

*Science and the Good*

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# Science and the Good

## *The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality*



James Davison Hunter  
Paul Nedelisky

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JDH:  
For Peter, Jack, Thomas and Honor

PN:  
For Beth—“Mafeking is relieved!”



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## *Preface*

### THE ARGUMENT, IN BRIEF

**W**HO COULD DENY IT? Modern science since the Enlightenment has been nothing short of a wonder. Its achievements in solving enduring riddles over the past half-millennium have been astonishing. Put aside for a moment some of the malevolent ways science has been used—the method itself, within many spheres of inquiry, has generated a range of new knowledge and insight that is nothing if not breathtaking.

For most of us, the intricacies of scientific knowledge are unfathomable, endlessly so. It is a realm far out of reach of the understanding of most mortals, which is why science can be, ironically, so mystifying. Much of the authority of science in the modern and now late modern world derives from both its extraordinary track record and from the esotery of it all—a knowledge possessed, albeit in fragments, almost exclusively by those rare individuals credentialed with advanced degrees in particular scientific fields.

Is it any wonder that we would give science, and those who

speak for it, the benefit of the doubt? But even for a subject as important as human morality?

The possibility is arresting, to say the least.

Indeed, it is quite a bracing experience to go into a bookstore or browse online and see titles claiming to show “how science can determine human values,” to uncover the “science of moral dilemmas,” to disclose “the biological basis of morality” or “the science of right and wrong,” to reveal “the universal moral instincts caused by evolution,” to explain how a certain molecule is “the source of love and prosperity,” to describe “how nature designed our universal sense of right and wrong,” or to demonstrate “what neuroscience tells us about morality.”<sup>1</sup> These claims are all taken from the titles of recent books and articles, and these claims are pervasive.

What pluck! These titles would seem to defy the age-old rule called “Hume’s Law” that you can never derive an “ought” from an “is”: that there is a decisive boundary separating prescription from description.

Could it be that this is no longer true? Have new technologies and new ways of thinking rendered the rule obsolete?

The very idea that scientists or philosophers of science could reach into the physical universe and demystify the nature of “the good” to reveal the physiological and evolutionary mechanisms behind ethics or the neurochemistry underneath morality is exciting, and in some ways intimidating, even if the idea is not fully persuasive.

The purpose of this book is to examine those claims. They are rooted in a longstanding and impassioned quest to find a scientific foundation for morality. When did this quest originate and why? How has it evolved? What is its current standing? What has it accomplished, and where is the quest leading us? What is at stake

is not merely academic. Rather, what is at stake is the yearning to coherently address some of the knottiest problems of the modern world—not least, *how and upon what foundation do we build a good and just society?*

### THE ARGUMENT, IN BRIEF

The heart of our argument is found in the story of this four-hundred-year quest to establish a science of morality. The story begins at the advent of the modern West, in a time when Europe was riven with conflict over the right, just, and moral ordering of society. 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. Against these failures, the emergence of science promised a new way forward in all spheres of life. After all, science had achieved extraordinary success in understanding the natural world and in addressing a range of human problems. Why couldn't it also solve enduring moral problems, not least of which was the puzzle of how to fashion a good and peaceable society? This is important, for what is at stake in this question was nothing less than the possibility of a new foundation for human flourishing.

Some of brightest minds of the Enlightenment looked to science to address these persistent questions. Over the next few centuries, the quest followed several paths. Some thought that moral reality could be established experimentally by observing which human laws promoted peace and concord. Some thought a mechanical theory of the mind would reveal everything we need to know about the moral realm. Others looked to the measurement of human pleasure to define morality. Still others thought

that the dynamics of human evolution produced morality as a tool of survival.

But 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. The various paths to ground morality in science seemed to end—in part because none had succeeded, and in part because science fragmented into specialized disciplines, none of which focused on morality. By the end of the nineteenth century, the prospects of establishing a scientific foundation for morality were not at all hopeful.

In the 1970s, however, with the reintegration of multiple scientific disciplines along with several of the older, more philosophical paths, the quest reemerged with renewed vigor. A new synthesis, aided by advancing technology, had created new enthusiasm for fulfilling this time-honored quest.

But has the new moral science actually brought us closer to achieving its aspirations?

Sadly, no. What it has actually produced is a modest though interesting descriptive science of moral thought and behavior. We now know more, to take one example, about what is happening at the neural level during moral decision-making.

Yet many of its proponents claim much more for these types of findings than the science can justify. While some of this overreaching is due to honest mistakes or misunderstandings about what science has shown, some of it appears fraudulent, designed to capitalize on science's prestige and the public interest in practical moral advice. In the end, the new moral science still tells us nothing about what moral conclusions we *should* draw.

This is not happenstance. There are good reasons why science has not given us moral answers. The history of these attempts,

along with careful reflection on the nature of moral concepts, suggests that empirically detectable moral concepts must leave out too much of what morality really is, and moral concepts that capture the real phenomena aren't empirically detectable. Whether they realize it or not, today's practitioners of moral science face this quandary, too.

But here the story takes a surprising turn. While the new science of morality presses onward, 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. Thus, when they say they are investigating morality scientifically, they *now* mean something different by “morality” from what most people in the past have meant by it and what most people today still mean by it. In place of moral goodness, they substitute the merely useful, which is something science *can* discover. Despite using the language of morality, they embrace a view that, in its net effect, amounts to moral nihilism.

When it began, the quest for a moral science sought to discover the good. The new moral science has abandoned that quest and now, at best, tells us how to get what we want. With this turn, the new moral science, for all its recent fanfare, has produced a world picture that simply cannot bear the weight of the wide-ranging moral burdens of our time.





PART I  
*Introduction*



## *Our Promethean Longing*

CAN SCIENCE be the foundation of morality? The social implications of this question are enormous. We live in a time rife with disagreement, conflict, and violence—clashes that are almost always rooted in competing conceptions of the good. How, then, do we resolve such disagreements? Is there a way to arbitrate these disputes? Surely in a day of cosmopolitan sophistication, there must be some way to mediate them—some compelling logic that could provide a common foundation for moral belief and commitment.

There are many for whom this question is absurd on the face of it—who say there is a *prima facie* case against science ever being the foundation for morality. Their quick dismissal ignores the fact that some of the brightest minds in science and philosophy are confident that science *can* be the foundation of morality. Indeed, public discourse is awash with books that claim this very thing. All of this suggests that we may be at the start of a new age in which science provides clarity and insight into vexing moral questions.

The skeptics' quick dismissal also ignores how central—and passionate—the quest for such a foundation has been to Western

thought over the last four hundred years. Over centuries, the pursuit has been nothing if not ardent.

The question, then, matters, and it matters a great deal. But why?

## THE DILEMMA OF DIFFERENCE

When one looks at this history carefully, one can see that, from the beginning, the animating force behind the quest for a scientific foundation for morality has been the desire to address the problems of moral difference and complexity and, more to the point, the conflict and confusion they generate. Many, to be sure, are also motivated by a pure search for truth. But even the search for truth is always embedded in a time and place and is strongly influenced by the contingencies of history and culture. Those contingencies always point to the overriding concern with the problem of difference.

The quest maps roughly onto the story of modernity. That story is, among other things, a story of the shrinking of the world in ways that bring in closer proximity different cultures and different ways of life. While the plurality of cultural difference has always existed, the past half millennia has amplified that development in ways that previous generations could not have imagined. The problem is that the coexistence of cultures is always accompanied by competing claims on shared public space, contradictory interests, and the inequities of power and privilege. Precisely because difference nearly always plays out at fundamental levels of human belief, and because the conflicts matter so concretely in human experience, they are nearly always accompanied by suspicion, tension, the suppression of legitimate claims and interests, latent antagonism, and sometimes open conflict and

violence. The accumulated costs of these differences are beyond comprehension.

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, those differences are intensified to the point that we would say that the now globally interconnected world is constituted by these deep social, cultural, and political differences. As is plain to see, these differences are anything but abstractions but rather continue to bear on issues fundamental to the well-being of all human beings—order, security, freedom, fairness, health, and wholeness. 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. And underneath the many specific questions are more fundamental disagreements about what constitutes the good life, the good society, and the good world.

No one's motives are entirely pure. All of us operate with, at best, mixed and conflicting intentions. Yet most antagonists have been and are sincere in their desire for human flourishing, at least on their terms. Whatever else may motivate them, they also happen to disagree fundamentally and mostly sincerely on what is true, right, and good. Here, too, the costs of these disagreements are often beyond reckoning.

### THE PROBLEM OF COMPLEXITY

The dilemma of difference is only made more confounding by the sheer complexity of the modern and now late modern world.

The explosion of knowledge that came with modernity is difficult to fully comprehend. Between 1517 and 1550, approximately 150,000 new books were published in Europe. This was at least four times as many as had appeared during the entire fifteenth century. Between 1517 and 1523 alone, one could find 400 printers, 125 places of publication, and approximately 900 authors.<sup>1</sup> At that time, this represented an extraordinary growth in the world's knowledge. Five hundred years later, of course, the growth in information and knowledge has surged exponentially.

We now live in an age of information superabundance. It is often noted that more information has been produced in the last thirty years than in the previous five thousand. Around 1,000 books are published internationally every day, and the total of all printed knowledge doubles every five years.<sup>2</sup> Yet printed documents only make up .003 percent of total information. The Internet and other digital technologies, of course, have only intensified the production, collection, and distribution of information. The world has produced 300 exabytes (300,000,000,000,000,000,000 pieces) of information—and produces between 1 and 2 exabytes<sup>3</sup> of unique information per year, which is roughly 250 megabytes for every man, woman, and child on earth. To make this a little more concrete, 300 billion emails, 200 million Tweets, and 2.5 billion text messages course through our digital networks every day.<sup>4</sup> Add to this the 85,000 hours of original programming produced every day by over 21,000 television stations and the 6,000 hours of YouTube video produced every hour.<sup>5</sup> The weekday edition of the *New York Times* contains more information than the average person in seventeenth-century England was likely to come across in a lifetime.<sup>6</sup>

We are overcome by a tsunami of information. Is there clarity, wisdom, or truth to be had in the midst of this complexity? If so,

how do we sort through it all? The puzzles posed by difference and complexity are built into the modern world. Given the conflict, disorder, confusion, and human suffering that follow in the wake of our deepest differences, and given the massive complexity of modern knowledge and information, questions arise: What is Justice? Fairness? Equity? How do we live together at peace with our deepest moral differences? And if we can't agree on shared principles or ideals and their application, on what grounds do we adjudicate our disagreements?

### THE PROMISE OF SCIENCE

Some see science as the only method that offers any hope of being such a rational arbiter. After all, the methods of science—observation, experimentation, theory building—have delivered a persuasive picture of the physical universe. This has brought a consensus in the physical sciences that stands in stark contrast to the disorderly tumult of moral opinion. Iranian scientists, for example, accept and employ the same view of physics as do scientists in France; Chinese scientists and Norwegian ones operate with the same understanding of chemistry. Yet the moral viewpoints across these cultures differ in the extreme.

And so we arrive at this bright thought: perhaps science can do for morality what it has done for physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, and mathematics, and the technologies that are based upon them. This is the question that animates this book. Can the methods of science provide rational and compelling answers to questions of right and wrong, good and bad, and how we ought to live? Can science be the foundation of morality?