A Scientifically Based Theory of Conduct?

The contemporary American scientist and philosopher Edward. O. Wilson, famous for his theory of Sociobiology, argues that all forms of knowledge have a fundamental unity. This unity, '**Consilience**', is created by a way-of-knowing, empiricism, which he argues is common to all the disciplines. Ethics is no exception to this rule. Ethics has an empirical under pinning .

In the recent past, he argues, much research has been undertaken into the way the human brain works, into how humans respond mentally, both instinctively and rationally. If we harness the information resulting from this research to what we know about the behaviour of early human settlements, we should be able to understand the origins of our universal ethical code.

Our moral decision making system is part of our evolutionary genetic development. In the earliest hunter-gatherer and agricultural societies, tribes evolved a pragmatic pattern of behaviour which enabled them to survive. A pattern of behaviour they must follow for their own mutual good.

The Biological Basis of Ethics

The absolute rock bottom of this morality, Wilson argues, is simply the relationship between working together and 'going-it-alone' (although he doesn't use these words). The members of the earliest tribal communities realised that co-operating gave a greater chance of survival, and a more satisfying life, than going-it-alone. The selfish genes of the intelligent individuals therefore guided them to co–operation. It has been proved that certain human behavioural traits are genetically passed on and Wilson suggests that co-operation is one of these traits. Certain people are innately more co-operative than others and these people, obviously, tend to live longer than those who are not co-operative. Because they live longer they produce more offspring. Over thousands of generations these co-operative genes have become dominant. Through genetic evolution humans have developed co-operative traits which have encouraged them to act in certain ways. These ways of behaving have been incorporated into their culture as things they 'ought' to do. Their instinct for survival produced a 'theory of conduct' which the tribe perpetuated.

As societies became more settled, as labour was divided up, hierarchies developed and leaders, chiefs and priests, took control of the organisation of the communities. They formalised these 'co-operative' rules to stabilise the society and their place in its hierarchy. Gods began to appear to ensure the continued advantage of the ruling group. For this reason communities develop rites of passage ceremonies, which often become religious ceremonies, to induct the young into the community.

Wilson states quite clearly that he might be wrong.

Mary Warnock. *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Ethics.* page 89 Duckworth 1998.
Edward O. Wilson. *The Biological Basis of Morality.* The Atlantic Monthly 1998.
From: Woolman, M. *Ways of Knowing IBID Press*, Victoria, Australia, 2000, pp 254 – 255.