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The Political Science of James Q. Wilson

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With a wink, Irving Kristol declared, "It is the self-imposed assignment of neoconservatives to explain to the American people why they are right, and to the intellectuals why they are wrong." Kristol did not mean that the neoconservative is to be a flatterer of populist spasms or the endorser of every shallow mantra. Nor is the neoconservative to confuse opposition to the class of would-be social engineers with opposition to ideas about society. Rather, the neoconservative stands for common sense over conventional wisdom; well-tried traditions over academic speculations; the American public philosophy over ideological imports. With mores and institutions bearing the brunt of scholarly iconoclasm and elite experimentation over the past half-century, the neoconservative project, forever the task of a small minority, demanded researchers of tremendous breadth and depth, scholars of modesty and discernment, public intellectuals of sincere concern, essayists of wit and candor, and figures of grace and charity. Great ideas must spring from true observations, must be vetted and refined by the highest intellects, and must be presented with equal parts charm and rigor.

All this is to say that a James Q. Wilson—researcher, scholar, public intellectual, and essayist—is as indispensable to neoconservatism as a Kristol or a Norman Podhoretz, and is therefore as indispensable to the social improvements of the last thirty years as any scholar or public intellectual. His 1982 article in *The Atlantic* with George L. Kelling, "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety," has been cited thousands of times in the academic literature and is widely considered responsible for a revolution in policing and urban policy. Wilson served on five major presidential commissions, on topics ranging from crime to bioethics. He served as president of the American Political Science Association, and later received the organization's highest honor, the James Madison Award. His book on American government is the most popular political science textbook for the Advanced Placement test in the nation's high schools. Wilson was so erudite, so insightful, so prolific in multiple arenas

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that he could not be ignored, whether in Washington or in Cambridge. His greatest legacy is creating a model for how to think about the swirling world of human interactions, and all its successes and maladies.

Wilson himself did not much like the label "neoconservative," because he never really saw himself as a conservative. Rather, he saw himself as a "policy skeptic," whose allegiances were as much to Hubert Humphrey (on whose campaign he worked) as to George W. Bush (from whom he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom). But by this description, Wilson sold himself short. He was a patient bulldozer of bad ideas, often striking at their theoretical and methodological roots, and had an impeccably keen sense of the intricacies of American life. He was also a builder of new policy strategies that eschewed utopian aims and doubted the value of vogue but impractical wisdom. Instead, he revived crucial if imprecise ideas—like incentives, goals, responsibility, and character—that are paramount in the ways normal citizens view politics.

Wilson's unique brand of political science—he was an empiricist with a jeweler's eye as well as an insightful moralist of great decency—never was the sort to order grand transformations; he was too serious for that. Instead, Wilson's practical inquiry recovered much public wisdom about bureaucratic structures, crime-fighting, and the broader issues of manners and morals in post-Great Society America. He improved our understanding and, when his ideas were integrated into policy, improved the lives of many Americans—especially those urban dwellers faced with the explosion of violent crime in the 1970s and 1980s.

Wilson's achievements, both theoretical and practical, are a testament to his kind of political science. It is a political science that first asks, "Does this matter?," and then, "Does this make sense?" His death this year gives us the occasion to look back on his ideas and his impact—although any short summary of his career and scholarship will necessarily be an overview that leaves out much of interest and value. Wilson's canonical works are still with us, as are the social improvements they gave rise to—and perhaps more importantly, his model is still with us. The fruits of epistemic modesty, public concern, and vigorous observation are what is truly on display in the success of his ideas.

Politics, Government, and Why Organization Matters

Within the circles of academic political science, James Q. Wilson's work on political institutions is undoubtedly his most influential. When he first began seriously to tackle the fundamental problems facing large-scale institutions and bureaucracies in the mid-1960s, the field was stagnant and bland. For years, the study of public administration had been dominated by unimaginative institutionalists who thought that the best way to reform and reshape public bureaucracies and institutions is simply to ask what people within the institutions think they need, because it is obvious (or so it was assumed) that public administrators have the public interest at heart and know what is best for the agencies. These early scholars usually recommended more money or more bureaucratic control. The idea of a scientific study of management was still very much alive, and the belief that experts in public administration could perfect the ways in which agencies are run—both making agencies more efficient and increasing their purview—was the dominant paradigm.

During the height of the Eisenhower boom, such unbridled optimism was rather commonplace both inside and outside the government, and the idea of the ultimately infallible nature of agencies was almost gospel to the people running them and those studying them. As Wilson pointed out years later in his 1994 John Gaus Award lecture, it is no coincidence that, as this era came to an end, "public confidence in all institutions of American life, but especially government and corporations, began to decline. The reasons for that decline are complex and not entirely understood. . . . But it is important to recall that the decline in public confidence began before Vietnam and Watergate and affected not just government but almost all institutions." Wilson emphasizes that this loss in confidence owed both to the American people's "natural suspicion of institutional power" and

to the particular hubristic stance the study of public administration had taken.

Wilson's own work began in conjunction with this national rejection of the supremacy of institutions as ends unto themselves. Two of his most important works—the books *Political Organizations* (1974) and *Bureaucracy* (1989)—challenge preconceptions about the structure, function, and motivations of political and governmental institutions. Though the books were published fifteen years apart, they can be read in conjunction to understand Wilson's foundational ideas about politics.

Bureaucracy is, in many ways, Wilson's definitive statement on public administration and the role it plays in society. The book is both expansive—seriously analyzing the internal functioning of more than half a dozen government agencies—and remarkably precise in its language and presentation. Characteristically, Wilson wrote *Bureaucracy* without much explicit reference to the myriad academic debates or controversies it responds to, so that a non-academic reader would be able to grasp its lessons as well as an academic would—a remarkable achievement considering how dry the material can be. By contrast, *Political Organizations* was overtly written as a response to contemporary academic debates. It challenges the prevailing academic thinking about the voluntary organizations involved in political life—parties, unions, civil-rights groups, interest groups, and other associations.

In these volumes, Wilson makes a number of important findings, ranging from concrete lessons about the workings of political institutions to general insights into the nature of organization. While the books focus on different subjects, they share a single fundamental insight: organization matters. *Bureaucracy* shows that the way government agencies are structured affects their ability to execute their mission. *Political Organizations* shows that what political groups do can be shaped more by their structure than by their goals or the interests of their members.

Organizational culture is also dictated mostly by the structure of the organization, as well as the character and behavior of the people who lead it. This is where Wilson directly contradicts another very popular school of thought on public administration, namely public choice theory. An offshoot of organizational economics, public choice theory essentially takes the microeconomic framework used to understand the behaviors of firms and applies it to bureaucracies. Wilson is appreciative of the work done in this field and builds from it, eventually offering friendly criticism. Its contributors—such as Nobel laureates James Buchanan and Kenneth Arrow—were among the first scholars to actively challenge naïve

assumptions about how bureaucracies behave, and began a movement to scale back many of those bureaucracies. Wilson argues that those who believed in the infallibility of institutions were almost entirely wrong and the public choice school was often right. But he is also critical of what he sees as the movement's methodological dogmatism, and its resulting inability to account for the actual behavior of government agencies.

Public choice theorists argue that bureaucratic behavior is reducible to simple games of incentive; that a bureaucracy will always have an incentive to increase its funding, powers, and control; and that individual bureaucrats additionally are motivated by self-interest, concerned chiefly with their careers, salary, and reputation. But Wilson dismantles this argument, showing that the goals for different bureaucracies vary greatly based on how they are constructed, where leadership comes from, and what the individual career incentives for each level of bureaucrat are. A classic example is the Food Stamp program of the early 1970s. The Department of Agriculture, which ran the large program, saw its food-stamp responsibilities as a distraction from its customary task of aiding farmers, and so tried to transfer the program to another department. Public choice theory would have predicted that the Department of Agriculture would welcome the new funding, responsibilities, and power that came with the Food Stamp program.

Wilson acknowledges that the incentives for low-level bureaucrats (including people like teachers and police officers, but also members of voluntary organizations such as labor unions or the NAACP) rarely match the incentives of middle managers, which in turn rarely match perfectly with the incentives of leaders. And he argues that reducing all of these actors' actions to choices made under consistent incentives—as public choice theory does—obscures rather than clarifies how organizations are actually run. Wilson shows the fundamental problem with excessively reducing human interaction to simple models: what shapes interests and incentives is far more complicated than these models have it. Though he accepts that incentives matter, Wilson maintains that the incentives faced by a bureaucrat are radically different in different organizations that are designed for different tasks and have different organizational cultures.

The lesson about the importance of structure and culture applies not only to the government agencies Wilson describes in *Bureaucracy* but also to the voluntary associations he studies in *Political Organizations*—not least because some political organizations *are* bureaucratic, either by design or necessity. Bureaucracy, which need not be "ponderous, undemocratic, or conservative," can be essential to a political organization's long-term

survival. But the larger teaching of *Political Organizations* is that structure matters more than goals in explaining how an organization will behave.

Wilson's conclusions about bureaucracies and political organizations illustrate his approach to public policy generally: structure, culture, and incentives matter; it is folly to assume people always act in accordance with simple psychologies; and aims should be set within the realm of the possible.

Fixing Windows

If Wilson's works on politics and bureaucracy were his most academically influential, his works on crime have had the greatest influence on the lives of normal Americans. Wilson has long been credited with helping, in the mid-1980s, to turn the tide against the prevailing sense that pervasive crime had become a permanent condition of city life in the United States. It was in part because major metropolitan areas like New York City and Boston implemented his ideas that safe urban living became possible again. Almost solely due to work led by Wilson and a few of his colleagues, criminology witnessed a paradigm shift that revived traditional notions of the role of local law enforcement in maintaining social order. To understand Wilson's contribution, it is necessary to understand the dominant paradigm he was working against: the social constructivist model of criminality.

In the late 1960s, criminology was dominated by urban sociology, psychological behaviorism, and educational theory. Researchers in these fields all held in one way or another that crime was caused by social circumstances, such as a deficient upbringing, poverty, or racial discrimination. To solve something like crime, these theorists argued, you have to get at the "root causes"—with poverty as the most oft-cited. Eliminate poverty and crime will go, too; wasting money on things like policing and punitive measures simply reinforces the tragedy of these root causes.

This logic dictated a series of government programs to increase welfare spending and eliminate racism; policing was de-emphasized. What followed was a decade of climbing crime rates, and the transformation of some neighborhoods into blighted war zones. Wilson was skeptical of this approach from the outset, criticizing it on empirical grounds in *The Public Interest* as early as 1967, but he became its most outspoken critic with the publication in 1975 of his book *Thinking about Crime*. This book became part of the first sustained salvo against the sloppy thinking of the overly deterministic schools of sociology. Wilson aimed to reorient the

discussion about crime from its supposed root causes to its more proximate causes, which he induced from decades of studying police behavior.

Wilson's major contributions to the field of criminology incorporate the understanding that criminals respond to incentives and disincentives in a predictable way. Instead of thinking of criminality just as an aberrant behavior that should be psychoanalyzed away, Wilson argued that we can think of it as a darker part of human nature that is usually kept at bay by the disincentives that are present in a well-ordered society. His argument was that criminals generally choose to commit or not to commit a crime based on an evaluation (though not necessarily a conscious deliberation) of potential risk and reward. The simplest way for governments to decrease crime is to alter the parameters of this calculation—either by increasing the punishment for committing crimes or by increasing the odds of getting caught. Clear and unambiguous punishment being consistently applied to the same type of crimes provides the potential criminal foreknowledge of the likelihood and severity of punishment.

Wilson's most insightful contribution to criminology explains more fully which incentives weigh (or fail to weigh) on the individual calculation about whether to commit crime. He observed that crime was most prevalent in areas that had the weakest meaningful police presence—meaningful in the sense that they were aware of and able to stop any disorderly or criminal activity going on around them. This analysis inspired his most famous observation about social order and the behavior of criminals—what became known as the "broken windows theory."

Wilson extrapolated from a social-psychology experiment in which breaking a window in an unattended vehicle planted in a neighborhood soon led to the complete destruction of the whole vehicle. This observation blossomed into a theory about the very nature of public order. As Wilson put it in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* in 2011, "public order is a fragile thing, and if you don't fix the first broken window, soon all the windows will be broken." Although jaywalking, graffiti, petty vandalism, and the harassing actions of New York's famous squeegee men were not serious crimes on their own, their presence in a city can contribute to the impression of lawlessness and disorder; criminals, seeing that laws will not be enforced and crimes will go unpunished, will feel less incentive to obey the law.

The broken windows approach holds that the most important role police play is in creating order: establishing a culture that respects the rule of law and leads to a predictably negative outcome for committing crimes means that fewer people will choose to commit them. Echoing his work on

political institutions, Wilson found that the incentives for crime are shaped by a broader context that includes culture and organization. Perceptions of structure and expectations of return on action change the calculus for the would-be criminal. It is important to note also that Wilson's use of rational-choice methods to understand criminals does not mean that he takes the position that criminality is in any way a "rational" path to take.

In that 2011 interview, Wilson described his *Atlantic* article as having had a "galvanic effect" on American police departments. It gave them a crime-fighting justification for answering the day-to-day complaints of local citizens about broken streetlights and petty criminals. New York City's former police commissioner William Bratton, whom Wilson credited with the "biggest change in policing in this country," was known for handing out copies of the article from his briefcase. In a remembrance of Wilson published in *City Journal*, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani describes implementing Wilson's ideas and how the city's police became "proactive rather than reactive in the fight against crime." Conditions in New York City began to improve rather suddenly.

Because Wilson rejected the reigning view of those who studied crime—that man is moral and society is the problem—he sought to understand just how a person becomes immoral and engages in criminal activity. His 1985 book *Crime and Human Nature*, co-written with Richard Herrnstein, deals with the fundamental question of what in an individual's nature predicts his proclivity to criminality. In a certain sense, Wilson here comes full circle, writing about the "root causes" of crime; he and Herrnstein focus on tangible causes and factors, some social and actionable—such as broken homes, deteriorating social order, drug usage, and poverty—and some more permanent and individual—such as low IQ and a predisposition toward high impulsivity. However, they emphasize that instead of focusing on the less tractable problems of human society and human nature, policymakers should direct their energies toward the tangible, proximate, and actionable causes of crime that are amenable to policy solutions—thereby fostering a culture opposed to criminality.

Crime and Human Nature concludes with Wilson and Herrnstein pondering a broader topic—namely, the question of what human nature is. They identify three ways to study this topic that inform different approaches to crime prevention: a Rousseauian approach, positing that human nature is fundamentally good but is ruined by society; a utilitarian approach, positing that human nature is all about rationally calculating the most optimal behaviors; and an Aristotelian approach, positing that man is a naturally social animal and can only be understood in relation to natural

associations that begin with the family, extend to the community, and end with the state. Wilson subscribes to the Aristotelian approach above the others, while recognizing kernels of truth in the other approaches. From his study of crime and institutions, Wilson's own scholarship turned toward a reflection upon these fundamental aspects of human behavior.

Family, Morality, and Why Character Matters

In a 1985 essay commemorating the twentieth anniversary of *The Public Interest*, Wilson notes Daniel Patrick Moynihan's proclamation in the journal's first issue that "men are learning how to make an industrial economy work." But those twenty years had been sobering—recessions, energy crises, stagflation. It is a tough thing, Wilson had realized, to make any economy work, let alone the modern one; doing so requires more than, as some economists would have it, shifting incentives about so that individual actors, with their variable array of tastes, would be led to make "socially optimal" choices. Never mind the impractical vagueness of a "social optimum"; some tastes should not, at least for the good of society, be encouraged. Society needed to shape its actors—not play a fateful game of carrot and stick.

In that *Public Interest* essay, Wilson argues that habits of industriousness and honest dealing—virtues even an economist would regard as moral—require the presence of a certain ethos in the broader society in order to flourish. Schools must discipline, debt must feel burdensome, and the dole must be undesirable. Moreover, crime, so often the result of an inner impulsivity, could be partially alleviated if only self-control were instilled; but modern life favors self-expression over self-control, and the effects were evident. Following Aristotle, Wilson concludes that only through steady habituation can character be instilled, and habituation is only possible if society can say to itself, without blushing overmuch, just what should be habituated for and what against: "If we wish it to address the problems of family disruption, welfare dependency, crime in the streets, educational inadequacy, or even public finance properly understood, then government, by the mere fact that it defines these states of affairs as problems, acknowledges that human character is, in some degree, defective and that it intends to alter it."

Though Wilson was too polite and collegial to exclaim this from the rooftops, one gets the sense that he thought that no force was more debasing to the character of the average American than the fads of the college campuses. They taught moral cosmopolitanism and cultural relativism, undermining conventional, bourgeois morality—the morality of self-control, industriousness, and honest-dealing that Tocqueville had noticed

in abundance. As Wilson noted in his 1972 *Commentary* essay "Liberalism versus a Liberal Education," the liberalism conveyed by higher education was "less a theory of justice than a theory of benevolence." And the cultivation of benevolence untempered by justice or moderation led students dangerously astray. By teaching their students to pursue liberation for themselves and others without inculcating any respect for the rule of law, the universities contorted liberalism into illiberal radicalism. By teaching liberalism rather than liberally educating, the universities had lost the lessons of self-criticism and balance in all things. As Wilson writes, "nothing could have been more liberal than the 1962 statement of the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]; nothing could have been less liberal than its subsequent history."

Though Wilson was a warrior for culture, he did not see himself as a culture warrior. His prescriptions were never religious in nature (though he did see parochial schools as particularly effective due to their use of discipline to instill good habits). In a 1967 *Commentary* essay, he worried about the prominence of issues of morality and "values" in the public discourse, arguing that "Our system of government cannot handle matters of that sort (can any democratic system?) and it may be torn apart by the effort." In part, Wilson simply meant that matters of moral conduct and character should not be so controversial. Yet his work, like any good work with public implications, could not avoid some measure of prescriptivism, and so of moralism—a point evident, for example, in his praising of the Victorian Age as a model of public morality unencumbered by academic iconoclasm.

Wilson's major work of moral philosophy is what Aristotle might write to rebut Hobbes (or, setting his sights a bit lower, Margaret Mead) if he had the benefit of reading Darwin and the last half-century of psychological research. In *The Moral Sense* (1993), Wilson melds the findings of psychological experiments, cultural-observation studies, and evolutionary theory to understand and describe certain human virtues, such as sympathy, fairness, self-control, and duty. He argues not for shared moral absolutes, but for a shared moral sense; not steadfast bright lines, but a good internal inclination among all the other inclinations, like "a small candle flame, casting vague and multiple shadows, flickering and sputtering in the strong winds of power and passion, greed and ideology."

Man, by virtue of his lengthy adolescence, is attached to his providers and protectors. This attachment means that man is a social animal, though not one that yet knows what it means to be sociable. Wilson's virtues start out as germs and are cultivated by families. Sympathy, for instance, has its basis in kinship and in evolutionary prerogatives to care for close relatives.

Because we are naturally social, and desire the company and approval of others, we sympathize with them, or feel altruistically toward them, and so tend to adjust our behavior accordingly. Fairness—a universal norm of equity, reciprocity, and impartiality—is universal precisely because of the advantages of cooperation that fairness furnishes.

Due to man's natural sociability, he is also self-controlled. Those temperate types who refuse immediate pleasures for more distant, more substantial, and more praiseworthy pleasures are easier for others to deal with, and thereby secure more blessings of sociability. Wilson argues that drug abuse, and other ways of pursuing immediate pleasure without thought for the future, "degrade the spirit" by snuffing the moral flame of self-control. Duty is the willingness to honor obligations in the absence of social rewards; a society that can cope with the problem of free riders will be more successful.

Wilson's writing, however, is conscious of the dangers and falsehoods of the determinism that so many scientists tout in their search for absolute predictability. While noting, for example, that "people may differ from birth [in how their] neurotransmitters operate, leading some to become more impulsive, excitable, fickle, quick-tempered, extravagant and easily distracted or bored," he qualifies that "these tendencies do not operate in a vacuum. The family can modify biological predispositions in important ways." The genetic lottery is not irrelevant, but neither is what family or culture does in rearing and shaping what that lottery provides. Character is not decided before birth, nor can it be cut with a knife; character must be taught and learned. (Toward the end of his career, Wilson would abandon this nuance, instead adopting a stance more in line with genetic determinism.)

The Moral Sense, it soon becomes clear, is really a book about the family. Our moral senses are innate, but they are broadened and habituated through familial attachment. The teaching of moral maxims alone will never suffice. Like Burke reminding the French geometricians that society is a partnership of many generations, Wilson concludes *The Moral Sense* by critiquing the Enlightenment assumption that autonomous individuals can make their own way in the world, and establish their moral life through will alone. This notion, now mutated for the worse by positivism and historicism, had spent nearly two centuries sapping the already precarious moral sense. A rebirth of right conduct would require institutions, most essentially the family, that socialize for such conduct.

Yet for all the weight he placed on the family as a result of his serious account of human nature and the importance of family life, Wilson too often saw the family as simply an institution with a salutary effect and did

not mine the natural sources of that effect. This is especially evident in his contribution to a slender 1998 book in which Wilson debated Leon R. Kass on the subject of human cloning. Wilson argues that while human cloning will likely never be popular (because people like the old-fashioned act of procreation), it would be manageable for society as long as clones are raised in two-parent households. The family is important to Wilson because it is the school of the moral sense; but one must ask if the moral sense would be compromised if asexual reproduction became in any way accepted. Wilson fails to see that the very effectiveness of the family as a tutor of the moral sense is tied to the way in which the family embodies the fundamental dynamic of human intergenerational relationships: an attachment and an otherness between parent and child. The attachment is especially strong in the family because sexual reproduction by two parents allows each to transcend the finitude of their bodies and their lifetimes. Their attachment to the child is a result of the transcendence that the child embodies, but it is an attachment refined by the basic otherness of parent and child; without that refinement, it becomes merely self-love.

The child is of the parents, but it is still, owing in part to its novel genotype, a wholly new human being full of surprises. The attachment, like any general sympathy for others, is an attachment to what is by no means fully knowable; it is the humble love of another. By contrast, the daughter who shares the genotype of her mother has a genotype that has already lived in the world, and that, more to the point, has been brought into the world to recreate a person already known. Her mother's attachment is, in a way, indistinguishable from boundless self-love, while her father's attachment is not rooted enough. His attachment is reliant on the saintly precedent of adoptive parents. It is very difficult to confidently speculate on exactly what would become of the parent-child relationship in an era of human cloning—but the triumph of self-love over attachment to a mysterious new human being seems to be among the things that would go awry within the family. As Kass writes, "Professor Wilson ignores the fact that giving birth to one's twin sister does not exactly reproduce a normal mother-daughter relationship."

A Modest and Prudent Scientist

James Q. Wilson's achievements are a credit to the kind of science he practiced. What makes him almost without peer as a social scientist is the ease with which he integrated insights across disciplines and across academic debates into a coherent and logical framework. Written always with

precision, Wilson's studies of politics and society rest on his observations about the interplay between human nature and the structure and function of social organizations. He recognized that a complex web of incentives, cultural accidents, and individual behaviors shapes society in a way that makes reducing it to any simple model impossible—but he showed that incorporating such models into a more humanistic and broader view would prove to be the most valuable in understanding social phenomena.

Wilson's political writing also sensibly deviated from the parallel lines of the other schools that have come to dominate social science, each of which also focuses on institutional structure or individual behavior—but largely to the exclusion of the other. Even as these seemed to be opposing sides of a methodological divide, Wilson argued for the inclusion of both, against the dominance of either—fighting the false presumptions that man is a supremely rational actor floating above the influence of society, or that he is helplessly adrift in the vortex of social forces.

Wilson's approach to the models and observations made by people from both schools suggests that he is fully aware of the intricacies and value of even the more abstract models of political behavior, but that he is not beholden to any one paradigm. The image of Wilson as the cautious and judicious political scientist emerges most forcefully when one begins to analyze the breadth and depth of the work he discusses or cites in his major publications. He easily takes insights from a diverse set of fields with a diverse set of assumptions and evenhandedly blends them together to obtain a better grasp on specific phenomena. His political science is thereby not confined just to the traditional demesne of politics, but reaches across the human condition. Yet despite the breadth of his work, there emerges a distinctly Wilsonian approach—one that stresses order, culture, and character.

Though Wilson made precise arguments about how society functions, he was hesitant about extrapolating these to predictions relevant to public policy. Wilson quotes the adage that "social scientists should never try to predict the future; they have trouble enough predicting the past." Modesty and incrementalism characterized Wilson's public-policy pronouncements; he regularly admitted that he did not know if his predictions would be borne out. By contrast, many an expert will say with the aura of certainty that such-and-such policy will have such-and-such effect, refusing to acknowledge the limitations and uncertainty in their methods. In a 1981 *Public Interest* essay, Wilson mocks these experts, describing a congressional hearing in which "intellectuals were asked for their advice and their findings; they gave copiously of the former and sparingly of the latter."

Wilson was of two minds on the quantitative turn of modern political science. He was certainly not a mathematical modeler or statistical scholar (he jokingly lamented that the one time he actually did a regression model it was a waste of his time). Although Wilson appreciated that abstract models may illuminate complex realities and intersections between behavior and institutions, he knew that when taken out of that realm and applied to actionable policy predictions, such abstractions must be approached with great caution. Quantitative models require a great deal of specificity that may not generalize well. And any model that creates abstractions using simplified assumptions about human psychology cannot be fully correct because, as *The Moral Sense* makes evident, human nature consists of a variety of good and bad inclinations complexly intertwined. Similarly, any model that refuses to take culture into account because it is too nebulous for study and too unmalleable for policymaking is deficient. Though Wilson criticized some turns in modern political science, his great criticism was reserved for the hubristic application of modern political science by "policy intellectuals."

Similar objections apply even to models based more on real-world observations and data analysis than on psychological abstractions, even if these may get closer to the truth. The problem is that, while what works in one set of circumstances will work again under the same set of circumstances, the circumstances of two situations are rarely identical, or even nearly as similar as we presume. Knowledge is not enough; what is needed is the "gift" of wisdom—"a gift for conceiving possibilities, estimating probabilities, choosing ends, understanding motives, and reconciling preferences." This kind of wisdom fuses experience and moral reflection. Above all, Wilson rejects the idea that "general regularities" can be simply applied to the future. Policy intellectuals, especially the ambitious ones, are typically unaware of how much they are unaware of.

Wilson agrees with Friedrich Hayek that the kind of knowledge needed for any sort of planning is incredibly difficult to acquire. "The planner," Wilson wrote in a 2003 essay for *The Public Interest*, "must be able to state all of his ends, reduce them to concrete alternatives, and evaluate each alternative. This is sometimes possible in private firms that have limited objectives, but it is rarely so in public ones that have many ends, countless courses of action, and a great likelihood of unintended consequences." Like Hayek and Edmund Burke, Wilson argues that when one possesses knowledge of the many possible alternatives, one often comes to understand that the world "cannot be made to work any differently" than it does at present. Regardless of the veracity and power of the observations

of even the best social scientist, his knowledge would do little for crafting policy. A more modest approach should go without saying.

It is of course wrong to say that Wilson believed no improvement could be made on what fortune had given. But it also should be noted that Wilson was typically pressing not against fortune, but the awful residual effects of decades of central planning. Wilson was more retrospective than prescriptive. Knowing that he did not know the future, Wilson focused on learning from the past. Moreover, Wilson was honest with himself; in his professional capacity, he had only knowledge to offer, not wisdom.

Wilson took on wrong ideas, often showing in exquisite detail why they were wrong, and never being afraid to use seemingly antiquated moral language to say that they were so. He could also say what was right; more often than not it was what Tocqueville called America's public philosophy: our common sense—an idea that freedom requires virtue and virtue means good character, which in turn means order and good culture. Replacing traditional notions like virtuous striving with new notions of determinism had led to a moral withering that contributed to many modern dysfunctions.

In his approach as a researcher and public intellectual, Wilson resembled a doctor to the body politic, while many of his peers resembled engineers. He never papered over complexities for the sake of a more symmetrical theory; instead, he pressed on, studying more and more and from different disciplines, and providing as precise a diagnosis as he could, even when that meant the diagnosis translated poorly to policymaking. Wilson did not suggest the obliteration of a given social malady through definite inputs according to the predictions of a theoretical model. Instead, he suggested soothing the malady within society's limited capabilities. First, do no harm: society is not to be drawn and redrawn, but nurtured and healed.

More than anything, Wilson invested his efforts in addressing some of society's most endemic ills—those of crime, bureaucracy, and character—because he was attuned to the moral significance of his calling. Some social diseases, like crime, have been greatly alleviated because of Wilson's work, while others persist, either because Wilson's diagnoses have not been acted upon, because his diagnoses were limited or flawed, or because new diseases always crop up. But it is fair to say that James Q. Wilson has been our greatest healer from the halls of academic political science. And we are grateful.