

Science and the Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality

James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky

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In 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. While

Christianity in the West had built its morality upon biblical revelation and church authority, secularists increasingly rejected that foundation and looked for one based on science and reason alone. How successful has that quest been? In *Science and the Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality*, James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky strive to answer that question.

James Davison Hunter is the LaBrosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture, and Social Theory at the University of Virginia, 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). Paul Nedelisky is assistant director and fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia.

In his review of their book on The Gospel Coalition website, Scott B. Rae notes,

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

In the *National Review*, M. D. Aeschliman comments on the book,

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Hunter and Nedelisky ultimately document the truth argued by a distinguished contemporary philosopher whom they do not quote, Charles Larmore: “Basically, Plato was right,” he argues; “moral value is something real and non-natural.”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, who is a regular reviewer for *Modern Reformation*, writes on *The Mod*,

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

In the preface, Hunter and Nedelisky provide “The Argument, in Brief” where they note,

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. (xiii)

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 write,

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. . . . [T]he 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. (xiv–xv)

For the remainder of the book, they expand and justify these statements. Chapter 1 indicates the importance of the quest for universal morality, that it is much more than mere 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. (5)

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. (9)

What perhaps needs to be expanded upon is that naturalism is also based on certain usually unstated presuppositions.

Part II consists of a historical overview of how we in the West got to where we are now in terms of our view of morality, and part III

summarizes 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 nonscientific overreach and ignoring of facts along the way. Their conclusion:

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]. . . . [T]here are no scientific findings that present claims of either Level One or Level Two status. (116–17)

In part IV, the authors consider some of the “enduring quandaries” of this quest, and they show that the naturalistic quest for the foundations of morality “leads the new moral science to moral nihilism” (168). “Within a disenchanted naturalism, there can be no irreducible ‘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” (173). Take, for example, Alex Rosenberg’s cold admission: “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.”⁴

The authors make the point that the failure of determining a naturalistic foundation for morality has consequences as well for other areas of naturalistic study. “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” (197).

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. (203–4).

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The tide has turned, and it is naturalistic science that claims a privileged epistemic authority. To question it is now 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. (209)

The effort over the centuries to establish the foundations of morality based on naturalistic science to which all could appeal has failed. Nevertheless, the quest goes on. Near the end of the book, Hunter and Nedelisky state,

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. (212–13)

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 may be inappropriate. This is not a book of Christian apologetics. Surely, Christians will affirm the biblical understanding that God is the author of moral law, and that all naturalistic attempts to find a foundation for morality are bound to fail. But the fact that Hunter and Nedelisky do not directly address this Christian understanding or develop it carefully is not really a criticism of the book, as this was not their purpose. To address the tragic quest for the naturalistic


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foundations of morality as carefully, generously, and thoroughly as they have done is commendable in itself.

Building on their thesis, it should be noted that the fact that there is no naturalist foundation for morality doesn't mean that there isn't a foundation for morality, just that there isn't a naturalistic one. To espouse that there isn't any foundation for morality, to believe in moral nihilism, is dangerous. The denial of reality is always dangerous.

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. Instead, they were primarily looking at the historical quest for foundations of morality. In other words, they were not investigating personal morality, but rather moral foundations to which societies and nations could appeal.

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. (214)

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, and so on. But I think it goes without saying that such means provide only 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! 

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1. Scott B. Rae, “Morality Is Not Scientific,” *The Gospel Coalition* (February 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), <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/03/james-davison-hunter-book-science-and-the-good>.
3. John Bombaro, *The Mod* (June 4, 2019), <https://www.whitehorseinn.org/2019/06/the-mod-science-and-the-good-the-tragic-quest-for-the-foundations-of-morality-by-james-davison-hunter-and-paul-nedelisky>.
4. Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life Without Illusions* (New York: Norton, 2011), 94–96. Quoted in *Science and the Good*, 180.