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A Materialist Response to Hunter and Nedelisky's *Science and the Good*

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Science and the Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality (2018) is a collaboration between sociologist James Davison Hunter and philosopher Paul Nedelisky, both of the University of Virginia. Formerly a student under Peter Berger, Hunter is now the LaBrosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture and Social Theory. He has written widely, including nine books, all concerned in some way with how morality has affected political and cultural change in America. His works have won national acclaim and numerous awards. This is Nedelisky's first book, although he has written numerous articles, also on much the same topic. His concern that science has overtaken much of philosophy's former authority on discussions surrounding the meaning and purpose of life is shared with many other philosophers.

The argument Hunter and Nedelisky advance is that the "good" is essentially incompatible with science. Sciences such as psychology and neurochemistry may be able to investigate certain aspects of morality by describing how morality functions, but they cannot provide us with a prescriptive morality that tells us how to act going forward. The authors' idealistic Platonic view of morality clashes with the more empirical utilitarian view held by those whom they call "ethical naturalists" (10). As I read their treatise, I constantly found myself asking why the authors do not seem to comprehend that the "good" cannot be in a *totally* separate realm from science. In some very fundamental way, science must be able to impact values if we want to avoid living in a totally subjective world. And I do not think we live in such a world.

The "new synthesis" they critique, expressed by moral scientists such as Joshua Greene, Owen Flanagan, Jonathan Haidt, Patricia Churchland, Sam Harris, and Mark Johnson, to name a few, begins from an evolutionary perspective of mind, where the origins of morality have the same type of explanation as any other biological phenomena. Hence, Frans de Waal (2013) claims that early forms of morality are already visible in his study of apes. He sees apes as having empathy – the ability to share emotional states – which then leads to the altruistic behavior of apes that he documents. His focus on emotions meshes well with Haidt's view that it is our emotions which most often guide us morally, after which our reason then rationalizes what we feel emotionally. Hunter and Nedelisky are careful to point out that *biological* altruism

is not necessarily the same as *moral* altruism. In their view, for something to be moral it must be able to tell us *how* to act, and biological altruism is simply a description of how animals *actually* behave, not how they *should* behave. The new synthesis, they say, is a naturalistic moral view that simply describes how morality functions, but never prescribes how we should act.

Hunter and Nedelisky insist that their objections to the new synthesis do not stem from not wanting science to have anything to say on the topic of morality. Neither do they believe that ethical naturalists cannot themselves be moral agents. Rather, the question they pose is whether science can resolve moral disagreements just in the same manner it resolves disagreements in chemistry or physics. The answer they offer is that science cannot, though too often it pretends to do so. A primary point for the authors is David Hume's "is/ought" distinction, which asserts that what *is*, or how things are in the natural world, tells us nothing about how things *ought* to be in the social world. Factual observations about the physical world cannot tell us what our values ought to be, or how we should organize ourselves and relate to each other socially.

The authors maintain that the implication of this distinction is often glossed over, resulting in the boundary between the two realms often being crossed. The reason, it seems to me, is that the boundary is not actually quite as impermeable to the naturalist as it appears to the authors. From the naturalistic perspective, if we live in a physical world that operates according to physical laws, and we have evolved in that world, then we are only constrained by those laws and not by any idealistic vision. Who we ought to be on the basis of such a vision never enters the picture. Presumably, this does not mean that the new moral scientists no longer believe in morals, as the authors argue when they label this "moral nihilism" (178). What remains is a horizontal practical morality that comes from needing to get along with others. Granted, such an "ought" is not a given, but rather something we attempt to discover on a daily basis.

When one believes, as the authors and most Christians do, that there is another, supra-natural realm where all is perfect, humans are seen as imperfect and in need of redemption, or at least in need of having their imperfect nature curbed. It follows that such a view of human nature requires a prescriptive morality that tells us how to behave, since we cannot be trusted to do it on our own. In contrast, materialists do not see human nature as flawed. For them humans are purely physical beings who have evolved from a purely physical universe. Our mental world and minds emerge out of our physical brains, and our ideals are human constructs that we strive toward. However, because they are our own creations or social constructions, they have no ultimately directive power over us. We are free to manipulate all the elements that make up the world, including ourselves, without fear of divine retribution, or fear that we are violating some preordained order.

To hold such a freewheeling materialist position does not automatically imply that humans will seek only their most immediate physical pleasures with no concern for others, as the authors suggest. Just like the idealist, the materialist wants to cooperate and get along with others, since that is what makes living easier, more enjoyable, and more gratifying. Communal boundaries are not seen as problematic, because they make practical sense for optimal societal functioning. They do not need to be tied to a supreme being or to the existence of a supra-natural ideal world. They need only be tied to a social consensus that seeking more Epicurean pleasure and well-being is the goal. Notably, Epicurean pleasure is not the immediate, short-term, self-indulgence that it is often misunderstood to be.

The difference between the ethical naturalist's scientific view and Hunter and Nedelisky's more idealistic view is well described in Edward Slingerland's book, *What Science Offers the Humanities* (2008). Slingerland describes the approach taken within the humanities as an investigation of the "products of the free and unconstrained spirit or mind...while the natural sciences concern themselves with the deterministic laws governing the inert kingdom of dumb objects. Products of the human mind...can be grasped only by means of the mysterious communication that occurs when one *Geist* (ghost or spirit) opens itself up to the presence of another *Geist*" (2008:3). Such communication, he explains, is seen as an event that requires "sensitivity, openness and a kind of commitment on the part of one spirit to another" (2008:3).

What is required is *understanding* as opposed to *explanation*, which is exactly what the natural sciences do. This fundamental intuition, that life is about commitment and participation, not detached analytical study, motivates the humanities, and any attempt to explain human-level phenomena in more basic terms is seen by the humanities as reductionism. This constitutes a core disagreement Hunter and Nedelisky have with moral scientists, and is derivative of their dualistic view where mind is essentially other than body, such that mind connects to a living spiritual realm and body simply connects to a dead physical realm. It is a view that is held intuitively by most theists, though not by naturalists, and it seems to obligate us to submit to this mystery if we want salvation or want to live in harmony with the universe.

Hunter and Nedelisky use Max Weber's concept of "enchanted" (171) to describe the non-physical, non-empirical phenomena that allow for the mysterious communication between human spirits. And it is this enchantedness that then allows them to imagine a prescriptive morality that applies to all peoples and cultures. The authors make a point of clarifying that enchantment does not require any sort of belief in "*supernatural deities*," although it could. Rather, enchantment accepts the idea that there are entities that are not subject to naturalistic explanations, and therefore we cannot and should not try to manipulate them for our own selfish advantage, as reductionistic science is seen to do. I struggle with trying to imagine enchantment that does not include a vertical dimension. It is obvious that by enchantment they mean more than simply the horizontal dimension of power that community or culture has over

us. And if enchantment refers to entities greater than the horizontal, then they must be above us. However, if they are on the same plain as we are, then we can choose whether we deem them valid or not, in which case they no longer obligate us to some sort of obedience. Hunter and Nedelisky's whole approach is that there is an "ought" and a "good" that exists which has or should have some power over us, which empiricism cannot reach, and which they believe we must hold on to in order to prevent society from degenerating into relative chaos.

Connected to Hunter and Nedelisky's argument that "Western middle- and upper-middle class liberalism" (211) has moved toward chaos by denying prescriptive morality altogether is their concern that defining morality as simply human well-being, pleasure, or happiness is too subjective. They fear that a culture built on a subjective feeling of happiness can lead to young Nazis in the "*Hitlerjugend*... [who] found camaraderie, fellowship, common purpose, opportunities to grow, develop, and work together" (210). The authors fear that groups like the Nazis, who turned their common purpose and camaraderie into harming others, show that human flourishing is not a sufficient basis on which to build a moral consensus. However, the problem with this argument is they have turned things on their head. It is not wanting happiness and camaraderie and common purpose that made the Nazis do evil. It is thinking that they had access to a prescriptive morality that told them what must be done to get it. Thus, in attempting to show how a morality based on the vague notion of human well-being goes awry, the authors have instead shown how moral prescriptiveness goes awry.

When Sam Harris, in *The Moral Landscape* (2010), wants to use human well-being as a basis for moral action, he does not focus on how to implement that idea; he only wants it to be the general idea from which we build a moral consensus. Hunter and Nedelisky's disagreement with that view ignores the well-intentioned goal, and instead criticizes its generality, before trying to show how such a broad view might be subverted. However, by doing that they have shown that the problem with morality occurs when it prescribes. It is when one exercises what one thinks to be right that conflict appears. The prescriptive morality that they are arguing for does not actually solve conflicts, it creates them. Harris and the other "ethical naturalists" avoid prescriptive morality for that very reason, and instead want to focus mainly on describing how morality originated and evolved.

There is an interesting counter argument to the idea that when we leave idealism behind, society tends to become more chaotic. The argument is made by Lane Greene in an *Aeon Essay* entitled "Who Decides What Words Mean?" (2018). While there is insufficient room here to describe the specific examples he uses to make his point, his overall argument can be summarized as follows. With regard to language, he postulates that people are required to take one of two stances. Either you are annoyed by language mistakes people make, which makes you a prescriptivist, or you enjoy how language changes and you make fun of people who get annoyed, which makes you a descriptivist. Of course, language changes all the time, but that does not prevent it from getting annoying and truly doing harm. But, as Greene points out, no

language has ever fallen apart from lack of care, and when meanings of words change, other words are created to fill in. Local, individual change is chaotic and random, but overall the system of language responds to keep things orderly. “Language is self-regulating. It’s a genius system – with no genius” (2018). If this is what happens in the realm of language, is it possible something similar happens in the realm of morality, and hence we perhaps need to fear relativity and chaos less than we do?

What is also interesting is how an idealist or an essentialist philosophical perspective aligns with political views, compared to an empirical or existentialist perspective. Essentialism is the philosophical idea that things have characteristics that make them what they are, and that the task of science or philosophy is to discover and express what those characteristics are. Existentialism, on the other hand, says that what exists is prior to essence, so that essence is not an entity in itself, but rather a concept we create when we try to describe things in general.

Conservatives and socialists, it seems, have a more essentialist view of the world compared to liberals, and their view gets transferred to their view of the role of government. So when conservatives believe in tax cuts and small government, or socialists believe in tax increases and big government, they have a deeper justification than just empirical evidence. Even if tax cuts or tax increases do not improve the economy, they still see it as good policy because they restore control of property to its rightful owners as determined by the free market for one side, and government for the other. Small government or big government is not only a means to an end, but an objective on its own. Taxing the rich is wrong because it is *unfair*, or right because it is *fair*, outside of any consequences to the larger economy.

In between are more pragmatic liberals whose ideology says, “let’s see the consequences of our actions before we decide whether something is good or not,” rather than saying, “we know what the good is, we just need to do it.” For liberals, regulations on air quality or health care are instituted because it is believed that those laws will increase health outcomes. If the evidence says they do not, they would be willing to have the laws repealed. There is no other reason for passing such laws other than that they will result in better living conditions for all. The issue is not that liberals do not have an ideology, but rather that their ideology is tied to existential consequences, not essentialist ideals.

Overall, it strikes me that the fundamental divide Hunter and Nedelisky are referencing is between idealism and materialism. It is not between atheism and theism, philosophical positions which can and do play into the equation, and which sometimes get mistaken as identifying the same conflict. The core difference of opinion is whether there is at bottom only matter and a natural material world out of which, in some unknown way, mind emerges, or whether there is another reality, an ideal realm as Plato thought, and as Christians believe. Idealists – atheists and theists alike, often within the humanities – find it impossible to imagine that human consciousness does not connect to some larger non-material reality. Materialists – often within the physical and biological sciences – prefer the counter-intuitive explanation that

emerges from evolutionary theory, where consciousness arises out of matter. For whatever reason, I am attracted to the counter-intuitive explanation.

References

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