James Q. Wilson on the moral sense
by Roger Kimball

On Mr. Wilson’s book *The Moral Sense.*

*We must be careful of what we think we are, because we may become that.*

—James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense*

For well over a century, Western intellectuals have rather specialized in bad news. There have been important exceptions, of course. But for the most part, recent reports from the fancier intellectual and cultural fronts have been contributing little to human self-esteem. Sophocles, in a famous chorus from *Antigone,* proclaimed that of “all wondrous things man was the most wondrous”; the Judeo-Christian tradition affirmed that man was created *imago dei,* in the image of God; the Enlightenment, though skeptical about God, nonetheless touted man’s autonomy and the universality of human reason; and even Immanuel Kant waxed enthusiastic about “the starry sky above and the moral law within.”

What remains? In the middle of the nineteenth century, Darwin came along to tell us that man, far from being *imago dei,* was in fact descended from the higher primates. Marx dismissed the entire realm of morality, religion, and culture as so many examples of ideology: “phantoms formed in the human brain,” he sneered. Freud claimed that what used to be called “conscience” was really a repressed distillate of lust and murderous aggression. And in *Beyond Good and Evil*—a title that epitomizes an entire worldview—Nietzsche assured readers that the ambition to provide a rational foundation for morality was “insipidly false and sentimental” in “a world whose essence is will to power.”

Today, these revolutionary ideas have lost the thrill of novelty but not their sting. They live on: as routine background assumptions (not to say as tokens of *bona fides*) for most academic intellectuals, and as a horizon of doubt and anxiety for many others. In the intellectual establishment, it is simply taken for granted that—as the philosopher A. J. Ayer put it—moral concepts have “no objective validity whatsoever.”

The omnibus term for this situation is relativism. In part, it is a correlate of what we might call the anthropological axiom: the conviction that morality, like human nature itself, is completely plastic, malleable: a function of culture not nature. If a tribe somewhere practices infanticide or cannibalism—well, *chacun à son goût.* One well-known guru of cultural relativism, Clifford Geertz, summed it up neatly when he insisted in the early 1970s that “there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture.”

This is the absolute that the deniers of absolutes champion. Their *Index Prohibitorum* is capacious: terms such as “universal,” “truth,” and “essence” feature prominently, as of course do “good” and “evil.” Anything suggesting that something in human nature transcends the leveling contingencies of culture is verboten. The proscriptions come in sweet and sour varieties. Sour is generally preferred among academics, as the popularity of gloom-spreaders from Sartre to
Derrida and Foucault attests: man “is only a recent invention,” Foucault famously sighed in Les Mots et les choses, destined to “disappear soon.”

But sweet relativism, too, has its appeal, as the attention granted to the chummy nihilism of Richard Rorty reminds us. Rorty, one of the most influential philosophers in American academia today, won his wide following by tarting up relativism with various aw-shucks blandishments. Insisting (like just about every other academic today) on “the ubiquity of language,” Rorty’s relativism takes the form of a radical pragmatism. He tells us that the statements “It is true because it works” and “It works because it is true” are indistinguishable. He waves a cheerful goodbye to “ideas like ‘essence,’ ‘nature,’ and ‘foundation,’” denies that human beings possess anything like a “core self,” and dispenses with “any truths independent of language.” Hence philosophy must emancipate itself from the idea of truth, morality must jettison the distinction between good and evil. There are no such things, Rorty continues, as “plain moral facts,” “nor any neutral ground on which to stand and argue that either torture or kindness is preferable to the other.” Then comes the sugar: If we would only stop thinking about such anachronisms, we could usher in a “liberal utopia” in which irony triumphs and “the charge of relativism has lost its force.”

Although widespread among intellectuals, relativism à la Geertz or Rorty does not proceed entirely unchallenged. The latest challenge comes from the perhaps unlikely quarter of the social sciences. In The Moral Sense,[1] James Q. Wilson, Professor of Management and Public Policy at the University of California at Los Angeles, mounts a spirited and articulate defense of the idea that the disposition to make moral judgments is innate in human beings. His frankness is a breath of fresh air: “We do have a core self, not wholly the product of culture, that includes both a desire to advance our own interests and a capacity to judge disinterestedly how those interests ought to be advanced.” When was the last time you heard a prominent academic invoke the idea of disinterested judgment (to say nothing of the notion that we possess a “core self”) without derision?

Wilson, whose previous books include Thinking about Crime, Bureaucracy, and other works concerned with public policy, writes about morality as a public fact. The language of virtue and morality has had a tough time lately. “Our reluctance to speak of morality,” he notes, “and our suspicion, nurtured by our best minds, that we cannot ‘prove’ our moral principles has amputated our public discourse at the knees.” Consequently, part of his purpose in this book is “to help people recover the confidence with which they once spoke about virtue and morality.” It is not, he writes, an effort to state or justify moral rules; that is, it is not a book of philosophy. Rather, it is an effort to clarify what ordinary people mean when they speak of their moral feelings and to explain, in so far as one can, the origins of those feelings.

Because the practice of morality is partly a social act, recovering the language of morality is at the same time an acknowledgment of social responsibility. “Rebuilding the basis of moral judgments,” Wilson points out, “requires us to take the perspective of the citizen, but the citizen has gone to great lengths to deny that he has a perspective to take.” While few ordinary people consciously espouse the extreme relativism that makes the academy such a cheerful place today, many have been infected by the habits of mind that such relativism encourages. “We are,” Wilson writes, “engaged in a culture war, a war about values.” It says a lot, for example, that it is now easier to renounce a marriage than a mortgage. If so many highly educated people—men and women, moreover, who educate and help to form the tastes of the young—proclaim themselves “liberal ironists,” liberal irony will naturally be a powerful ingredient in the cultural climate.

Mr. Wilson seeks to provide a corrective by introducing an invigorating dose of common sense into the discussion. His first message is that “we need not retreat” in the face of cultural relativism. He points out that even if examples of moral confusion abound, most of us continue to experience the world as a field of moral choices. Even if “some of us have tried to talk ourselves out of it,” the palpable reality of our moral sense nevertheless continues to assert itself in daily life. “It is,” he writes, “as if a person born to appreciate a golden sunset or a lovely song had persuaded himself and others that a
greasy smear or a clanging gong ought to be enjoyed as much as true beauty.” The pose of moral incompetence is entirely artificial and, if we are honest, unsustainable. We turn to words like “justice,” “equity,” “right,” and “wrong” because they address the reality of our experience. “If we purged our discourse of such terms,” Wilson observes, “the only difference between Tiny Tim and Scrooge would be their age.”

The Moral Sense is far from being anti-intellectual. But it is, in part, a cautionary tale about the dangers of taking intellectuals, especially academic intellectuals, too seriously. Given the presumption that education will broaden one’s perspective, it is curious that the chief danger is a narrowing of horizons. The peculiar combination of arrogance and despair that seems characteristic of homo academicus today breeds a remarkable obtuseness about many important questions. Wilson puts it thus: “Someone once remarked that the two great errors in moral philosophy are the belief that we know the truth and the belief that there is no truth to be known. Only people who have had the benefit of higher education seem inclined to fall into so false a choice.” It is a sobering thought that last year in the United States, some thirteen million students partook of that benefit.

Mr. Wilson writes first of all as a social scientist. But The Moral Sense displays a closer and more sympathetic acquaintance with the classic texts of moral philosophy than do most “professional” examples of the genre. The phrase “the moral sense” comes from the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Francis Hutcheson; but the chief philosophical sources for Wilson’s argument are Hutcheson’s most famous pupil, Adam Smith—especially his theory of moral sentiments—and Aristotle’s discussion of virtue in the Nicomachean Ethics. We are used to speaking of moral concepts. But in fact morality has much more to do with dispositions than concepts or rules. This is one of Wilson’s chief points. Following Aristotle, he argues that the essence of morality consists in liking and disliking the right things. “Pleasures and pains,” Aristotle writes, “are the things with which moral virtue is concerned.” Hence being well educated means partly being taught to like and dislike the right things. The Aristotelian position is eminently empirical: Moral behavior is largely a function of habit. “We become just,” Aristotle writes, “by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts… . In a word, our moral dispositions are formed as a result of the corresponding activities.”

But while Wilson follows Aristotle in acknowledging the central place of habit (“only an utterly senseless person,” Aristotle insisted, “can fail to know that our characters are the result of our conduct”), his starting point is the irreducibility of moral experience. It is not as if we add our perception of morality to an experience that would otherwise be neutral: we experience the world as moral from the very beginning. “The argument of this book,” Wilson writes, “is that people have a natural moral sense, a sense that is formed out of the interaction of their innate dispositions with their earliest familial experiences.” Our moral sense thus not only shapes our own behavior but also our judgment of other people’s behavior. Indeed, it is here that the irreducibility of moral experience shows itself most consistently. Take the sense of justice. Wilson believes that a sense of justice is part of our innate moral equipment. The institutional correlate of the demand for justice is the law. Today, many academics deny that the law is an instrument of justice. The so-called “legal realists,” for example, teach that the law is merely a codification of (inherently inequitable) power relations.

But think about it. We live in an imperfect world, one full of injustices. But to observe that the law is not always just or equitably applied, to point out that certain groups have been unfairly treated—some discriminated against while others receive preferential treatment—is not to discredit the idea of justice. Far from it. It is merely to acknowledge that human beings err in their attempts to be just, as in all else. Pace the “legal realists,” the notable thing is not how often we fail to achieve justice, but how often we succeed and, even more, how consistently we make the effort. Indeed, the polemical point of legal realism would not even be intelligible were we not endowed with a sense of right and wrong. It turns out that the legal realists are anything but realistic in their understanding of the law.

Mr. Wilson discusses four elements of the moral sense: sympathy, fairness, self-control, and duty. The list, he admits, is somewhat arbitrary, and might easily be extended. But a good case can be made for the universality of each of his four examples. Peoples everywhere and at all times express some fellow feeling, at least for their offspring. Some sense of fairness or reciprocity is found in every culture. Likewise, every culture demands some checks on impulse and
gratification. (“The universality of rules of etiquette,” Mr. Wilson comments, “probably reflects their value as a way of signaling the existence of self-control.”) And the idea of binding obligation—for example, in the repayment of debts—is found in some form everywhere. Of course, to say that the moral sense is universal is not to say that it expresses itself in the same way in every culture: to assert the universality of the moral sense is not to deny cultural diversity. Nor is it to say that everyone is equally endowed with the moral sense. Like the sense of humor, it is universal, but it can be deficient or perverted. We recognize this in our language when, for example, we call someone a psychopath.

Mr. Wilson draws on the anthropological literature and, especially, developmental psychology to make his case. After describing the ways in which the senses of sympathy, fairness, self-control, and duty exhibit themselves in various contexts, he steps back to examine the social and biological sources of these distinctively human attributes. Like Aristotle, again, Mr. Wilson begins with man’s inherent sociability: man is by nature a social animal, and his filiation with others encourages the development of reciprocity, fair play, etc. Our moral nature, he argues, “grows directly out of our social nature.”

A second powerful source of the moral sense is the family. Much that Mr. Wilson has to say will seem like old news to the tribunal of common sense: is anyone surprised to learn that a child’s strong and affectionate bond with its parents, especially with its mother, is of great importance in forming character? But this seems like uncommon wisdom when compared with some of the orthodoxies informing public policy today. And of course families are not only sources of affection; they are also important sources of conflict. In this context, Wilson quotes a perceptive comment from G. K. Chesterton:

   Of course the family is a good institution because it is uncongenial. It is wholesome precisely because it contains so many divergences and varieties. It is … like a little kingdom, and like most other little kingdoms, is generally in a state of something resembling anarchy…. Aunt Elizabeth is unreasonable, like mankind. Papa is excitable, like mankind. Our youngest brother is mischievous, like mankind. Grandpa is stupid, like the world; he is old, like the world.

Gender is a third source of the moral sense that Mr. Wilson discusses, and here, too, much that he says will seem like old (but true) news to anyone not besotted by feminist ideology. Everything we observe, everything the science of psychology tells us, suggests that the moral development of boys differs in important ways from that of girls. This is not to say that one sex is more or less moral than the other, only that each is likely to approach moral problems in distinctive ways. This shows itself, for example, in everyday expression: characteristically, Mr. Wilson observes, “Men speak in order to report, women to establish rapport.” Men are more likely to be interested in rules and principles, women in intimacy, consultation, reciprocity. Men and women have the same basic moral senses—fairness, duty, and the rest—but they live or inhabit those dispositions differently.
Wilson is himself a social scientist, it is perhaps only natural that he should turn to the social sciences to support his arguments. He informs us early on that “science supplies more support for the ‘ancient’ view of human nature than is commonly recognized.” Maybe so. But it is not at all clear what we gain by learning that being (say) trustworthy “may have an evolutionary advantage.” Wilson seems determined to explain the moral sense entirely in materialistic terms. His performance is something of a tour de force. And perhaps attempting to explain morality solely in naturalistic terms will appeal to readers smitten with the prestige of science. But by neglecting what we might call the spiritual sources of morality one is also in danger of neglecting—how to put it?—what makes morality moral. Somehow adducing the “evolutionary advantage” for telling the truth doesn’t quite wash. This may also be the place to make a comment about style. In general, Wilson writes well. But his commitment to the language of social science occasionally involves him in unnecessary awkwardnesses. In one place, for example, he tells us that we learn to be fair partly because “we want to find a cost-minimizing strategy for managing joint activities (such as playing with the same toy).” Maybe Donald Trump does, but no self-respecting three-year-old cares much about cost-minimizing strategies: he just wants the toy.

Perhaps the most powerful part of *The Moral Sense* is the chapter called “The Universal Aspiration,” in which Wilson describes the way in which the moral sense was gradually extended beyond one’s kin or tribe or nation to embrace all of humanity. As Wilson notes, “Mankind has a moral sense, but much of the time its reach is short and its effect uncertain.” The roots of this extension of the moral sense go back to the Greeks and the moral teachings of Judaism and Christianity. It reached full flowering in the Enlightenment and remains one of the chief contributions of Western civilization to the moral capital of the world. Mr. Wilson is quite right to exclaim that “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.” He is also right to insist that “the greatest and most sustained expansion in the boundaries of the moral sense occurred in the West.” It was in the West, and only in the West, that freedom for all men became a fundamental moral principle, a universal aspiration. And it is this above all that makes the cozy nihilism of so many academic intellectuals morally irksome. Beneficiaries of freedom and tolerance, they blithely set about denying their foundation. Wilson is consistently gentle and judicious in this book, but he is surely, and frighteningly, correct when he observes that “the kind of culture that can maintain reasonable human commitments takes centuries to create but only a few generations to destroy. And once destroyed, those who suddenly realize what they have lost will also realize that political action cannot, except at a very great price, restore it.” At a moment when a new tribalism is rampant on the political as well as the intellectual scene, it is well to reconsider what recommends the catalogue of virtues that sophisticates like Richard Rorty would have us jettison.

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