

BOOK REVIEW

of

James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky,
Science and the Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality,
Yale University Press, 2018.

This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

Upon what do we base our concepts of morality? With the rise of the Enlightenment there was a commitment to discovering a secular foundation for morality. Christianity in the West had provided this foundation in Biblical revelation and church authority, but increasingly secularists rejected that foundation and looked for one based on science and reason alone. How successful has that quest been? In their book *Science and the Good*, James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky strive to answer that question.

James Davison Hunter is LaBrosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture, and Social Theory at the University of Virginia and founder and executive director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, and Senior Fellow of the Trinity Forum (a faith-based, evangelical Christian organization founded by Os Guinness). Hunter has written nine books and has published many articles, all concerned with meaning and moral order in America. He has achieved national recognition and numerous literary awards. Hunter's books include the following: *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, Oxford University Press, 2010, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil*, Basic Books, 2000, and *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America: Making Sense of the Battles Over the Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics*, Basic Books, 1991.

Paul Nedelisky is Assistant Director of and Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia. Nedelisky's research interests center on issues in metaphysics and ethics. His work in metaphysics concerns the nature of the fundamental constituents of reality – the basic building blocks of the world.

Scott B. Rae, in his review on the Gospel Coalition web site, notes the “The book is full of insightful commentary on the historical figures and the current evolutionary and neuroscientific bases for morality. The authors maintain that the neural or evolutionary basis for particular traits or virtues may be interesting but tell us nothing about whether they *should* be adopted or rejected.”¹ M.D. Aeschliman, in his review of the book, comments “In their painstakingly fair-minded analysis, Hunter and

Nedelisky ultimately document the truth argued by a distinguished contemporary philosopher whom they do not quote, Charles Larmore: ‘Basically, Plato was right,’ he argues; ‘moral value is something real and non-natural.’ . . . Thus Hunter and Nedelisky conclude that the dominant schools of contemporary academic philosophy and social science (and the popularizations of natural science in ‘evolutionary’ everything) logically terminate in ‘moral nihilism,’ Crocker’s ‘nihilist dissolution.’² John Bombaro comments: “With ample quotes and comparative research, the findings of socio-biologists, 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.”³ Bombaro points out in a later blog post “they would have done their argument (and the discussion itself) better justice if they had been more comprehensive in their scope. . . . 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*.”⁴

The book *Science and the Good* contains a preface, four parts, and a total of nine chapters.

Part I: *Introduction*

Chapter 1 is titled *Our Promethean Longing*

Part II: *The Historical Quest*

Chapter 2 is titled *Early Formulations*

Chapter 3 is titled *Three Schools of Enlightenment Thinking And One Lingering and Disturbing Worry*

Chapter 4 is *The New Synthesis*

Part III: *The Quest Thus Far*

Chapter 5 is *What Has Science Found?*

Chapter 6 is *The Proclivity to Overreach*

Chapter 7 is *Intractable Challenges*

Part IV: *Enduring Quandaries*

Chapter 8 is *The Quest, Redirected*

Chapter 9 is *The Promethean Temptation And the Problem of Unintended Consequences*

In the Preface, Hunter and Nedelisky give “The Argument, in Brief.” They note that “Traditional religious beliefs and medieval philosophy had not only conspicuously and tragically failed to bring order and peace to an increasingly pluralistic world but had

made such hopes ever more elusive.”⁵ It was the perceived failure of the Church to put forth a universal morality that all could buy into that led to a secular pursuit for a universal morality. But the authors note that “after four hundred years, the ideal of understanding moral reality scientifically through observation and demonstration – in the way that truths in astronomy and medicine were understood – continued to confound. . . . In the end, the new moral science still tells us nothing about what moral conclusions we *should* draw. . . . the idea of morality – as a mind-independent reality – has lost plausibility for the new moral scientists. They no longer believe such a thing exists. . . . Despite using the language of morality, they embrace a view that, in its net effect, amounts to moral nihilism.”⁶ The remainder of the book expands and justifies these statements.

Chapter 1 indicates the importance of the quest for universal morality, that it is much more than some academic exercise. “Is there an issue of public policy or foreign policy that is not morally fraught? Immigration, health care, racial inequality, care for the elderly and for the poor, education, aid to victims of natural disaster, international trade, and war are all laced with difficult moral questions that have no easy answers and that more often than not lead us to fundamental disagreements over what is right and wrong, good and evil, just and unjust.”⁷

It is critical to note that the real issues are not about facts, but rather about philosophy and religion. “Those who argue that science is or should be the foundation for morality are generally making an epistemological claim about the superiority of science over other forms of knowledge. . . . What is at stake here is the viability of a certain comprehensive view of reality called *naturalism*. . . . Naturalism is in competition with perspectives that look to other, often *nonscientific* and *nonempirical* bases for truth, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.”⁸ What perhaps needs to be expanded upon, is that naturalism is also based on certain usually unstated pre-suppositions.

Part II, Chapters 2 through 4, give an historical overview of how we in the West got to where we are now in terms of our view of morality.

Part III, Chapters 5 through 7, summarize what the scientific quest for a universal morality has achieved thus far. The fact that it starts from an Enlightenment (naturalistic) point of view dooms it from the start, and the authors discover a good deal of non-scientific overreach and ignoring of facts along the way.

Near the end of Chapter 5 the authors write “After five hundred years of scientific inquiry into the nature

of morality, the most noteworthy scientific findings at best achieve Level Three status [the lowest level of scientific finding]. . . . there are no scientific findings that present claims of either Level One or Level Two status.”⁹

Chapter 8 primarily makes the point that the naturalistic quest for the foundations of morality result in “even if not by intent – it leads the new moral science to moral nihilism.”¹⁰ “Within a disenchanting naturalism, there can be no irreducible more “oughts”; there is no fundamentally *moral* normativity. . . . What had long been a suspicion in modern philosophy has now become a creed: morality isn’t real.”¹¹

Alex Rosenberg is the R. Taylor Cole Chair in Philosophy at Duke University. He writes “In a world where physics fixes all the facts, it’s hard to see how there could be room for moral facts. . . . Why bother to be good? . . . We need to face the fact that nihilism is true.”¹²

Reflecting on these ideas, Hunter and Nedelisky comment: “Stepping back a bit from these particular theorists, if there is no morality, if nothing is genuinely valuable, if there really is nothing beyond human preference, convention, or etiquette to frame our decision-making, then it would seem that any course of action is, intrinsically, as good or bad as any other.”¹³

In Chapter 9 the authors make the point that the failure of determining a naturalistic foundation for morality has consequences for other areas of naturalistic study as well. “This logic of disenchantment threatens much more than morality. It separates the scientifically pure concepts from the unclean ones such as consciousness, intentionality, life, free will, and the like.”¹⁴

“There was a time when theology claimed a privileged epistemic authority. Its claims to truth were embedded within institutions that could protect the power and advantage of the people making those claims. To contradict its assertions or challenge its authority was an act of transgression”,¹⁵ but now the tide has turned, and it is naturalistic science that claims a privileged epistemic authority and to question it is an act of transgression. “Without such awareness, one is vulnerable to the Promethean temptation to overreach. In this case, it is a temptation to turn science from a method into a metaphysic – from a set of tools, a set of rules, and a discursive orientation into the ground of all being.”¹⁶

The effort over centuries to establish the foundations of morality based on naturalistic science that all could appeal to has failed. Nevertheless the quest goes on.

Near the end of the book, Hunter and Nedelisky state the following: “The question of the moral

foundations of a good and just society is certainly one of the central philosophical, social, and political puzzles of the modern world since the Reformation. For us to propose an answer in the last pages of the book would be folly. But the urgency for a solution is palpable, made all the more so by the sense that we are in new territory; that our philosophical and political theories and our procedural tools for adjudicating disagreement are proving inadequate to the challenges we now face.”¹⁷

Two observations should be made here in assessing the value of this book. First, I think criticisms of this book for not presenting a solution, or to “propose an answer” as Hunter and Nedelisky put it, may be inappropriate. This is not a book on Christian apologetics. Surely Christians can immediately see the affirmation of the Biblical understanding that God is the author of moral law, and they may understandably want to shout out that truth, and that surely all naturalistic attempts to find a foundation for morality are bound to fail when thoroughly investigated, as Hunter and Nedelisky have done. So the fact that Hunter and Nedelisky have not directly addressed this Christian understanding nor developed it carefully is not really a criticism of the book. They did not have this purpose. To address the tragic quest for the naturalistic foundations of morality as carefully, generously, and thoroughly as they have done is commendable in itself.

Nevertheless, some appeal to the common (universal?) experience of moral consciousness as an apologetic for belief in God (see Romans 2:14-16). A noteworthy example would be C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity*, book one, with the title of “Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe.”¹⁸ A somewhat simple conclusion, then, to the quest for a naturalistic foundation of morality is that there isn’t one, but that doesn’t mean that there isn’t a foundation, just that there isn’t a naturalistic one.

It should also perhaps be noted that to espouse that there isn’t any foundation for morality, that is to believe in moral nihilism, is dangerously close to being insane! The moral apologetic for the existence of God assumes that morality is real, which is what C.S. Lewis, and others, make the case for. In fact, in criminal trials if the defendant can be shown to have no moral consciousness, that is, no sense of right and wrong, he satisfies the legal definition of being insane. The American Law Institute’s Model Penal Code (MPC) permits acquittal by reason of insanity if “at the time of [the crime] as a result of mental disease or defect [the defendant] lacks substantial capacity either to appreciate the criminality (wrongfulness) of his conduct or to conform his conduct to the requirements

of law.” (MPC, Sec. 4.01(1))¹⁹ In fact, in some cases, even a witness may be disqualified if he does not exhibit “that he understands his moral responsibility to speak the truth.”²⁰ If he professes to be a moral nihilist, perhaps that would disqualify him. Perhaps a mere mentioning of these issues by Hunter and Nedelisky would have been useful.

Second, the authors were not as concerned with the religious, or metaphysical, truth of the foundations of morality, or of discovering what we may think of as real morality, but were primarily looking at the historical quest for foundations of morality that all could appeal to. In other words, they were not investigating personal morality, but rather moral foundations that societies and nations could appeal to. “In such a context, simply making our differences intelligible to one another would be a start. The reason for this, of course, is found in one of the fundamental premises of democracy itself, namely the agreement not to kill each other over our differences, but rather to talk through them. It is in the deepening of the quality of our public discourse on those matters that divide us so profoundly that we have any hope of finding common ground.”²¹ This is more of a pragmatic quest than one of metaphysical truth.

To that end I am in agreement with Hunter and Nedelisky that progress can be made, must be made, through dialogue, through diplomacy, through international organizations, etc. But I think it goes without saying that such means will only provide partial solutions. From a Christian perspective, the only real solution that can be hoped for is the rule of God. That awaits the second coming of Jesus Christ, the consummation of the ages, and the kingdom of God whose citizens have been redeemed and cleansed by the blood of Christ. Come Lord Jesus!

Notes

1 Scott B. Rae, “Morality is Not Scientific,” *The Gospel Coalition*, February 1, 2019, accessed September 1, 2019,

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/science-good>

2 M.D. Aeschliman, “James Davison Hunter and the Inadequacy of Naturalism,” *National Review*, March 2, 2019, accessed August 31, 2019, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/03/james-davison-hunter-book-science-and-the-good>

3 John Bombaro, “The Mod | ‘Science and The Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality’ by James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky,” June 4, 2019, accessed July 12, 2019, <https://www.whitehorseinn.org/2019/06/the-mod-scie>

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4 John Bombaro, "The Mod | Dr. Bombaro's Reply to Dr. Nedelisky," July 10, 2019, accessed July 12, 2019,

<https://www.whitehorseinn.org/2019/07/the-mod-dr-bombaros-reply-to-dr-nedelisky>

5 *Science and the Good*, p. xiii.

6 *Science and the Good*, pp. xiv-xv.

7 *Science and the Good*, p. 5.

8 *Science and the Good*, p. 9.

9 *Science and the Good*, pp. 116-117.

10 *Science and the Good*, p. 168.

11 *Science and the Good*, p. 173.

12 Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life Without Illusions*, Norton, 2011, pp. 94-96. Quoted in *Science and the Good*, p. 180.

13 *Science and the Good*, p. 183.

14 *Science and the Good*, p. 197.

15 *Science and the Good*, p. 203-204.

16 *Science and the Good*, p. 209.

17 *Science and the Good*, p. 212-213.

18 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, HarperOne, 1952.

19 See the following web site, accessed on March 10, 2020:

<http://psychology.iresearchnet.com/forensic-psychology/criminal-responsibility/insanity-defense-reform-act>

20 See the following online document, accessed on March 10, 2020:

https://www.nycourts.gov/JUDGES/evidence/6-WITNESSES/6.01_COMPETENCY.pdf

21 *Science and the Good*, p. 214.