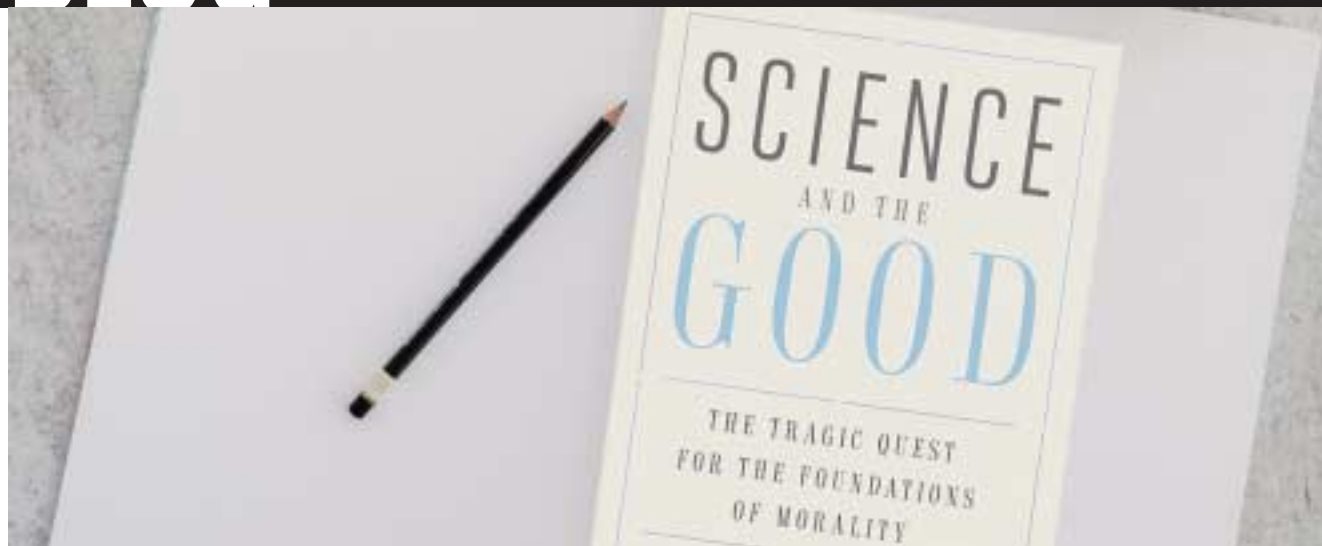


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→ THE MOD | “SCIENCE AND THE GOOD: THE TRAGIC QUEST FOR THE FOUNDATIONS OF MORALITY” BY JAMES DAVISON HUNTER AND PAUL NEDELISKY

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Best-selling author James Davison Hunter, along with his colleague, Paul Nedelisky (the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture) issue a serviceable, if not overreaching, exposé on what contemporary neuro and evolutionary scientific research has yielded about human morality. In their book, [Science and the Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality](#), the authors correctly conclude that scientific research (such as it is) has made some worthy observations, but has not begun to broach a coherent or substantiated physicalist or

materialist account of morality. At the same time, Davison Hunter and Nedelisky caricature the players involved as “tragic” and, themselves, fail to analyze “the good” and alternative epistemologies outside of “science”/“natural science”.

There are two main divisions: the first is a historical recounting of the grounds for morality, concentrating on Enlightenment thought, beginning with Cartesian methodology and continuing through its application with the domains of modern natural science; while the second part discusses contemporary findings and the schools of thought engendered thereby. In light of their substantial research, Davison Hunter and Nedelisky ascertain that scientific efforts have not and will not conclusively evidence what morality is and how we should live.

The weakest and most disputable part of *Science and the Good* is its first section. While the influential contributions of the Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke lineage are refracted through the evolutionary lens of Darwin by way of David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill, the megashift in ethical discussions instigated by Immanuel Kant’s epistemic revolution goes unexplored. Given that our present intellectual milieu bears the appellation “post-Kantian”, the authors’ omission is ponderous at best, inexcusable at worst. What is more, it is Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* that inspired Hume and set the stage for Darwinianism and the shift toward a thoroughly anthropocentric morality, such that finds expression in the monumental work of Friedrich Nietzsche. Kant also prompted the massive metaphysical rebuttal by G.W.F Hegel, marshalling forth his own presumed solution to morality. Notwithstanding, Hume’s notion that we cannot derive “ought” from “is” (deontology from ontology or morality from metaphysics) largely factors into the Davison Hunter and Nedelisky critique.

Still, the authors prove their mettle in the second part of the book by applying Humean skepticism to the assumptions of current scientific teaching on the origins, workings and mechanisms of morality. With ample quotes and comparative research, the findings of sociobiologists, philosophy professors, publicists, neuro-economists, neuro-psychologists, and social psychologists are called into question and found to be not only exaggerated, but sometimes absurdly so.

From a plethora from which to choose within the pages of *Science and the Good*, here is but one highly-publicized example of such exaggeration: Primates manifest empathy toward other primates. True, scientists observe what appears to be something akin to empathy or sentiments like unto empathy, yet it was not nor could not be established by the scientists that the observed behavior involved moral choice. The scientists were (and are) unable to bridge a connection between behavioral phenomena and moral adjudication in primates,

notwithstanding SPECT, MRI, PET, CT and other neuro-imaging techniques and observations. Indeed, as with all the examples, these scientists remain unable, by their inadequate naturalistic understanding of morality itself, to explain *what* ought to be done, much less *why* or even *how*.

Science and the Good has clear apologetical value toward natural law and foundationalist theories of morality, as well as against morality-as-altruism reductionism, but it should not be deployed as an argument defeater against materialists given its own insufficiencies. Still, this is a thoughtful summary and sound criticism of today's presumptuous scientific findings, taking back ground from the likes of Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, to say nothing of "just so" proponents of physicalism and/or scientism. Many readers therefore will appreciate that theological and natural law paradigms remain alive and well for contemporary discussions on morality. God, it turns out, may not be dead after all, but irretractably present in the moral fabric of the natural order and humanity.

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