BOOK REVIEW

***Science and the Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality*.**
By James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky.
New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018, 312 pages.

While leading scholars such as Christian Smith and Jonathan Haidt have only recently offered a social science of morality, the study of morality by the natural sciences has been emerging for quite some time. *Science and the Good* provides enlightening background to this quest by all the sciences. The authors, a sociologist and a historian, trace the development of this field of study in the natural sciences over centuries, culminating in the findings and conclusions reached to date. Their account of the origins and history of the topic, the premises of the methods of study, the research efforts undertaken, the conclusions reached thus far, along with their own assessment of the relative successes attained is more than adequate.

Historically, the study of morality has largely been confined to the fields of religion and philosophy. Various religious traditions have taken their turn positing various bases for morality, each offering a set of rules to live by that answer the question of how one ought to live, or what might be called successful living over a life course. This work by James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky discusses the topic from a logic standpoint, using the language of science as the medium, while seemingly intentionally avoiding religion in their review. The value of their approach is to be able to speak from an academic framework that is conversant with our modern culture, one that eschews the assumptions of religion and instead substitutes the assumptions of science. This is extremely important, as it enables the reader to become more fully aware that science also begins with a set of assumptions, no differently than religion and philosophy do. But because those assumptions are different in kind, the tendency is for readers of science to gloss over the assumptions of science.

The reader of *Science and the Good* is shown how modern science arose in the context of the assumptions of philosophers and scientist of the sixteenth century. Francis Bacon, for one, insisted that the young discipline of science must be based on what has come to be called inductive reasoning. Only rigorous, logical reasoning based on hard empirical data must be allowed to form the basis of conclusions. Innocuous as it may seem, modern science began with this guideline and built a whole framework of study that then added numerous other assumptions. Scientific findings then are only as good as the assumptions used as their foundation. The beauty of *Science and the Good* is that these assumptions are clearly elucidated at the outset.

For example, science asserts that evidence from the five senses is the basis of empirical study, after which reasoning is employed to form conclusions. Intuition, values, and emotions

are irrelevant and must be discarded. However, as the authors point out, most scientific work begins with intuition, not pure logic. The great discoveries of Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, and others originated with their intuitions. So to say that intuition is of no value and yet use it as the onset of study is clearly a logical contradiction. Furthermore, the scientific assumption that a human mind, functioning via chemical reactions, is alone capable of comprehending all phenomena in the universe is a major assumption that scientists must be willing to own before offering any new theories based on whatever findings. Again, by operating on certain assumptions, science is no different than religion. Though the authors do not stress this point, the similarities are immediately clear. Religion starts with the assumption that there is order in the universe, including moral order, and that the mind must be willing to consider the possibility of superhuman forces as the source of that order. Modern science, on the other hand, assumes that the universe consists only of ordered material, and that superhuman forces are not possible.

One of the most interesting observations in the book is the evidence cited that the science of morality has had to change completely, and "mid-stream" so to speak. Using the tools of science, twentieth century scientific study of morality sought a universally accepted basis for morality, which is indeed a worthy pursuit. However, it was not long before scientists had to admit flatly that there is no basis for morality from a scientific perspective. Many scientists, Hunter and Nedelisky argue, believe in moral nihilism, meaning there is no scientific evidence that morality has any relevance in our age, and in fact there can be no such concept as morality. Yet popular scientist philosophers such as Sam Harris, Peter Singer, and others make a living proposing ideas on how to secure a form of morality which, in the next breath, they admit has no actual scientific basis. They clearly see the need for a set of moral principles, and admit that all societies have sets of moral guidelines, even as they proclaim that any morality, much more traditional morality cannot be substantiated. They nevertheless go on to promote their own "moral" tenets often based on utilitarianism, knowing full well that such reasoning, as employed by Hitler and other authoritarian regimes, have proved to be hopelessly flawed and destructive.

The findings the authors list for what science has actually uncovered, and what avenues of research are currently being proposed, are especially valuable. Abandoning the search for a basis or bases of morality, research at this point is simply descriptive rather than prescriptive. And that is surely the appropriate, delimited realm of science. Science has done a superb job of revealing which sections of the brain are stimulated by which emotions, and which chemicals can influence which emotions. However, how to use that information to make the world a better place has thus far been beyond the grasp of science. But perhaps science can formulate and propose an agreed upon minimal set of moral principles (human rights?) that all societies can accept as a basis for arbitrating global order. While science is forced to admit that it cannot give any guidelines to the individual that are binding or acceptable to all, perhaps it can still be

used to make the world more tolerant and less violent. But even then, the moral basis for why the world should become more tolerant and less violent is left unanswered and unanswerable. This is the tepid state of the new science of morality at the moment. Historians recognize that since the Second World War, science and technology have provided enablements for the world to become more violent, the weapons conceived by technology having become ever so much more effective and terrifying. So how do we find a way to stop this trend? More fundamentally, why should we?

Another valuable contribution of this book is the clarification of why science has come to such an abrupt dead-end. The explanation begins with the serious problem of defining morality, on which there is little consensus. The early classical and philosophical writers began with the question, "How ought humans to live?" But are there universal guidelines that can be learned and taught that will make life "successful?" Of course, science immediately comes up against a road block. Researchers soon discover that science cannot logically prescribe or direct, since "ought" implies a subjective answer, while science supposedly only deals with objective questions and answers. Rather than admit science is not qualified to answer such questions, scientists now not only acknowledge as much, they go much further to claim that there is no possible answer, and therefore the question is irrelevant. Hunter and Nedelisky maintain that scientists have revised their question to, not "how ought…," but rather "how might any society (not individual) encourage citizens to live successfully." But this simply raises the subsequent difficulty of defining what constitutes "success." What does success mean? Who decides that? How can it be ensured that every society will have the same international goals in mind, and why should that be a value? How can success be measured qualitatively or quantitatively when even IQ (a number) is considered to be biased toward Western expectations?

In overview, the majority of scientists are nihilists, contending there is no rational basis for a universal morality. Yet they still appear to contend that they are able to contribute something useful to the discussion of morality. Deeming individual morality to be too subjective an issue, they have now turned their attention to finding useful guidelines to mitigate societal conflict and violence. But how can scientists come up with tenets on which a world of multiple diversities can agree? The authors report that minimal effort has even begun addressing this task.

Without a doubt, Hunter and Nedelisky have fulfilled the goal they set out for themselves in this project. *Science and the Good* is a very well documented primer on science and its quest for a workable system of morality. The writers took great pains to be objective in their reporting, and by hardly mentioning religion, either positively or negatively, they appear not to be pushing a personal religious agenda. In truth, by avoiding religion as a contrast to the methods of science, there is often a sense of a missing element in their presentation. A clearer contrast may have highlighted the relatively narrow approach scientists of morality are taking in their research, and how similar they are to dogmatic religionists.

Pertaining particularly to sociology, Hunter and Nedelisky explored the contributions of the sociology of religion concerning morality for the purpose of bringing into focus the (dis)agreements between the hard and soft sciences. The book did mention in passing the work of Max Weber. In fact, Weber's assessment of the predicament science found itself in one hundred years ago would have been a fitting conclusion to the book. After another hundred years of more intense scientific effort, modern science has simply confirmed Weber's assessment, though without the clarity and finality with which he writes. Weber concluded that since there is no possible completely objective means of arriving at a logical and absolute moral code, any individual has a very simple choice to exercise. One can be a quester who accepts the logical conclusions of science, an almost nihilistic, desolate conclusion, and therefore resign oneself to living without a set guideline, simply hoping for the best. Or one can opt to choose one of the traditional sets of moral guidelines in world religions, most of which have very similar conclusions, each with thousands of years of commentary testifying to their relative successes and shortcomings, and then attenuate that code of living to modern environments. These are the only two options, but at least there is a choice.

The time taken by Hunter and Nedelisky to analyze the arguments dissected in this volume was well worth their and the reader's investment. Any reader of this research will come away with a well-rounded background to the present state of science's search for morality, and will perhaps find an aid to determining their own personal choice and course of action.

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