

# *Engaging E. O. Wilson: Twenty-Five Years of Sociobiology*

E. O. WILSON AS MORALIST

by Stephen J. Pope

*Abstract.* E. O. Wilson offers descriptive and normative analyses of morality. Regarding science as the only proper basis for explaining and developing morality, he has not sufficiently accounted for the complexity of human conduct in this arena. Wilson's account of evolved proclivities, however, indicates important features of human nature that moral theorists ignore at their peril.

*Keywords:* biological predispositions; emotion; empiricism; gene-culture theory; material origins; morality; norms.

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The term *morality* refers to a community's commonly held beliefs and assumptions regarding right and wrong conduct and good and bad character. Morality can be distinguished from *ethics*, the normative, rigorous, and academic reflection on what actually constitutes right and wrong action and good and bad character.

Ever since the publication of *Sociobiology* in 1975, E. O. Wilson has been passionately committed to making the case that sociobiology has an irreplaceable and pivotal contribution to make to our understanding of both morality and ethics. He believes that this contribution is both explanatory and normative, that is to say, sociobiology pertains to how we understand morality and also to how we ought to engage in ethical reflection.

Stephen J. Pope is Associate Professor of Social Ethics and Chairperson of the Theology Department at Boston College, Carney Hall 417, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467. His e-mail address is [stephen.pope.1@bc.edu](mailto:stephen.pope.1@bc.edu). This paper was originally delivered for a session of the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, D.C., 20 February 2000. The session theme, "Sociobiology at the New Millennium," marked the 25th anniversary of the publication of E. O. Wilson's *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1975).

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Wilson believes that sociobiology in its explanatory function can help us to grasp the deeper nature of morality as it really functions rather than as we would like to think of it as functioning. Moral codes have originated because they serve the fitness interests of their adherents, not because they are supernatural realities delivered from on high or sparks of the divine lodged in the inner sanctum of people's consciences. Wilson argues that specific norms—e.g., regarding marriage, property, or truth-telling—provide fitness benefits for those who adhere to them, or at least for those who promote them in others. So membership in dominance hierarchies, he argues, “pays off in survival and reproductive success” (Wilson 1998, 259), and compassion “conforms to the best interests of self, family, and allies of the moment” (Wilson 1978, 155). A stable and relatively trustworthy social order is one where, in the language of the Prisoner's Dilemma (see Axelrod 1984), individuals are more likely to cooperate and less likely to defect. In the long run, internalizing norms that resist crude ways of pursuing self-interest actually contribute to one's fitness (at least, that is, for people living in reasonably stable social orders; in other cases, the optimal strategy might be an aggressive exploitation of available opportunities). As philosopher Michael Ruse puts it, “We believe what we believe about morality because it is adaptively useful for us to have such beliefs—that is *all* there is to it” (Ruse 1998, 42; emphasis added).

An alternative view is expressed by evolutionary biologist Francisco J. Ayala, who holds that, while morality is dependent on our biological makeup as its necessary condition, morality evolved not because it was adaptive in itself but rather as the “indirect outcome of the evolution of eminent intellectual abilities” such as foresight, evaluation, and choice (Ayala, in Thompson 1995, 302). For Wilson and Ruse, on the other hand, the ought-generating “moral sense” and its valuational preferences have been selected because they help their agents to obtain their reproductive goals, especially in the environments of evolution.

Wilson does not provide a comprehensive and detailed theory of morality but for the most part has been satisfied with suggesting hypotheses and speculative scenarios for future investigators who are interested in developing a more thorough account of morality. He proclaims without embarrassment that “there is intrinsically only one class of explanation” for all phenomena (Wilson 1998, 266). And though he knows that explaining morality necessarily includes examining a variety of levels of analysis from the genetic and neurological to the ecological, he has chosen to focus on the ultimate evolutionary causes of morality rather than its proximate causes.

In pursuing this agenda, Wilson relies upon several apparently unexamined assumptions. The first is the methodological assumption that morality can be dissected, analyzed, and explained in the same manner as one would examine the objects of the biological sciences. Actually, this is not an unexamined assumption, since many of Wilson's efforts in ethics are

intended to demonstrate the relevance of sociobiology to aspects of morality, but it is something like a heuristic principle on the basis of which Wilson attempts to generate testable hypotheses.

Thus, in *Consilience*, after lamenting that ethics is currently a “blank space on the scientific map,” Wilson urges scientists to examine the “biology of moral sentiments” (1998, 255). And, of course, it is a tribute to Wilson’s fertile mind that many of the hypotheses he has suggested have been taken seriously by other scientists, especially evolutionary psychologists, behavioral ecologists, and biological anthropologists. At the same time, the speculative nature of Wilson’s enterprise has also been its weakness: he typically provides *programmatic* proposals, studded with intriguing hints regarding practices like incest taboos and hypergamy, rather than developing a carefully documented and comprehensive substantive descriptive anthropology.

A second assumption found in Wilson’s work is that morality is largely a matter of emotions or “intuition based on emotion” (Wilson 1978, 167). Even philosophers, he has said repeatedly, most fundamentally rely upon the “emotive centers of their brains,” especially their limbic systems, for their moral insights. This generalization is offered without any evidence and is called into question by the de facto variety and complexity of ethical procedures and methods that characterize the history of Western moral philosophy. And as an explanation of how ordinary people come to moral judgments, it suggests a strong line of demarcation between reason and emotion that, in light of work reported in texts such as Antonio Damasio’s *Descartes’ Error* (1994), seems increasingly implausible. In *Hamlet*, for example, we witness acts based on inflamed passion, on suspicions and hunches, on cold calculation of opportunity, on feelings of resentment and simmering anger, on loyal dedication, on adherence to moral principle, on familial loyalty and guilt feelings, on intent to achieve long-term ends, on maintaining social position, and so on. To simply reduce all of these motives and motivations to one large category called “emotion” is unhelpful. At the very least, Wilson here needs a much more complex and differentiated theory of emotion if so much descriptive weight is to be placed on it in his attempt to explain morality.

To his credit, Wilson is clearly motivated by a worthy humanistic concern that the human race continue to survive, that we learn how better to flourish, and that individuals be less harmed by inappropriate and repressive moral codes based on inaccurate assumptions about human nature. Wilson’s moral project continues the Baconian commitment of employing scientific knowledge “for the relief of man’s estate.” And there is something true about Wilson’s identification of the roots of some troubling human conflicts that arise when traits that were probably adaptive for people living in small groups in open savannahs in the Pleistocene past no longer

match the demands generated by living in the hyperquick, congested confusion of contemporary mass urban society. But whether his constructive position provides a framework sufficient to address these conflicts is another matter.

Wilson aims to ground ethics on what he calls “objective knowledge,” particularly scientific knowledge of the brain, and intends to promote the long-term goal of forming a “wiser and more enduring ethical consensus” than has been attained to date. He expresses our situation with the passion of a preacher: we are caught in a “struggle for men’s souls” (metaphorically speaking, of course, since he doesn’t think we have souls), and we can win this mighty struggle only by taking the side of “science-based material analysis” (Wilson 1998, 240) over that of theology and philosophy. If the struggle is fundamentally a matter of *scientific* debate, Wilson is correct. But if it is not, Wilson is leading us down a blind, if very interesting, alley—or at least down a road that by itself will not take us where we need to go.

This constructive agenda is why Wilson announced the need to remove ethics from the hands of the ethicists—“temporarily,” that is, until philosophers get up to speed and are trained to “biologize” ethics. Though it might seem odd, given the political attacks launched on him, one might say that Wilson’s agenda is intended to function as something like a form of “liberation biology” that is roughly analogous to the liberation theology of Latin America. Knowledge of sociobiology will give us the power to live more intelligently and thereby to achieve greater freedom. Through science, he writes, moral codes “can be made increasingly wise and stable through the understanding of the needs and pitfalls of human nature” (Wilson 1998, 251). And so, though Wilson sometimes sounds like a strong determinist, he strives to identify ways in which we might actually extend the range of human choices and incrementally empower human agents—albeit only within the boundaries set by the range of “epigenetic rules” that constitute human nature. There is, he says, “no genetic destiny outside our free will” (1998, 277). Indeed, sounding almost like an existentialist, he says, “Soon we must look deep within ourselves and decide what we wish to become” (1998, 277).

This benign interpretation of Wilson stands in some tension with his more reductionistic leanings, as when he hypothesizes that ethics has a “*purely material origin*” (1998, 241; emphasis added). Does Wilson mean, say, that Kant’s theory was actually caused by his neurochemistry, the same way, for example, that it might have caused Kant to become senile in old age? Or does he mean that Kant (a fairly abstemious lifelong bachelor) unconsciously constructed his theory as a way of obtaining material goods? or that Kant held what he did because it promoted his survival and reproductive success? By saying that ethics has a “*purely material origin*,” does he mean to deny that ethical theories are influenced by culture? or that they are not influenced by mind? Or does he mean only that moral in-

sights emerge spontaneously and naturally from within the human communal context and, further, that the way they emerge is, in any particular context, usually shaped in important but unclear ways by the structure of the human brain, particularly via the “epigenetic rules”? Perhaps this is the best construction to put on Wilson’s words: that he is simply attempting to explore the explanatory power of science rather than making the more ambitious metaphysical claim that the only thing that exists is what is explainable by science. Instead of radical metaphysical reductionism, this view advocates a methodological reductionism that is compatible with the old tradition of “natural law” theory (see Porter 1999).

This makes it easier to put a reasonable construction on the claim that ethics has a “purely material origin,” which can be taken to mean that morality emerges with the evolution of the neocortex and related physiological systems and what Ayala calls “eminent intellectual abilities” like foresight, evaluation, and choice. Yet this innocuous interpretation would be dismissed as disappointingly underachieving when viewed in light of Wilson’s ambition for science, which he hopes will show that ethical precepts are the “*physical* products of the brain and culture” (Wilson 1998, 250; emphasis added)—a notion whose very meaning is difficult to discern. In what sense could the golden rule, for example, be a *physical* precept as distinct from a *moral* precept that depends for its execution on the physiological capacities of human agents?

In any case, when Wilson moves from his explanatory project to his normative agenda, even his allies suspect that his attempt to derive moral norms from nature is doomed to fail because it commits the naturalistic fallacy, moving illicitly from “is” to “ought” language. Wilson could respond that he is not attempting to derive his entire normative ethical position from nature without remainder. The ethical “ought” flows from what Wilson takes to be the descriptive “is” in virtue of what a simple noncontroversial premise (what a Kantian would call a “hypothetical imperative”): if we want to survive, he argues, then we ought to value nobility, appreciate human diversity, and protect human rights (Wilson 1978, 197–98). Security and happiness are not deduced by logic from nature—but they do not need to be, because everyone simply takes security and happiness as givens of human aspiration. Wilson does not notice that this empirical givenness does not make them *ethically* legitimate ends, but he does not investigate the deeper question of ethical justification.

Wilson’s critics might also charge that his assumption that security and happiness are givens is question begging. What, after all, *is* genuine happiness, and how do we differentiate authentic flourishing from mere subjective contentment? And how do we differentiate true survival—other than mere physiological functioning—from genuine safety and the elusive but noble ideal that we call “peace”? This kind of philosophical question begging provides an indication of an important point, which is that scientific

accounts of evolution, human behavior, neurochemistry, and genetics will always “underdetermine” ethics. Of course, we ought to consult current science for whatever insight can be forthcoming for our understanding of human conduct, since ethics is, and always will be, based on or rooted in some view of human nature. But moral wisdom comes not from sheer data or theories of behavior but rather through the exercise of making sound judgments about the best possible ways for us to live individually and communally. And coming to this judgment, or series of judgments, will always be fundamentally a philosophical rather than a scientific enterprise—even when philosophical reflection proceeds on the basis of data and theories provided by science.

The main objection to Wilson’s descriptive account of morality has always been that it is excessively simple, moving too quickly and abruptly from genes to behavior without taking into sufficient account the impact of culture on conduct. Wilson, of course, attempted to respond to this criticism by developing gene-culture theory with Charles Lumsden. He knows that morality, like all human phenomena, exists only within culture and that we need to attend to the reciprocal and interdependent relation between culture and genes (see Lumsden and Wilson 1983). But in arguing that hereditary “epigenetic rules” bias learning and information processing and incline people to make cultural choices that are generally most likely to increase their fitness, Wilson continues to regard genes (and genetic fitness) as the key factor explaining human behavior and therein continues to undervalue other levels of influence, most notably the cultural.

When speaking of human behavior, moreover, we also have to consider not only biophysical growth and enculturation but also the particularities of personal history, the flow of experiences most adequately expressed in narratives. From an ethical perspective, to be a person is not only to instantiate the universal category of “humanity” or to constitute a sample of a general population, though it includes these, but it is also to be a unique individual with a distinctive point of view and life story. We can draw connections between what fitness considerations would predict and what actually obtains in specific life stories, but in many instances people are motivated by moral considerations to act in ways that run against the grain of what might be predicted statistically on the basis of evolutionary premises. Attempts to explain these away—like saying that Mother Teresa was really selfish deep down inside (as in Wilson 1978, 164-65)—only discredit sociobiology in the eyes of many ethicists.

Since a human community has a complex history, or, in the case of relatively recent communities, a complex series of precursor communities, any account of its morality has to grasp this history. Human history cannot be usefully analogized to natural history and be understood with nuance and depth. Human history is complex not only because of the multiplicity of factors that impinge on it and from it—economic, political,

legal, linguistic, artistic, military, psychosocial, and so on-but also because these factors are manifested concretely within the contingency of human *choices*. Wilson himself makes room for human choices when he refers to the individual as only "*predisposed* biologically to make certain choices" (p. 250; emphasis added) and when he recognizes our need "to conform to some drives of human nature and to suppress others" (Wilson 1998, 251; 1978, 97). We may, under certain conditions, have a natural proclivity to engage in violence, or to act sexually in a "mildly polygynous" manner (Wilson 1978, 125), or to speak deceptively, or to cheat on commitments-but because we are not rigidly "programmed" to act on these proclivities, we have to decide how to respond to them.

Sociobiology can give us a sharper grasp of behavioral probabilities and our innate proclivities, but our particular choices are not mechanistically determined by the events and processes that precede them. This is why many humanists are convinced that the depth of moral perception communicated in great novels like Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* or Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* will never be eclipsed by insights generated by science.

I close with three brief observations. First, in ethical theory, Wilson in effect functions as a pretty straightforward commonsense "consequentialist." This explains why he especially laments the inability of ethicists to make accurate predictions of the consequences of various courses of action, a fatal flaw, he believes, that leaves them without recourse when confronted with cases of moral ambiguity (Wilson 1998, 240). So we might find him a helpful guide when moral decision making depends significantly on estimating the effects of various courses of action, for example, in weighing various environmental policy options, yet not so much when other kinds of ambiguity are at issue, for example, over competing and incommensurate loyalties, or conflicting moral virtues such as mercy and justice.

Second, Wilson's critics focus on the weaknesses of his explanatory project but often miss his own kind of moral sensitivity, which can be seen in his unequivocal rejection of the harm stemming from unchecked tribalism, of anti-intellectual cowardice, of authoritarianism of all kinds, and of the obscurantism and bigotry of political ideologies. He also is committed to the need for public moral discourse and for the formation of a broad moral consensus within pluralistic societies, a view hardly consistent with the dismissal of Wilson as cynical amoralist.

Wilson as moralist makes his greatest substantive contribution as a public intellectual when he addresses broad popular audiences with the message that we need to value species diversity, take more seriously our obligations of ecological responsibility, and involve ourselves in political action or at least political support of organizations and policies devoted to preserving Earth and its species. In this context, Wilson's writings communicate a sense of wonder, aesthetic appreciation, and awe in the face of nature

that borders on a kind of terrestrial spirituality. Put in terms taken from the sociology of religion, Wilson's "prophetic," ethical voice is inspired by a complementary "priestly" voice calling our attention to the sacredness of nature and our need to cultivate "biophilia."

Third, and finally, Wilson's work as moralist is more significant for the *cast of mind* it represents than for particular ethical arguments. He exemplifies in a particularly uninhibited way the increased tendency of the educated mind in our society to feel alienated from our moral tradition and many, if by no means all, of its standards and ideals, to be suspicious of moral authorities, and to find the theistic basis for morality to be implausible.

Some readers are interested in Wilson because he expresses in prose what they intuitively feel is the case regarding what has become a "disenchanted" secular world explained only by science. His search for moral coordinates echoes their own felt need for moral identity. For others, Wilson represents the apotheosis of scientism and materialism, an expression of a long and painful process of social decay that has radically eroded the moral core of our civilization. His moral quest, for them, signals the desperate refusal of secularism to live with the cynical and amoral consequences of its own implicit nihilism. Perhaps other voices will emerge in this debate. In any case, Wilson articulates a series of questions and answers with which every thoughtful and morally sensitive member of our society must come to terms. And for this we all owe Wilson a significant debt of gratitude.

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