
The New Moralism

James Q. Wilson, The Moral Sense, The Free Press, New York, 1993

Reviewed by Knud Haakonssen

Morality is a flavour of the month that has become theme of the decade. Anyone who wants to figure in public life must invoke the caring attitude. Every profession and pseudo-profession must have its code of ethics. And the greatest change to professional moral philosophy during the last generation has been towards a concern with the practice of being good, with the application of moral ideals to matters of life and death rather than with the meaning and status of goodness. In these developments the conception of morals has also changed. Instead of seeing morals as a matter of prescriptive rules for behaviour, fashionable moral thought is dealing with the *virtues*, with the qualities of character that make a person good. In tune with this, new liberal opinion is rejecting the ideals of the Enlightenment on the alleged grounds that it is impersonal and asocial, as epitomised in the political economy of Adam Smith and the legalistic ethics of Immanuel Kant. Instead, inspiration

is being sought in a cuddly Aristotelianism that embraces us with the virtues of 'the good life' that can be fostered only in the womb of community and without which community is impossible.

This mode of thinking — or feeling — is sufficiently woolly to be attractive to a wide ideological spectrum. It supplies the rhetoric, if not the ethos, of the Clinton White House; it is invoked by celebrators of the inherent virtue of femininity and by the family-values lobby; it is central to many aspects of multiculturalism and policies towards minority groups; and it seems to play an increasing role in UN and other development-aid programs.

In most of these arenas the new moralism is in sharp conflict with a pervasive cultural and moral relativism. In fact, the virtue push is largely inspired by the fight against relativism and has accordingly been received with open arms by Catholicism. The central concern is that the Enlightenment ideal of the moral person as an autonomous individual defending personal rights and imposing moral rules upon himself has led to pure subjectivism and relativism, if not outright value nihilism. So the search is on for the virtues of an inherently good life. Are there such universal virtues?

In *The Moral Sense*, James Wilson, Professor of Management and Public Policy at the University of California at Los Angeles, answers this question in the affirmative, but he approaches it in a way that makes his answer more interesting than the question might lead one to expect. With inspiration not only from Aristotle but also from such 18th-century thinkers as Francis Hutcheson, David Hume and Adam Smith, he argues that there is overwhelming scientific evidence that humanity has a specific moral nature, or that human nature *per se* includes moral features that can usefully be characterised as moral senses (the text is more cautious than the title). Wilson draws on all the modern sciences of human nature — biology (including development genetics), evolutionary theory, individual and social psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science — providing an impressive synthesis of a huge literature.

The moral nature of humanity is a composite of several factors that Wilson divides into sympathy, fairness, self-control and duty. Sympathy is 'the human capacity for being affected by the feelings and experiences of others' (p.30) and, while necessary for the moral life, it is, as Wilson shows, a capacity as readily employed for moral ill. Fairness is analysed in terms of equity, reciprocity and impartiality, and is traced to 'the parent-child relationship, wherein a concern for fair shares, fair play, and fair judgments arises out of the desire to bond with others' (p.70). Wilson provides a particularly clever analysis of the emergence of self-control — in effect a combination of the ancient virtues of prudence and temperance — and shows that, in isolation, it is as morally ambivalent as sympathy. The sense of duty, or conscience, is likely to have roots in an innate desire to please parents, but, as an autonomous force independent of considerations of reward and punishment, it is socially learnt. Wilson is here very close to Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

In the second half of the book, Wilson seeks out the 'sources' of the moral senses under four headings: the social animal, families, gender and the universal aspiration. In a grand tour of evolutionary, social and anthropological theory, Wilson identifies

the extent to which all 'humans are disposed to be social before they learn what sociability is all about' (p.125); he shows how this disposition is in constant tension with the self-interested 'desire for survival and sustenance' (p.123); he makes sense of the complex relationship between genetics and social life in the family, linking basic personality to the former and its moral expression to the latter; and he cautiously summarises what can be said about gender-determination of the moral senses. But while natural sociability, family life and gender play their roles in the moral life of the species everywhere and at all times, 'the universal aspiration' is unique to the modern world and especially to the West (meaning northwestern Europe and North America) for only 'there has been erected a cultural commitment to individualism and universalism — that is, to the belief that all men ought to be free and each man is entitled to (roughly) equal respect' (p.197). This aspiration was generated in the Enlightenment through the idea that human life 'could be understood by the use of our natural faculties and without relying on ancient custom or revealed religion' (pp.196-7). Wilson offers an imaginative explanation of why this phenomenon has emerged only in the West: that 'the growth of universalism and individualism was the product, in part, of the rise of consensual marriages and the existence of private property' (p.214). While stressing both the speculative and the incomplete character of his theory, Wilson's basic point is that the nobility of the universal aspiration has been 'purchased at a price, and sometimes a very high one: a lessened sense of honour and duty, and a diminished capacity for self-control' (p.218).

This leads to the concluding challenge: how to achieve a coherent view of morals that both honours the empirical arguments for universal moral senses and rescues as much universalism and individualism as possible without paying the price indicated. The rich scientific material enables Wilson to dismiss the more notable rejections of a natural morality, such as Marx's reduction of morals to ideology, Freud's idea of morality as a socially induced thwarting of our natural antisociability and aggressiveness, B. F. Skinner's explanation of morality as a conditioned response and Richard Rorty's Gucci-philosophy of the moral self as fashion. But such ideas can thrive only because they are nourished by a much more pervasive 'ambiguous legacy of the Enlightenment' (p.244), namely a perversion of the fine ideals of individual freedom, autonomy and equality into pure subjectivism and relativism. Wilson is perfectly clear that the sciences of human nature are of little help in establishing a balance here. From the theory of universal human nature we can deduce only 'a handful of rules or solutions to any but the most elemental (albeit vitally important) human problems. The reason is that one universal truth — man's sociability . . . — coexists with other universal truths — man's ambition, avarice, and vanity' (p.218). A resolution 'requires moral reasoning to take up the incomplete task of natural development' (p.237). Yet it is not reasoning but intuition in which Wilson places his faith. Ultimately the 'balance among the moral senses is, to me, more an aesthetic than a philosophical matter. It is aesthetic in two senses: it is a balance that is struck without deliberation or reasoned justifications, and in the character thereby formed there is no clear distinction between form and content' (p.243; Oakeshott is duly acknowledged).

The problem with this is that we each have our intuitions. If we want them to match sufficiently to resolve conflicts, not among our own moral senses but between our moral senses and those of others, then we shall have to resort not only to reasoning but to argument. This is indicative of the basic weakness of Wilson's impressive book. He has no appreciation of that part of the Enlightenment legacy that sees morality as, in part, a public, inter-subjective process of discussion in which ideals of cogent argumentation hold sway. While the theory of humanity's moral nature suffices to reject the notion that anything goes and that 'autonomous individuals can freely choose, or will, their moral life' (p.250), it still leaves a wide open field of possibilities. The field is undoubtedly narrowed down by, among other factors, habitual 'aesthetic' intuitions of the balanced character. But central to the Enlightenment's 'dangerous' lessons is the habit of questioning habits, and it is in response to this that we have developed an intricate, sometimes institutionalised, culture of public moral and political discussion. Conventional moral philosophy in effect addresses such discussion by trying to supply criteria and ideals for moral decision-making. Wilson has little appreciation of this aspect of morality, but he is quite right in rejecting as naive the belief that traditional theories, such as utilitarianism, Kantianism, and rights-theories, exhaust the moral sphere. The contribution of this fine book is to give a sharp portrait of the moral nature which in the Enlightenment learnt the lesson that what it can do with itself is a matter of debate. This debate cannot be reduced to either sociobiology or aesthetic intuition.

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