

Are Moral Intuitions Self-Evident Truths?

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Mr. Wilson's Heresies

The Moral Sense is an intellectually courageous book that will have relatively few friends among anthropologists or moral philosophers. It is an intellectually courageous book because it commits many heresies, in particular these four:

- (1) The heresy of moral cognitivism, which claims that moral appraisals should be interpreted and evaluated in terms of their degree of accuracy in representing some domain of moral "truth." As I understand *The Moral Sense* it suggests that the moral sense is not merely a feeling or a sensation but is a kind of sixth sense, which, like our other senses, is a source of valid knowledge about something (namely, "goodness") that is objective, natural, or real.
- (2) The heresy of intuitionism, which claims that valid or truthful moral appraisals are produced rapidly and unconsciously and that moral men and women know the "good" (and/or are inclined to do the "good") spontaneously or "reflexively," without being motivated by the conclusions of deliberative reason.
- (3) The heresy of romanticism, which claims that "the mind is in the heart" and that moral truths are represented to the senses (and motivate action) by means of the emotions, via feelings such as repugnance, indignation, or shame.
- (4) The heresy of pluralism, which claims that the ultimate "goods" of morality are many, not one, and that plurality is a terminal (rather than an intermediary) state. When joined with the heresy of cognitivism, the heresy of pluralism implies that there are universally valid moral "goods" (for example, fairness, sympathy, duty and self-control) but these various "goods" cannot be reduced, aggregated or translated into any single common denominator of moral evaluation, and cannot be rank or-

dered in terms of their relative efficiency as alternative means to some more ultimate moral end (such as pleasure, happiness, or "utility"). The heresy of pluralism also implies that those various universally valid and ultimate moral "goods" cannot be simultaneously maximized, either because they are inherently in conflict with each other (for example, fairness and sympathy drive out duty and self-control) or because they are practically difficult to combine in this or that setting, culture or institutional context.

Permit me to confess from the outset that I am a fan of all of those heresies, including a fifth heresy, the heresy of thinking that it makes sense to commit all four heresies in the same book, or with the same breath. Shortly before I became aware of the publication of *The Moral Sense*, Jon Haidt and I wrote a review essay predicting and looking forward to the development of a cognitive-pluralist-intuitionist theory of moral psychology,¹ whose main tenets are brilliantly set forth in *The Moral Sense*. I find it exhilarating to discover that our prophecy had come true even before it had been made.

I also find Wilson's four-fold classification of the virtues extremely insightful, and credible. The broad domains of moral sensibility that he portrays (fairness, sympathy, duty and self-control) are consistent with a tripartite division of the moral domain (the "Big Three of Morality") that my associates and I have induced from research on moral intuitions and judgments in India and the United States, where we distinguish an "ethics of autonomy" (including fairness and sympathy) from an "ethics of community" (including duty) from an "ethics of divinity" (including self-control).² Wilson's abstraction nicely captures some of the formal characteristics of substantive moral sensibilities and raises the possibility that diverse aspects of personal functioning (for example, planning, foresight and dependability) may well be in the service of the same moral ideal (for example, self-control).

Permit me to also acknowledge up front that, based on my reading of *The Moral Sense*, I fancy that Wilson and I probably differ a bit in personal temperament. I seem to

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be far more willing than is he to allow the importance of the rebellious, skeptical and corrosive virtues of Bohemia. I am somewhat more critical than is he of the literature that links social ills to the demise of the "family." I am more critical as well of the literature that attributes the development of moral character to the emotional quality of parent-child attachments or to any particular kind of kinship structure or domestic living arrangement. At times while reading *The Moral Sense* I found myself wondering why Wilson had become so focused on the moral sense per se, seemingly privileging it as an explanation of behavior. I wondered this not because I favor sympathy and social justice (the "liberal" virtues?) over duty and self-control (the "conservative" virtues?), or because I am a fan of the view that human beings are mere victims of their environment, but rather because very early in his book Wilson acknowledges that a moral sense may be overridden by circumstances (presumably including poverty and peer pressure) and that our moral sensibilities are but one of many motives for behavior. In the remainder of the book, however, whenever he speculates about the causes of the behavior that public policy analysts want to regulate and bring under social control (for example, physical abuse of children, the use of mood-altering drugs, sexual and reproductive behavior outside of marriage, violence and economic behavior that is outside the law, and so forth), the analysis is almost always carried forward in terms of some presumed failure of the moral sense. At times while reading *The Moral Sense* I wondered what had happened to all the other possible causes. Nevertheless, in this commentary I plan to overlook such minor issues.

There are things that Wilson and I have in common. I share with him an admiration for the ingenious character of the institution of the family (within which significant exchanges of protection, loyalty, respect, love, intimacy, information and material goods take place without the need for courts, contracts or formal rules). I share with him a concern about the historical erosion of non-contractual middle-level community institutions that stand in between the individual and the bureaucratic state. I share with him, as well, a sense of nostalgia for some of the virtues, values and objective "goods" (e.g., duty, honor, civility, will power, the desire for excellence, personal sanctity and self-improvement) that were the casualties of the "Enlightenment" and of the modern "free to choose-freedom of contract" ideology of liberal "individualism."

Clearly (it almost goes without saying) *The Moral Sense* is much deserving of praise. From the point of view

of anyone familiar with the empirical social science literature on socialization, personality development, moral judgment, social evolution, and policy studies it is a tour de force of erudition, packed with creative and provocative reinterpretations of numerous important bodies of evidence. In many ways (and not simply as a "family values" book) Wilson's treatise is a master work. Not the least of those ways is the book's attention to "habits of life" rather than "systems of thought," the book's presumption that normal human beings do not need to deliberate about whether to seek the "good" or reason about which ultimate ends in life are desirable because a moral sense is already included in their complex human nature, the book's insights into the moral basis of manners, and the book's rather consistent message that honor is the best antidote to rational choice. Wilson would probably like to have us view *The Moral Sense* as a footnote to Aristotle. Others are likely to read it as

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reminiscent of a rather different classical performance, with James Q. Wilson playing the part of a patriarch of Athens defending etiquette, politeness, civility, chastity, courtship, chivalry, and especially habit and tradition against (Socratic) reason. That anti-rationalist tone of the book only adds to its fascination and potential importance, since such a defense is long overdue (which is not the same thing as saying that it is possible).

In any case, whether Wilson is Aristotle or a patriarchal defender of the faith, I am sympathetic with the heretical drift of his book. I am so sympathetic that I think it is crucial to understand why *The Moral Sense* is likely to be seen as problematic or question-begging (or if not question-begging then at least answer-free) by many anthropologists (who may wonder what happened to culture in the argument) and by many moral philosophers (who may wonder what happened to argument in the argument). Even those relatively few anthropologists and philosophers who are like-minded followers of cognitivism, intuitionism, romanticism and pluralism will, I think, be eager to have Wilson say a bit more in defense of his heresies.

Justifying Wilson's Moral Intuitions

The wise tell us that some questions do not deserve to be answered and that others do not need to be. That may be so, but for the sake of the four heresies, certain questions cannot be ducked, for they will be among the first ones posed by any serious critic. Questions such as these: (1) Let us grant that people often respond to circumstances intuitively, instinctively or sentimentally, for example, they feel horrified by the idea of an abortion or a caning and inclined to keep others from engaging in such practices. How can we know which of the many (often opposed) moral-emotional intuitions of human beings are valid? That is to say, how can we know which of the many (often opposed) moral-emotional intuitions either incline human beings to do what is objectively "good" or "desirable" (under some set of circumstances) or are accurate representations of moral "truths"? and (2) Let us grant that, when people have moral-emotional reactions to some set of circumstances they do not typically do so because they are motivated by conclusions drawn from right reasoning. Nevertheless, if they took the time to reflect on the validity of their moral intuitions, sentiments, instincts or "natural inclinations" could they rationally justify them? That is to say, could they make use of deliberative reason to establish that their intuitive or "reflexive" moral-emotional feelings had inclined them to do precisely what any and every reasonable person ought to want to do (under the circumstances)?

Perhaps these critical questions should merely be seen as variations on the famous normative question posed by David Hume (and noted in *The Moral Sense*). In paraphrase: Is there a basis for Wilson's moral sense, aside from (or in addition to) (his) revealed religion? Wilson probably has a well-thought out answer to that question,

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but I confess that, based on my own reading of *The Moral Sense*, I remain uncertain whether his answer is "yes" or "no."

The question of justifying the moral sense would not arise if *The Moral Sense* was aimed merely at the description and classification of the concrete moral-emotional

actions and reactions of people in everyday life, for then the book would be neither heretical nor provocatively problematic, and we might simply spend our time arguing about whether the magic number of abstract virtues implicit in common (moral) sense is four or three or thirteen. There is certainly nothing controversial about the claim that human beings have moral-emotional intuitions about events and subjectively experience their intuitions as automatic (or even instinctual).

On the basis of the historical and ethnographic record we know that different people in different times and places have found it quite natural to be spontaneously appalled, outraged, indignant, proud, disgusted, guilty and ashamed by all sort of things: masturbation, homosexuality, sexual abstinence, polygamy, abortion, circumcision, corporal punishment, capital punishment, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, capitalism, democracy, flag burning, mini-skirts, long hair, no hair, alcohol consumption, meat eating, medical inoculations, atheism, idol worship, divorce, widow remarriage, arranged marriage, romantic love marriage, parents and children sleeping in the same bed, parents and children not sleeping in the same bed, women being allowed to work, women not being allowed to work. Each of those events and practices (and many more) has been a source of spontaneous and "natural" moral-emotional opprobrium or approbation at one time or another for one community or another, and not infrequently the very same event (for example, abortion, caning, parent-child co-sleeping arrangements) that has been the source of spontaneous and "natural" opprobrium (in one community) has also been the source of spontaneous and "natural" approbation (in another community).

If *The Moral Sense* was merely a descriptive study of the moral sense it would raise few eyebrows and it would probably be less deserving of widespread critical evaluation. For who doubts that human beings often sense and do things intuitively, routinely, habitually or sentimentally, and react to the world (and act in it) without being directly, immediately or consciously motivated by strategic calculations or the conclusions of deliberative reason? Indeed, it is almost a canon of orthodoxy in folk and scientific psychology that many human actions and reactions (from visual perceptions to automated motor movements to moral-emotional responses) are produced rapidly and unconsciously, so rapidly and unconsciously that the processes that produce those actions and reac-

tions are not available to introspection.

But, of course, *The Moral Sense* is not merely a descriptive study of the moral sense. The book sets its sights much higher, in the direction of normative ethics and public policy studies, and that is where problems, questions, and objections will arise. One aim of the book is to go beyond mere description of the substantive, concrete and meaning-laden moral intuitions of human beings (for example, the moral revulsion in Hindu Brahmins caused by beef eating and cow slaughter) to suggest that there are no less than four deep structures or abstract forms or ultimate ends (fairness, sympathy, duty, and self-control) which regulate all *valid* concrete moral reactions to the world. A second aim is to suggest that it is not through a process of deliberative reasoning (for example, logical deduction, rational choice, or strategic means-ends analysis) that those four (or so) deep structures, abstract forms or ultimate ends are (or should be? or could be?) discovered or learned. A third aim is to argue that the deep structures or abstract forms or ultimate ends which regulate all *valid* moral reactions have already been included in our nature (by evolution) and become manifest in our moral character through participation in the social-emotional life of a properly composed and normally functioning family.

Given those aims, to establish the deep structures or abstract forms or ultimate ends of moral correctness as a prelude to examining the conditions of family life that promote a worthy moral character, *The Moral Sense* is vulnerable to criticism on the grounds that the book tries to dismiss or by-pass too many standard questions about

the validity of moral intuitions. Some critics will say that Wilson has not succeeded at rationalizing the deep structures or abstract forms or ultimate ends that regulate our moral-emotional intuitions, that he has failed to re-present them in such a way that any and every rational person must feel compelled by reason to find them desirable. Some critics may say that Wilson has not even tried to rationalize them; that all he has done is illicitly declare that a corpus of his own unrationalized moral-emotional intuitions ought to be a standard for determining the source and gross architecture not just of his own moral-emotional intuitions but of universal moral truth?

The difficulty with Wilson's book is not that he is unaware of these kinds of issues, criticisms, and questions of moral justification. For his book is breath-taking in scope, even monumental, and he seems to be aware of almost everything. The real problem is that his responses to those potential criticisms and questions are abbreviated, tentative, eclectic, and occasionally cavalier. He hints at some answers, but the answers he hints at are very different kinds of answers, and none of them is systematically defended. Given the absence of step-by-step philosophical justification, the book appears a little too answer-begging when it comes to matters of basic principle. Given all the deep and heretical philosophical claims made in *The Moral Sense* about the nature of moral "goods" or ultimate aims (cognitivism, pluralism), and the source of our knowledge of them (intuitionism, romanticism), answer-begging is certain to invite an inquisition.

Moral Correctness: That Question of Revealed Religion?

So is there in fact a critical intellectual basis for Wilson's moral sense, aside from (or in addition to) (his) revealed religion? As far as I am able to judge, Wilson's answer to that question seems to waver between "yes" and "no".

The answer seems to be "no" in those contexts in *The Moral Sense* when he is tempted to treat moral-emotional intuitions (for example, his own sense of "repugnance" at this or that) as self-justifying, or to treat moral-emotional intuitions as unquestionable or fundamental philosophical principles in and of themselves³), or to treat moral-emotional intuitions as a form of knowledge whose validity is guaranteed simply by the fact that they have been handed down to us or inscribed in our nervous system by the god of deep time (Darwinian evolution). In my view such "arguments" are logically equivalent to

arguments from revealed religion and are merely the contemporary idioms through which revealed truth is expressed in a secularized world.

I would note in passing that "just-so stories" appealing to "evolutionary value" are rather hazardous in the context of Wilson's overall argument, for they would seem to suggest that there is a single terminal "good" after all, namely personal survival (or getting your genes into the next generation) and that any action that is an effective means of promoting survival, including (survival promoting) *violations* to justice, sympathy, duty and self-control, can be justified by reference to that overarching end. If Wilson's conception of the "good" reduces to "evolutionary value," then I find it hard to see how the heresy of pluralism can be sustained. Addition-

ally, a moral system based on "evolutionary value" as the ultimate good would seem to suggest that "might makes right" and that every natural inclination or instinct is desirable. Since that can't be what Wilson has in mind when he celebrates our moral-emotional intuitions, I remain confused about the normative role of evolutionary functionalism in Wilson's morality. Describing (or even explaining) our "natural inclinations" is not the same as justifying them, right? Who was it that said, "If we can't change human nature, the least we can do is ignore it!"?

In saying this I certainly do not mean to rule out the possibility that "no" ("no, there is no basis for morality aside from revealed religion") is the most truthful answer to David Hume's question. Perhaps that message is the central message of *The Moral Sense* and should be

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acknowledged as such. (That candid message would be this: that, of course, revealed religion, or something analogous to it, is at the base of any moral life; moreover, there is a validity to our moral-emotional intuitions that has something to do with the greatness and character of their historical source or origins, but that validity is beyond the capacity of human reason to rationalize in any detail.) If it is Wilson's view that any attempt to rationally justify our moral-emotional intuitions is pointless because it is ultimately self-defeating (and hence is the enemy of the moral life, presumably because it results in a misguided moral skepticism), then he should say so. If it is Wilson's view that *The Moral Sense* is not really a work in normative ethics at all, but should be read simply as a factual inquiry into some divine (or Darwinian) moral plan, then he should say so as well (although I can promise him that a Socratic question calling for justification, "What makes you think that the plan is so divine?" is bound to arise).

Sometimes, Wilson's answer to David Hume's question seems to be "yes" (yes, our moral-emotional intuitions can be rationalized, justified and represented to the intellect by some form of deliberative reasoning). This is especially so when he alludes to our moral-emotional

intuitions as "self-evident truths" which have "practical value" [p. 240]. For reasons I just mentioned the appeal to "practical value" is not helpful in the context of Wilson's overall stance. For it suggests that fairness, sympathy, duty and self-control are merely contingent means to some other end, and might (from a rational deliberative point of view) just as well be set aside should instrumental means-ends reasoning determine that they are inefficient.

More promising, I think, as a rational justification for our moral-emotional reactions, is the idea that our moral intuitions ultimately rest on a solid foundation of self-evident truth. There is but brief mention in *The Moral Sense* of the idea of moral intuitions as self-evident truths. However, with some significant qualifications, it strikes me as a very fruitful potential line of argument, especially if Wilson is prepared to give back to philosophy and anthropology what he has tried to take away, namely reason and cultural content.

A "yes" answer to David Hume's question ("yes, there is a basis for morality aside from or in addition to revealed religion") would require either (1) a demonstration that our moral-emotional intuitions are consistent with the conclusions of some form or other of deliberative reason (deductive, inductive, instrumental) or (2) a demonstration that deliberative reason itself leads us to the conclusion that there is validity in things that are beyond our capacity to reason through for ourselves (such as the sacred "truths" of revealed religion or those deeply felt "truths" of moral-emotional intuition of which we can not make sense, yet which we feel "naturally inclined" to hold on to nonetheless); or both.

It seems to me that one way to try to meet this demand would be to show that everyday moral appraisals can be rationalized, justified (and thereby represented to the intellect) by grounding them in a heterogeneous base set of self-evident truths and saturating them with a good deal of local cultural content. In the context of a scholarly exchange about the heretical claims made in *The Moral Sense*, nothing would be more satisfying than a demonstration that the architectural plan for human moral-emotional sensibilities was naturally engineered through a psychological mechanism that could be represented as self-evident truth.

I do not know if Wilson (or anyone else) has tried to carry through this type of project, and I certainly do not know whether it would be successful. Nevertheless, it seems to me true that if you push the process of abstraction to some limit, you sometimes bump up against formal principles that have weight and intellectual authority because they have the feel of a self-evident truth.

At the very least, that seems to me to be true of certain formal principles of fairness such as "one ought to treat like cases alike and different cases differently." Imagine someone denying the principle by asserting that "one ought to treat different cases alike and like cases differently." You might interpret such a denial as a joke, or an ironic comment, or as a failure in the person's under-

standing of the meaning of English words. You might ultimately conclude that the person was not a member of the human race. But one option you would not have is to surrender the self-evident truth captured by that formal ideal. Perhaps, at some high level of abstraction, that quality of rational undeniability or self-evidence might be found to characterize all moral "goods."

"Culture" as The Missing Link: Nothing Moral Happens Without It

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that one actually succeeded at representing the human moral sense in terms of a base set of several (or many) self-evident moral truths stated as formal principles? Why would one still have to saturate the moral sense with cultural content? The reason, I think, is this. Even if there are formal features (Wilson's four abstract moral "goods") that cause a concrete action or event to be sensed or felt as morally desirable or morally obnoxious, those formal features qua formal features are not sufficient for the activation of our moral-emotional sensibilities. With the possible exception of a few philosophically inclined moralists who experience outrage and repugnance at the abstract idea of injustice, cruelty, irresponsibility, or self-indulgence, our everyday intuitive moral-emotional sensibilities (of approval or disapproval) are always activated by concrete substantive events (for example, a friend shows up in blue jeans at your daughter's wedding, a child's genitor refuses to be its pater, an American is caned in Singapore, a large mammal is deliberately sacrificed in a scientific experiment, a human corpse is disposed of without a proper burial).

Thus, although I find it an appealing idea that there is a formal architecture to the human moral sense, which can be represented in terms of a base-set of abstract self-evident truths, and which resonates to the deep structure or formal features of any truly moral action or event, I also find that idea problematically incomplete. Of course one cannot do everything in a single book, not even in monumental book such as *The Moral Sense*. Incompleteness is a real problem in this case, however, because by virtue of its attention to the formal architecture or deep structure of the moral sense, *The Moral Sense* tends to suppress the following critical fact: the intuitive moral-emotional sense of human beings is not able to recognize or detect the formal moral feature(s) of an action or event without the assistance of a great deal of very concrete and local parochial knowledge.

Here I speak as an anthropologist interested in cross-cultural and sub-cultural disagreements about what is loathsome, outrageous, disgusting or shameful. Perhaps it is an article of faith in anthropology that human beings do not speak "language," they speak "a language"; that human beings do not practice "religion," they practice "a religion"; that one does not study "people," one studies "a people." Nevertheless, that article of faith captures the important (even if partial) truth that to really understand the everyday functioning of the human moral sense one cannot ignore content in favor of form. Hindus in rural India become outraged if a widow eats fish. Secular middle class folk in urban America become disturbed when a teenager has a baby; they also think that physical punishment and parent-child co-sleeping arrangements are forms of "child abuse." Anthropologists (and others interested in comparative ethics) would be left with no way to understand those substantive moral-emotional reactions if (following Wilson's lead) they sacrificed a particular people's concrete local parochial knowledge to everyone's self-evident truth. Subtract out concrete local parochial knowledge from the moral sense and the moral sense becomes senseless.

Under the rubric "local parochial knowledge" I mean to include culture-specific ideas and beliefs about nature, persons, and society. I mean to include everything an "outsider" would need to know to understand why eating beef (and the process of raising cows for slaughter) might be seen as a profoundly immoral violation of fairness, sympathy, duty and self-control by a Hindu Brahman. I mean to include everything an "outsider" would need to know to understand how it could be that, in this or that cultural community, the imposition of ordeals and hardships on children (including physical punishment and circumcision) is a realization of moral sensibilities (aimed at promoting loyalty, respect, duty and self-control). Under "local parochial knowledge" I mean to include anything and everything that serves as

the necessary intellectual bridge linking substance to form. I think it is reasonable to think of "culture" as that bridge (linking substance to form). I think it is crucial to recognize that without that cultural bridge (linking substance to form) the process of moral sensing simply grinds to a halt.

Real world moral-emotional reactions are always saturated with cultural content. There are many implications of that basic fact, of which I will mention only this one: that it is hazardous to make judgments about the formal moral sense of people in different cultural communities, unless one already knows a great deal about their culture-specific way of linking substance to form. Lacking that kind of knowledge it is usually impossible to know whether this or that concrete behavior is or is not evidence of a well-developed moral sensibility (in Wilson's formal sense).

Thus, for example, "treat like cases alike and different cases differently" is a formal principle of fairness, and may even be a self-evident (and hence universal) truth. Nevertheless, we cannot really know if someone is respecting that formal moral ideal of fairness simply by knowing how he behaves. In the light of local cultural knowledge (and especially in the light of culture-specific beliefs about relevant likenesses and differences) almost any behavior (permitting twelve-year-old children to vote, denying twelve-year-old children the vote, drafting women into the military, excluding women from the military, legalizing the practice of slavery, prohibiting the practice of slavery) might be a local instantiation of the abstract (and universal) moral norm of treating different cases differently and like cases alike.

The Moral Sense has a dual focus. On the one hand the book examines the formal architecture of a universal moral sense. On the other hand it draws our attention to behavior that has been defined as socially problematic or even criminal in our contemporary society. Yet it seems to me that as soon as Wilson elects to examine the moral sense purely as a formal architecture (or deep structure) he surrenders his chances of tracing causal connections between that moral sense and actual behavior. The self-evidence (and hence universality) that Wilson achieves for his formal "moral sense" is purchased at the price of not being able to rationally derive from his formal "moral sense" anything specific or determinate about which particular events are morally valid, and which ones morally corrupt. The rational link between Wilson's formal "moral sense" and our moral-emotional reactions to concrete events is so loose that I think Wilson would have to grant that, given the abstract character of his formulation, there might well have been slave owners in

the United States who were in possession of a fully developed moral sense (in Wilson's formal sense) and for whom the practice of slavery was experienced (presumably with pride) as a moral reality? It seems to me that he ought to grant that, given his formulation, when people engage in behavior that other people (for example, public policy analysts) experience as morally offensive or criminal, it is possible that the "offenders" have a fully developed moral sense (in Wilson's formal sense) and have simply done things which they experience as instantiations of some self-evident moral truth(s)?

Allow me here to anticipate and circumvent a certain misunderstanding. I am definitely not arguing that because our real world moral-emotional reactions are always saturated with cultural content, therefore conduct we find morally offensive (such as slave-holding) is not really morally wrong. Quite the contrary, I would argue that when it comes to considerations of fairness, it is certainly possible that a people's substantive and

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parochial beliefs about which likenesses and differences ought to matter in life are false. It is possible that their false beliefs about likeness and difference have led them to engage in behaviors (based on those discriminations) which are morally obnoxious and profoundly wrong. But let me also be clear about this point. The question of whether someone's substantive beliefs about the world are true or false (and the related question of how one could demonstrate the falsity of such beliefs) is quite a different kind of question than the question of whether others are in possession of a fully developed moral sense, in Wilson's (formal) sense.

Because real world moral-emotional reactions are always saturated with cultural content it is usually impossible to draw valid conclusions about the quality of a person or people's formal moral sensibility simply from their concrete behavior. That is why in trying to decide whether this person or people has a well-developed (formal) moral sense it is not enough (indeed, it may even be irrelevant) that their concrete behavior (for example, parent-child co-sleeping, the use of physical punishment, the routine practice of extra-marital sexual rela-

tions) offends your intuitive moral-emotional sensibilities, because your moral sensibilities never function purely as abstract forms.

Indeed, it is precisely because I agree with Wilson that the claims of self-evident truth are so deep in human beings and the formal moral sense so pervasive, that I am tempted to argue that, when it comes to moral diversity, most of the action (and most of the conflict) turns on matters of belief. How does it turn on matters of belief? In two ways. First, every cultural community, including our own, has its own local cultural beliefs concerning which of the several abstract moral "goods" should have precedence (for example, duty and self-control over justice and sympathy, or vice versa). Secondly, every cultural community, including our own, has its own local cultural beliefs about how formal moral "goods" should be enriched and given substantive definition in this or that historically constructed social and material world. It is for those reasons that it makes sense to speak of the "Hindu moral sense" or the "Islamic moral sense" or the "Western liberal moral sense." It is for those reasons that it makes sense to argue that in everyday life people don't practice morality in the abstract. Rather a people practices this or that concrete morality vis-a-vis this or that very particular way of life.

It may be an anthropological commonplace, but it is nonetheless true, that when moralizing "outsiders" react to the concrete behavior of "insiders" they often get it wrong. One major way they get it wrong is by not recognizing the formal "good" (or, ideally, the universal self-evident truth) promoted by the concrete behavior of "insiders", because they (the "outsiders") have failed to unburden themselves of their own culture-specific (and habitual) way of connecting substance to form. What "outsiders" ought to be open to recognizing is that behavior (for example, parent-child co-sleeping) which produces in them a spontaneous feeling of moral disapproval may well be justifiable, in the sense that any and every moral and rational person might well to do the

same thing "under the circumstances," where "the circumstances" include those local cultural beliefs.

Perhaps Wilson would agree with all this. If so, then I would be overjoyed to conclude this commentary by simply applauding his book, while reiterating my judgment that one of the truly great strengths of Wilson's account is his view that there are certain abstract features of actions and events that must be there for us to experience those actions and events as morally desirable. But then again, perhaps he will not agree with all this. If not, then I want to invoke an anthropological piety. Given Wilson's keen interest in public policy and the regulation of very specific types of behavior there is a missing link, an unbridged gap in his analysis. For he never quite acknowledges the full force of the moral truth that neither actors nor observers of behavior are ever able to instinctively, reflexively, or intuitively experience actions and events as unmediated abstract forms. Culture is that missing link in his analysis of the moral sense. Culture is the bridge that crosses the gap between substance and form. Culture may not be everything, but when it comes to our moral sensibilities, nothing much happens without it.

I hope nothing I have said by way of critical commentary detracts from the magnificence of Wilson's book or from the importance of his cognitivism, intuitionism, romanticism or pluralism. My aim is simply to provoke the strongest possible defense of those heresies, for surely they will come under attack. I learned much from *The Moral Sense*, and the book left me wondering about some marvelous things. These things. If both "form" (universal self-evident truths) and "content" (cultural-specific beliefs) are jointly necessary conditions for the activation of our moral sensibilities, then perhaps there really is no necessary opposition between reason and revealed truth. And maybe, just maybe, the most honest answer to David Hume's question really is one which, like Wilson's, wavers suggestively (some might say maddeningly) between "yes" and "no."

NOTES

1 Shweder & Haidt, *The Future of Moral Psychology: Truth, Intuition and the Pluralist Way*, 4 *PSYCHOLOGICAL SCI.* 360-65 (1993).

2 See Shweder, *In Defence of Moral Realism: Reply to Gabennesch*, 61 (1990) 2060-67; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller. *Culture and Moral Development*. *CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY: ESSAYS IN COMPARATIVE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT*. (J. Stigler, R.A. Shweder, & G. Herdt eds. 1990); R.A. Shweder, N.C. Much, M.M. Mahapatra, & L.

Park. *The "Big Three" Explanations of Suffering in MORALITY AND HEALTH* (A. BRANDT & P. ROZIN EDS., under review, and J. Haidt, S. Koller, & M. Dias, *Affect, Culture, and Morality, or Is It Wrong to Eat Your Dog?* 65 *J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOLOGY* 613-628 (1993).

3 J. WILSON, *THE MORAL SENSE* 239 (1993). All subsequent references to this book will be enclosed in square brackets.