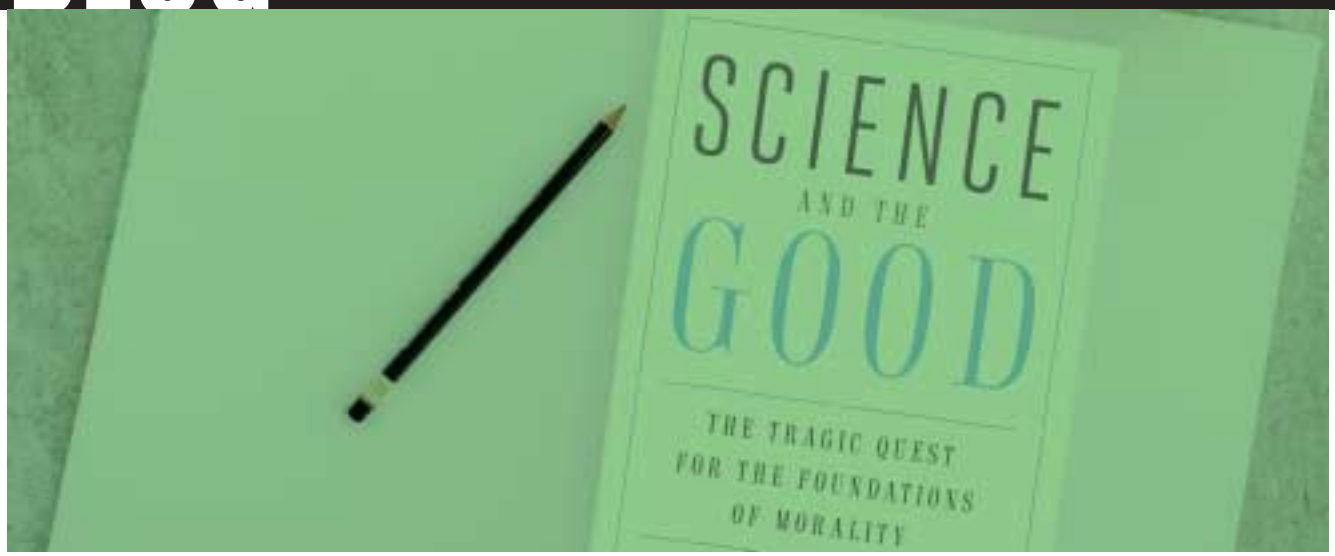

The Mod | Dr. Bombaro's Reply to Dr. Nedelisky

Wednesday, 10 Jul 2019

I confess I was rather surprised at reading Professor Nedelisky's courteous response to my review—my impression of the book was positive (notwithstanding a fault or two), and rarely have my critiques been faulted for holding the author to a standard he never intended to meet. Nonetheless, I'm grateful for the time and consideration he has taken with my work, and glad for the opportunity to reply to his response. Upon subsequent reconsideration, I see that my language perhaps lent itself to a misunderstanding on Professor Nedelisky's part (as well as my own!) I *did* set myself up (with some significant help from the geriatric word processing software I'm obliged to work with) for the professor's criticism when he took issue with my summary of the influence of Hume on Kant—the sentence originally read, "What is more, it is Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* that inspired Hume and set the stage for Darwinianism…..", when it ought to have read, "What is more, it is Kant's *Critique of Pure*

Reason that **revived** Hume and set the stage for Darwinianism…." Having visited the grave of Hume a dozen times while a student at Edinburgh, I know perfectly well that Hume was dead by 1776, five years before Kant penned his magnum opus, so it's regrettable that such an error should have appeared, and I thank Dr. Nedelisky for pointing it out (unlike some philosophy-major editors I could name, but won't). 😊

Professor Nedelisky does not disabuse me of anything in his first point. In my view, the authors *do* make a caricature of new moral scientists and Dr. Nedelisky kindly supplied the reason: "This is because the narrative in which they find their role is indeed tragic." I see the authors making an intense point disproportionate to evidence. They see it as "tragic in the extreme". I don't, that's just how I adjudicated their perspective as reader and reviewer.

It is with his second point with which I will take issue. Upon further reflection, I realized that there was a bit more to his criticism (specifically that I was faulting the authors for failing to do something they never intended) than I initially allowed for. They decided to go one route to accomplish their end (viz., "These scientists tried to establish a naturalistic foundation for morality and failed—here's how that happened,") while I would have taken a different route ("These scientists tried to establish a naturalistic foundation for morality and failed—here's why that was never going to work, and why any attempt to do that will probably fail.") I maintain, however, that they would have done their argument (and the discussion itself) better justice if they had been more comprehensive in their scope. He writes, "Bombaro says we 'fail' to analyze the good. It is true that we don't attempt to analyze the good…". But if the purpose of the book is to articulate how scientific enquiry has failed to produce a substantive and compelling argument for a naturalistic account of 'the good', then analyzing 'the good' has the most immediate relevance for the arguments in *Science and the Good*. He writes that it was not included because "We don't need to present an analysis of 'the good' to point out that value of this sort doesn't appear to be empirically detectible or demonstrable. In general, we can often tell that something is not X even where we don't have a comprehensive analysis of X." That's fair—it's incumbent on the scientists who want to ground 'the good' in naturalist principles to demonstrate that goodness is itself empirically detectible or demonstrable—but doing so would have better developed their thesis that not only has this project not succeeded, it was destined to fail due to the fact that humans do not make moral decisions based on natural principles. Even supposing the scientific community to have accomplished their goal, it is difficult to imagine precisely how they could have categorized those ethical insights as 'good' or 'bad' without significant reference to the received ethical tradition of the West.

Prof. Nedelisky also says that goodness "cannot be analyzed … [and] we could not have done

so". If by this he means that he and Prof. Davison Hunter can't offer an articulation of 'the good' grounded in naturalist principles, then well and good—again, that's up to the scientists who are trying to establish it. But it doesn't follow that there is not a sense of 'the good' that the vast majority of people (including the scientists) in the West work with by default, and that it is through that lens that the scientist will interpret her findings (if any there be). For example—suppose the scientist takes the instance of sows eating their young and deduces from that an ethical principle: the termination of less-than-desirable offspring (filicide) is a moral good because it contributes to the survival and well-being of the species as a whole. From whence does the scientist draw the conclusion that this is 'good'? Why is survival and flourishing 'good'? Why is life, with all its misery and pain, preferable to death? Bringing these implications to the forefront would have helped drive home the point that (as he rightly points out in his response) while the evidence of the reality of the ethical impulse can been seen in nature, its origin cannot be traced back to nature. The fact that he and Dr. Davison Hunter didn't is not necessarily a flaw, but it is something that I think would have benefitted both the discussion and the reader.

In the next paragraph, Nedelisky dismisses the opinion that Kant should have been mentioned in his book. With all sincere respect, I disagree—Kant is in every way relevant to the story told in *Science and the Good*. Hume likely would have gone down in history as an intellectual curiosity if it were not for Kant being awakened from his "dogmatic slumbers" due to Hume's work on causality. We are not in the post-Humean era and there was no Humean Revolution; we are immersed in post-Kantianism today due to the Kantian Revolution. The scientists who attempt to either unearth a materially-founded idea of 'the good' (or to ground its present articulation in naturalist principles) are, whether they acknowledge it or not, the heirs of a tradition born of Kant's revolutions in both science and modern ideas of 'the good'. The authors' historical narrative is lacking at best for omitting any discussion concerning his influence and relevance.

Professor Nedelisky agrees with my extrapolation that the book should not be used as an argument defeater against materialists due to its insufficiencies, then says I have faulted "the authors for failing to do something we never intended to do." I apologize if there was any confusion on this point—the authors are not faulted for crafting the ultimate apologetic weapon; but for (in my humble opinion) not adopting a method that would have better addressed two points that are both relevant and necessary to their discussion. I mention that it should not be deployed as an argument-defeater to caution zealous readers or first-year philosophy students that if they're looking for a Swiss Army knife with which to engage their naturalist-materialist friends, this isn't it.

Again, *The Science and the Good* is important, timely, and helpful, and I appreciate Professor Nedelisky's time in interacting with my review. I hope that my remarks here have clarified my own position, and contribute to the important discussion around whether or not philosophical and scientific naturalism is delivering on its promises.

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