion of the idea that the moral sense ought to govern a wide range – perhaps, indeed, the whole range—of human interactions. (193)

Wilson offers a fascinating historical explanation. Boiled down to bare bones, it is this. About 300 AD family and kinship structure in Europe began to diverge from the previously common pattern in which marriage partners and property inheritance were determined by heads of male-dominated clans, multiple wives were allowed, and it was easy for males to divorce their wives. Over the next several centuries that pattern changed in northern and western Europe to one in which monogamous marriages established outside the clan by consent of the partners themselves became increasingly common, leading to growing numbers of independent nuclear families sustaining themselves on their own plots of land. During this period the Church played a role by ratifying consensual marriage, banning polygamy, adultery, concubinage, and remarriage after divorce, while enforcing church discipline on people as individuals rather than as clan members. This in turn facilitated growing recognition that a woman could share an inheritance, serve as her husband's business partner, and raise her own children after his death. The result, Wilson argues, was a more child-centered family and the development of a more individualistic culture that was susceptible to universalistic appeals in morality.

The ground was prepared for the growth of individualism and universalism by the dramatic changes that occurred in family life during some thousand years, stretching from the end of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance. In this time, "monogamous marriages triumphed over polygamy and male divorce power, and gradually shifted its focus away from parental and kinship concerns to the advantage of the conjugal couple. The family they were founding...consolidated its position as the basic cell of Western society. [Geis (1989)]" (205)

The final piece in Wilson's puzzle was the extension of private property and the codification of rules governing it. Speaking of post 13<sup>th</sup> century England, he says:

Individualism in economic and social life existed, rooted in property rights, partible inheritances, and cash markets. Land was a commodity that could be...bought and sold, fathers bequeathed their land to particular offspring...men and women hired out for cash wages...Women, unmarried as well as married, could (and did) own property, make wills and contracts, and bring suit...There were no insuperable barriers dividing

poor farmers from rich ones, and so some who began poor ended up rich. The existence of individual property rights made England...a litigious society: if land could be bought and sold, inherited and bequeathed, it was inevitable that there would be countless disputes...The courts of equity that settled these disputes inevitably decided something even more important than arguments over land; they resolved – or at least shaped – a broader set of claims about individual rights. (213)

These changes, Wilson suggests, provided the soil that nourished the Enlightenment celebration of individual liberty, the rights of man, equality before the law, and the equitable treatment of all human beings, all of which have powerfully shaped our moral thinking from the 18<sup>th</sup> century down to the present day.

It is ironic that this story of what Wilson views as an advance in human morals -- though not, as he recognizes, one without its own moral costs -- should also be the greatest challenge to his view of morality as founded in an innate moral sense. Human communities in every century in every inhabited region of the Earth have shared the components of Wilson's moral sense -- our native sociability, our prolonged dependence as infants, the human bond between parent and child, the social attachments with friends, family, and neighbors, and the intertwining of our self-interest and self-conception with a concern not only for the winning the good opinion of those with whom we are connected but also for their genuine well-being. Yet despite this commonality, only a few human communities have conceived of moral obligations in universalistic, post-Enlightenment terms. Why, if this aspect of morality is grounded in our biological endowment, should its appearance be so unusual, and so late in coming?

The answer, we will be told, is (i) that the moral sense is only one, and not the strongest, part of our human nature and (ii), that the moral systems that arise from it are strongly influenced by non-moral aspects of our nature as well as by the physical, social, and economic environments in which agents find themselves. Fair enough. But this

invites a deeper question. Why do we think that morality *ought* to include a degree of post-Enlightenment moral universalism? Why is it, all other things equal, *morally better* for us to recognize some obligations to those outside our tribe, and indeed to all human beings? What, given Wilsonian naturalism about morality, does such a claim even *mean*?

Consider what two of Wilson's philosophical heroes -- David Hume and Adam Smith, call 'utility' -- roughly, the advancement of fundamental interests. Human nature being what it is, certain actions, habits, rules, and patterns of social organization are more likely than others to advance the general utility of human societies. One of these utility-advancing rules enjoins individual agents to extend moral standing beyond the tribe to include all human beings. Surely, one is inclined to think, it is best for humanity in general that individuals internalize this rule. It may also be best for particular individuals whose moral sense and self-conceptions has been shaped by a post-Enlightenment culture to live by this the rule. It is a hallmark of such individuals that what they value in themselves and others includes concern for, and willingness to recognize obligations to, distant others. This, it may plausibly be argued, is what makes it true that *they* have moral obligations to such others; that they *ought*, or *ought not*, to perform certain actions, out of concern for them. But none of this touches the problem that post-Enlightenment universalism poses for Wilson.

That problem may be simply put. Is it true, or not, that individuals whose cultural conceptions of morality *don't* incorporate post-Enlightenment universalism *ought*, nevertheless, to treat outsiders with fairness and sympathy? Given what has gone before, we can't say it is true that they ought to treat outsiders in this way unless we can show that doing so would, in the main, advance the interests that currently connect them with

other people. Is there any reason to think it would? One might try arguing that such a change in their moral behavior would, in the long run, advance their culture to the overall benefit of their descendants, whom they may well care about. But such an argument – which ties present moral obligations to a contingent historical transformation that might, if successful, take many generations -- is at best highly speculative. In many imaginable cases, there will be no guarantee that such change will ever come, let alone come quickly enough to engage the imaginations of present actors. Shall we then say that individuals in such a culture have *no binding moral obligations to outsiders*, even though we take ourselves and other members of our culture to be so bound? This sounds like a species of relativism that isn't very attractive either. The fact that neither alternative seems attractive is an important problem for Wilsonian naturalism about morality.

Similar problems arise in cases in which it is indeterminate how, precisely, we ought to pursue different Wilsonian virtues. We may recognize an obligation to contribute to the welfare of others, but how exactly should we do so? Who are we obligated to benefit, and how much do we owe different people? Since those we care about may have many competing interests, we may wonder which of those interests we ought to care most about advancing, and at what cost to ourselves. The same questions arise for our obligations to treat others fairly and equitably. When does fairness require equal benefits for all participants, when does it require benefits proportionate to effort, or to the value of each individual's contribution, and how are these determined? How should we resolve matters when our obligations conflict? When one starts thinking along these lines, one realizes how many moral questions are left unresolved, even after we have recognized the existence of Wilson's moral sense.

The worry is not that many moral problems remain solved, but that it is unclear what, in addition to learning more about the moral sense, is needed to solve them. Wilson's contribution in sketching a psycho-biological foundation for morality is only the beginning. In addition to a more precise and detailed understanding of that indispensable foundation, we need to know what other factors are needed to finish the job of constructing a defensible moral code sufficient to provide plausible resolutions to outstanding moral problems. I suspect that these other factors will have a more contractual flavor than the social-scientific findings Wilson wrote about in *The Moral Sense*. The factors I have in mind are needed not to *discover* the truth about our nature, but to *negotiate* working agreements with our fellows about how to live in increasingly close contact with one another, in the light of what we discover about our common nature. If this is right, then we should think of the study of morality as part descriptive science and part empirically informed, prescriptive policy prescription. It is precisely this conception which, on my reading, unifies the extraordinary corpus -- on crime, policing, politics, government, regulation, public administration, bureaucracy, marriage, families, character, moral judgment, and the moral sense -- of the great political scientist whose legacy we commemorate in this volume.

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