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## **Toward a Richer Understanding of the Moral Life: three disquieting questions about the contemporary science of morality**

**James Davison Hunter**

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## Précis<sup>1</sup>

*The current academic and scientific consensus about the nature of morality has been framed by a conceptual architecture bequeathed by the three main schools of Enlightenment thinking on this matter: the psychologized sentimentalism of Hume, the evolutionary account of the mind from Darwin and, finally, as procedures for guiding human action, the utilitarian calculus of Bentham and Mill. It is within the paradigm of this new moral synthesis that moral psychology and neuroscience operate and where experimental insight presently accumulates. But is this conceptual framework adequate to the reality it seeks to describe and explain? The purpose of this paper is to begin to create a clearing in which a richer and thus more adequate conceptualization of morality and virtue might be forged. To this end, I raise questions surrounding the dominant conceptual understandings of morality and the cultural logics that follow from them.*

I. Since the early part of the 20th century, both the study and practical development of character has been dominated by the field of psychology. This is especially true of America and, while less so here in the UK and elsewhere, the influence of psychology as the dominant discourse of moral formation has grown substantially. Psychology both as a field of inquiry and as a set of practices is a paradigm in the sense intended by Thomas Kuhn in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. By “paradigm” Kuhn meant the assumptions, conceptual frameworks, exemplary figures and experimental practices that underwrite what is considered the “normal science” of the day. A paradigm defines for a field what is reality—what is significant and insignificant, what are the relevant and irrelevant questions, what constitutes data and therefore needs to be observed and what can safely be ignored, how the science is to be conducted and how the results of scientific investigation should be interpreted.

Think of it as the lenses in a pair of glasses; lenses that let you focus on some things, but that filter out other things. For well-integrated members of a particular discipline, its paradigm is so convincing that it normally renders even the possibility of alternatives unconvincing and counter-intuitive. Such a paradigm appears to be a view of the bedrock of reality itself, and obscuring the possibility that there might be other, alternative imageries hidden behind it. This conviction tends to disqualify evidence that might undermine the paradigm itself.

For Kuhn, then, normal science is not radical, but conservative. It is not about breakthroughs, but about confirmation. Inside normal science are powerful vested interests in keeping the models intact and unquestioned. Professional reputation is at stake, as is career mobility, grant dollars, and so on—all hinge on protecting the paradigm.

Now, there can be various models operating within a paradigm, but the models operate within the conceptual, philosophical and experimental framework of the paradigm and they do not challenge that framework.

Within the study and practice of character development, there has been historical variation in the actual models of understanding the moral formation of children—e.g. cognitive developmentalism, etc.—but over a century there has been a remarkable continuity in the assumptions and conceptual frameworks employed. The latest manifestation of this paradigm is, of course, positive psychology—a movement that began just 18 years ago and has grown into a massive international movement. While it offers some variation in the theme, it merely extends

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws upon James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky, *Can Science Be the Foundation for Morality?* New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming.

the domination of psychologistic assumptions about the nature of morality, the child as moral agent, and the process of moral formation that have been in place for nearly a century.

The question is, *is this view adequate to the reality it seeks to understand? Are its models of practice adequate to the realities it seeks to influence?*

I am convinced it is not; that the paradigm is deeply flawed philosophically, conceptually, empirically, and substantively. How and why this is is a topic for another time. Much of my work right now is oriented toward the development of an alternative paradigm for understanding and practicing the moral formation of the young.

My concern today is limited, focusing on the new moral science that underwrites the paradigm of psychological monism. Even in a post-Enlightenment world, science confers authority and prestige upon public declarations. Science—or what passes as science—has become the idiom of educational reform, again particularly in the U.S. My objective here is to inquire into the nature of the science behind psychological monism because if the scientific project is also flawed—if it isn't adequate to the reality it seeks to understand—then it not only will be ineffective, but it can do enormous harm and not least to the children who are the intended beneficiaries of that science.

There is much to say here, but I will focus today on the conceptual problems that underwrite the new moral science and the cultural logics that follow from them. My purpose is to begin to create a clearing in which a richer and thus more adequate conceptualization of morality and virtue might be forged.

II. For over 400 years, Westerners have been on a quest to find a scientific foundation for morality. Confidence in this project has waxed and waned over the centuries, but today we live in a time when that confidence is empyreal. Public discourse is awash with books that claim to show “how science can determine human values,” that reveal the “science of moral dilemmas,” that disclose the “the science of right and wrong,” that reveal “the universal moral instincts caused by evolution.” All of this suggests that we are at the start of a new age for the power of science to dispel moral myth and establish moral truth once and for all.<sup>2</sup>

But what is actually new about this? The reality is that the science of morality has reached a theoretical stasis framed by the conceptual architecture bequeathed by the three main schools of Enlightenment thinking on this matter: the psychologized sentimentalism of Hume, the evolutionary account of the mind from Darwin and, finally, as procedures for guiding human action, the utilitarian calculus of Bentham and Mill. To be sure, the general synthesis of these elements is novel as are the technologies that aid its pursuit, but in terms of the conceptual tools that guide contemporary efforts to fix a scientific foundation for morality, the apparatus is familiar, if not by now conventional. It is within this paradigm, then, that moral and evolutionary psychology, primatology and neuroscience operate and where experimental insight presently accumulates.

On the surface, the New Synthesis has generated a great deal of intellectual excitement particularly around the potential of neuroscience and evolutionary biology in conjunction with

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science can Determine Human Values*, New York: Free Press, 2010; Patricia Churchland, *Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us About Morality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011; Michael S. Gazzinga, *The Ethical Brain: The Science of Our Moral Dilemmas*, New York: Harper-Perennial, 2006; Robert Johnson, *Rational Morality: A Science of Right and Wrong*, Great Britain: Dangerous Little Books, 2013; Laurence R. Tancredi, *Hardwired Behavior: What Neuroscience Reveals About Morality*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005; Marc D. Hauser, *Moral Minds. How Nature designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*. London: Abacus, 2006

psychology to provide empirical discoveries about the nature and functioning of morality. While the rhetoric surrounding the promise of the new moral science has been extravagant, from my vantage point, there is less here than meets the eye.

The reason is that underneath the enthusiasm, certain intractable challenges remain even if they are not acknowledged. I want to focus on just one of these challenges today and to work through the logical consequences of it.

The particular challenge I want to address is the challenge of definition. In order to establish a genuine science of morality—one capable of adjudicating moral differences—it must meet several challenges, but perhaps the most important one is the *challenge of definition*. That is, it must make clear that the phenomenon it describes really is morality, and is not merely something that vaguely resembles, approximates or accompanies morality—otherwise it will be open to the charge that it isn't really an account of morality at all. It will fail to provide enough intellectual consensus necessary for scientific authority and, over time, incremental progress in the development of a body of scientific knowledge.

Clarity and consensus about the phenomenon under study is essential. Biology would not be much of a science if biologists could never agree on the nature and meaning of a cell; physics would not be much of a science if physicists could never agree on the properties that define different forms of energy, and chemistry would not be much of a science if chemists constantly wrangled over the elements comprising the periodic table. Even if they could conjure agreement, these would still not be very good sciences if they failed to define the subjects of study in ways that were adequate to the phenomena they wished to understand. In the same way it is essential to a science of morality that morality be conceptualized in a way that fit the reality; that convincingly conceptualizes morality and other moral terms in a way that closely, if not accurately, describes what they are.

The fact is, the term 'morality' has several legitimate meanings, and which one is used has tremendous implications for what exactly a scientific theory of morality is really showing us.

Consider three different types or senses of 'morality' and their implications are for scientific theories of morality.

First, 'morality' can mean the realm of right and wrong, good and bad, whether these are grounded by fundamental moral laws or grounded by the value of particular things and states of affairs. This is the sense of 'morality' meant when we say that, for instance, killing innocent people for fun is morally wrong or that racism is immoral. This morality is *prescriptive*, meaning it is supposed to justifiably guide human action. This is the kind of morality we might call or 'lived' morality.

Second, 'morality' can mean the realm of social rules and practices, and those rules or decisions sanctioned by the things considered to be valuable; that describe what groups of human beings consider to constrain what is permitted or encourage what should be pursued or promoted. This is the sense of morality meant when we talk about a society's moral code without intending to say anything about whether such a society's codes "really are" right or wrong. We might call morality in this sense *descriptive*.

Third, morality can mean something more practical or instrumental. In this sense, morality concerns what one should and shouldn't do, but where the 'should' isn't a 'moral' should in the lived and prescriptive sense. That is, there's a kind of 'ought' that is practical without being ethical. It's the sort of 'ought' we mean when we say things like "Well, if you want to win the lottery, then you ought to buy some tickets." In such cases we aren't trying to say that anyone morally ought to buy lottery tickets, but instead just that if someone's goal is to win the lottery, then in order to

achieve that goal they would have to buy some lottery tickets. This kind of normativity is sometimes called *prudential*.

Which of these is meant matters a great deal for figuring out what is being shown. One way to appreciate this problem is to consider an imaginary case. Suppose you wanted to figure out how best to budget your income, manage your debt, and invest for the future. You pick up a few books with promising sounding titles, such as *Homo Thrifticus: The Evolutionary Science of Personal Budgeting* and *Mind Over Money: The Neuroscience of Saving*. You begin reading the books with gusto, but before long a troubling worry arises: are these books using the scientific investigation of personal finance to reveal how best to manage your money, or merely to reveal how human beings in fact tend to think, feel, and act with respect to their money? Since you know that many people have consumer debt, you doubt that knowing merely how humans are inclined to use their money will help you budget well. After all, since what people actually do is no guide to what you should do, knowing the neural or subjective basis for what people do seems to offer little guidance on what you should do. This goes for both personal finances and for the moral life.

The fact is, much of the recent scientific study of morality makes little attempt to clarify which sense of morality is under discussion. In fact, it is a common practice that those who advocate a science of morality—and this is pervasive in positive psychology—conflate the various meanings of the word as though these differences either didn't exist or didn't matter.

There are many illustrations of this in the literature. Let me focus on the example of altruism as a real world example of this challenge.

In a recent book, biologist David Sloan Wilson argued that science can demonstrate that altruism exists. Whether this is an interesting claim depends entirely on how Wilson defines altruism. Wilson gets off to a promising start, beginning his book by defining altruism as: "... a concern for the welfare of others as an end in itself."<sup>3</sup> This definition of altruism places it firmly in the prescriptive realm, given, among other reasons, the inclusion of the ideas of the goodness of intention and a Kantian concern for human beings as ends in themselves. If Wilson could give a scientific argument for the existence of this kind of altruism, it would be a major breakthrough, given the historical intractability of moral properties for empirical inquiry.

But there are two different senses of altruism at play in his argument—one is prescriptive and the other is descriptive; one is ethical and the other is biological. In biology, altruism is one organism's increasing another organism's reproductive fitness at a cost to its own. It stands in contrast with an ethical understanding of altruism, where the idea is in terms of one's acting with the intention of benefitting another, without regard for the cost to one's self.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, Wilson eventually migrates away from plausibly morally-relevant understandings of altruism to another, more empirically tractable behavioral definition. Toward the end of the book, Wilson is explicit about his act of redefinition:

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<sup>3</sup> *Does Altruism Exist?* Yale University Press, 2015, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Our view is roughly in line with Samir Okasha's in his essay on the subject in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. He writes, "Ordinarily we think of altruistic actions as disinterested, done with the interests of the recipient, rather than our own interests, in mind. But kin selection theory explains altruistic behaviour as a clever strategy devised by selfish genes as a way of increasing their representation in the gene-pool, at the expense of other genes.... The key point to remember is that biological altruism cannot be equated with altruism in the everyday vernacular sense. Biological altruism is defined in terms of fitness consequences, not motivating intentions. If by 'real' altruism we mean altruism done with the conscious intention to help, then the vast majority of living creatures are not capable of 'real' altruism nor therefore of 'real' selfishness either." Samir Okasha, "Biological Altruism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/altruism-biological/>>. Accessed July 13, 2015.

Altruism exists. If by altruism we mean traits that evolve by virtue of benefitting whole groups, despite being selectively disadvantageous within groups, then altruism indubitably exists and accounts for group-level functional organization we see in nature.<sup>5</sup>

This account of altruism takes us far from a recognizably prescriptive definition of altruism. Wilson is aware of this, but is unconcerned. This book, he argues,

... has been critical of some of the ways that altruism is traditionally studied. Altruism is often defined as a particular psychological motive that leads to other-oriented behaviors, which needs to be distinguished from other kinds of motives. Once the existence of altruism hinges on distinctions among motives, it becomes difficult to study because motives are less transparent than actions...But to the degree that different psychological motives result in the same actions, we shouldn't care much about distinguishing among them, any more than we should care about being paid with cash or a check. It's not right to privilege altruism as a psychological motive when other equivalent motives exist.<sup>6</sup>

So Wilson claims that whether one satisfies the biological, behavioristic definition of altruism is all that really matters—as he put it, “It doesn't matter whether he gets paid in cash or by check”.

But of course this is far from evident and will certainly face much resistance. Do you only care that your spouse *acts* as though she loves you? That she says complimentary things to you, that she pulls her weight on the household chores, that she contributes income to the family, that she says the things a loving spouse should say, that she appears sexually attracted to you, that she remembers your birthday, etc? What if you discovered that she does all of these things without feeling anything for you—or worse: she does all these things while secretly detesting you? Wilson's claim is that this is just a “cash or check” situation—just so long as she's doing all the observable things she would do if she really did love you, then the underlying motives, intentions, and desires are moot. It is difficult to imagine that Wilson himself would be indifferent to these motives and intentions. Such a relationship would be functional, but loveless—indeed, missing precisely the element that makes an act genuinely altruistic.

Wilson's definition of the key moral term in his study ultimately renders his account incoherent, at the least, and possibly irrelevant to a science of altruism at the most. This is the common outcome for scientific accounts that falter on the challenge of definition.

In short, questions of method and measurement are critical to science, but they are irrelevant if researchers are unable to clearly mark out the object of inquiry in a credible, consistent, and persuasive way. Conceptual clarity, if not precision, is essential, yet this is often missing in the new moral science. What unfolds looks something like a shell game. Scholarship declares itself to be addressing questions of prescriptive morality, but through a slight of hand, puts descriptive and prudential definitions of morality into play in ways that conflate the meanings of the term.

**III.** This is a reason why the new moral science has to redefine and redirect what it means to have a science of morality. Joshua Greene of Harvard lays out the logic with precision:

Perhaps our moral questions have no objectively correct answers. But even if that's true, knowing that it's true is not much help. Our laws have to say *something*. We have to

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<sup>5</sup> *Does Altruism Exist?*, Yale University Press, 2015, p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> *Does Altruism Exist?*, Yale University Press, 2015, p. 142. Emphasis added.

choose, and unless we're content to flip coins, or allow that might makes right, we must choose for *reasons*. We appeal to some moral standard or other.<sup>7</sup>

In effect, Greene would say, “Pay no attention to the yawning abyss at the foundations of my preferred moral theory—focusing on that won't help us.” Perhaps it wouldn't. But keeping that abyss in mind does help to clarify what Greene and the other new moral scientists really mean when they go on to use moral language and invoke moral concepts in their recommendations for what they think we should do. For unless one is paying careful attention, it is easy to read Greene and others as operating within conventional moral language and moral systems. But that actually is not the case.

In fact, Greene proposes that we should *revise* what moral language means, moving away from concepts understood in terms of right and wrong, and instead taking moral concepts to concern serving human interests. This is a consequential move because it reframes—by way of definitional fiat—the terms by which morality is understood. Though the language of morality is invoked, the meaning of the term “morality” has now changed into something different; something that resembles common or conventional morality on the surface, but in fact isn't at all like it. By rendering prescriptive morality into something more amenable to naturalistic explanation, the meaning of morality changes into something different; into a non-prescriptive, instrumental arena of moral prudence.

Owen Flanagan of Harvard echoes the point: “We are looking for norms, values, and practices that are the best, where “the best” is almost always “the best for such and such purpose or purposes.”<sup>8</sup> Part of what makes this interesting is that he—and so many others—have begun to call this approach “eudaimonics”—the empirical study of human flourishing.<sup>9</sup> These new eudaimonistic theories bear some similarities to Aristotle's ethical view, which was an account of prescriptive morality. As such, it would be easy to come away from reading Flanagan's work (and others too) thinking that he too accepts that prescriptive morality is a genuine phenomenon, but rather than objective and true, morality is now functional and manipulable; rather than constitutive of an objective human flourishing, morality is now useful for fluid and variable conceptions of human well-being.

Alex Rosenberg of Duke University comes right to the point: “*reducing moral rightness to prudence produces a naturalistic grounding for morality by changing the subject.*”<sup>10</sup>

The new moral scientists are not alone here. In meta-ethics, the nature of morality is an open question. The new moral scientists merely take a stance in this contested realm. Thus, no one is conspiring to perpetrate a deception. Yet, there is an ambiguity in the terminology that is, on the face of it, confusing. Part of the appeal of this proposal depends upon this confusion. By talking about morality as if it were what most people assume to be morality, in effect, the new moral science produces a bait and switch.

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<sup>7</sup> *Moral Tribes*, p. 290.

<sup>8</sup> Pp. 120-121. In effect, he has also redefined the realm of morality as the realm of practical reason. As he put it, “Ethics is not a separate domain of knowledge—it's probably continuous with prudential and practical knowledge...it just has to do with matters... we take to be of greater importance.” Owen Flanagan, comments at the Moving Naturalism Forward conference, October 27, 2012, morning session of day two, roughly at the 1:01:00 mark. Video at <http://preposterousuniverse.com/naturalism2012/video.html>. Flanagan elaborates his views in his book, *The Really Hard Problem*, MIT Press, 2007, p. 125

<sup>9</sup> *The Really Hard Problem*, pp. 1–3.

<sup>10</sup> Alex Rosenberg, “Disenchanted Naturalism,” *Kritikos* Volume 12, January-April, 2015, emphasis added.

IV. So, on what basis, then, do prudential ethics rest? Greene is clear: "...we've no choice but to capitalize on the values we share and seek our common currency there..."<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere he writes, "[w]e're looking for a [common moral standard] based on shared values. For our purposes, shared values need not be perfectly universal. They just need to be shared widely, shared by members of different tribes whose disagreements we might hope to resolve by appeal to a common moral standard."<sup>12</sup> The best strategy, then, is

to seek agreement in shared values. Rather than appeal to an independent moral authority...we aim instead to establish a *common currency* for weighing competing values. This is...the genius of utilitarianism, which establishes a common currency based on *experience*...<sup>13</sup> ...We can take this kernel of personal value and turn it into a *moral* value by valuing it *impartially*...Finally, we can turn this moral value into a moral *system* by running it through the outcome-optimizing apparatus of the human prefrontal cortex. This yields a moral philosophy that no one loves but that everyone "gets"—a second moral language that members of all tribes can speak...This is the essence of [Greene's preferred view]: to seek common ground not where we think it ought to be, but where it actually is.<sup>14</sup>

In the end, the utilitarianism that Greene and others in the new moral science advocate isn't driven by the greater value of some outcomes over others. It is driven by what people happen to *value* (and maximizing this), rather than what is intrinsically *valuable*.

Flanagan echoes this view. He gives us the metaphor of a bridge across a certain river. Where did this goal or end come from?

"The answer is this: *It came from the people*. Enough of them shared the goal of doing business with the folks on the other side of the river that seeking to meet this goal was judged to be a good idea. The same is true, I claim, for what seem to be, but are not, the more mysterious kind of normative questions that philosophers fuss with and often mystify."<sup>15</sup>

Here too, the basis for whether we should do something is whether doing that thing contributes to a goal that enough people share.

Framed in this way, the quest of ends or goals is paramount. What are our ends or goals? Though the historical record is clear how widely this varies, Green thinks he knows. "We all want to be happy. None of us wants to suffer. And our concern for happiness and suffering lies behind nearly everything else that we value."<sup>16</sup> Thus, "...our task, insofar as we're moral, is to make the world as happy as possible, giving equal weight to everyone's happiness."<sup>17</sup>

Greene's view isn't that we should try to make everybody happy because happiness is the most valuable thing; rather, Greene's view is that we should try to make everybody happy because that's something *everybody wants*.

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<sup>11</sup> *Moral Tribes*, p. 189.

<sup>12</sup> *Moral Tribes*, p. 191.

<sup>13</sup> *Moral Tribes*, p. 291.

<sup>14</sup> *Moral Tribes*, p. 291.

<sup>15</sup> *The Really Hard Problem*, pp. 38–39. Emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> *Moral Tribes*, p. 291. I believe that the values behind utilitarianism are our true common ground...we...are united by our capacity for positive and negative *experience*, for happiness and suffering, and by our recognition that morality must, at the highest level, be *impartial*. *Moral Tribes*, p. 189. "Happiness is what matters, and everyone's happiness counts the same" and so "We should simply try to make the world as happy as possible." *Moral Tribes*, p. 170 and p. 333.

<sup>17</sup> *Moral Tribes*, p. 189.



This might seem like a small, inconsequential distinction, but it isn't. What people happen to value and what really is valuable are two very different things. After all, just because people *want* something—even if *everyone* wants the same thing—in no way makes pursuit of that thing acceptable. Some people *value* hoarding old newspapers—but hoarding old newspapers isn't really valuable. On the other hand, human life really is *valuable*, even if no one values it. Greene's (and the others') utilitarianism maximizes what people happen to value, not what is really valuable.<sup>18</sup>

So we see that Greene makes happiness the main object of human action not because he thinks happiness really is the greatest good. Greene doesn't think anything is good at all, literally speaking. Why then happiness? Greene's overall project is to propose a solution to moral conflict between groups with different moral views. His strategy is two-fold: first, to reject moral pluralism as it exists on the ground by ignoring the particular claims of competing groups in the particular moral languages in which those claims are made; and second, to find something everybody considers valuable, and then building all of ethics on that common basis. He believes that happy experiences are this common basis, and hence his choice of happiness-based utilitarianism. This position isn't incompatible with Alex Rosenberg's contention that "Darwinian processes operating on our forebears in the main selected for niceness."<sup>19</sup>

Greene is hardly alone. Happiness (or subjective well-being or flourishing) has become a rage in psychology as seen in the burgeoning field of positive psychology. Here too, morality is redefined from historical categories into the categories of utility, functionality, and capacity. Think, for example, of Martin Seligman's book, *Flourishing*. Here again, it appears as though he is talking about morality in classical Aristotelian terms, but he is not. Any notion of prescriptive morality has been emptied out of its intrinsic and substantive qualities in favor of a generic morality of strengths and utility.

**V.** The centrality of "social consensus" in the new utilitarian logic deserves further interrogation. Joshua Greene and others speak about the necessity of relying upon "the shared values" of social consensus to build an ethics; that ethics begins with what "the people" want. Surely, we should be cautious about that idea. After all, social consensus has given us a democratically elected Nazi party, the Third Reich and its war machine and, in turn, the horrors of the Holocaust. Social consensus has given us a democratically validated slavery, Jim Crow, the terror of lynching and every conceivable expression of social denigration and discrimination. Social consensus gave us Apartheid in South Africa and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. It has given us genocide in Armenia, Darfur, Burma, Rwanda, Cambodia, Somalia and the Congo. At various times in history, social consensus has also authorized the practices of foot-binding, genital mutilation, suttee, suicide-bombing, honor killing, unrestrained consumerism, and the like. These are not the inventions of fanatical autocrats who imposed their ideas with authoritarian zeal. Rather, they have been popularly embraced by "the people," woven into their cultures as well-established if not

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<sup>18</sup> "Put them together and our task, insofar as we're moral, is to make the world as happy as possible, giving equal weight to everyone's happiness. I do not claim, however, that utilitarianism is the moral truth. Nor do I claim, more specifically, and as some readers might expect me to, that science proves that utilitarianism is the moral truth. Instead, I claim that utilitarianism becomes uniquely attractive once our moral thinking has been *objectively improved* by a scientific understanding of morality." *Moral Tribes*, p. 189.

<sup>19</sup> Rosenberg, "Disenchanted Naturalism," *Kritikos* Volume 12, January-April, 2015. This, he says, "was a convenience, not for us as individuals, but for our genes." He goes on to say that "after enough cycles the result is a nice bell-shaped distribution of niceness, with a small number of people at the extreme ends of unconditional altruism and egoistic sociopathy. It can't be helped of course. Variation is the rule and there is really no way to stamp out the sociopathy. All we can do is protect ourselves from it."

commonplace social practices, and reproduced generation after generation by the formal and informal socialization practices of, among other institutions, the family and school. The shared values of social consensus can yield murderous results.

To make such comparisons and to see their implications, of course, one must have an elementary notion of institutions or of society. But in the new moral science, there are no such conceptualizations. The social world in all of its complexity is simply constituted by the sum total individuals motivated by their own particular interests in order to sustain or increase their personal contentment. Institutions exist, but only as vague entities whose relative legitimacy is measured by the degree to which they increase or decrease personal satisfaction.

Even if those possibilities seem remote at this particular moment in time, one cannot help but be struck by the banality of scientific ethics as currently defined and wonder if it can bear the weight of our individual and collective moral concerns.

Precisely because there is no adequate conception of the social within the new moral science, there is, by extension, no conceptualization of human goods that exist outside of mutually-agreeable mental states of individuals. Public goods have no existence outside of individual subjectivity, no ontology, no transcendence against which the self would be held to account. How, then, within the framework of the new moral science is one to make ethical sense of the threats to our global environment, to liberty from the expanding surveillance capacities of the state, to the economy from fraud in the banking sector, to justice from the corruption of political, civic and corporate leadership? How is one to make sense of the sacrifice necessary to achieve social justice? The new moral science provides no categories for comprehending, much less addressing questions of collective moral failure or collective moral aspiration.

And, because a moral nihilism underwrites the new moral science, there is *nothing* intrinsic to it that would naturally set itself against the dehumanizing impulses inherent in the regime of instrumental rationality. Neither is there anything intrinsic to it that would define itself against the ravages of inequality, the exploitation of the weak or poor, the despoiling of the environment, the oppression of minorities or any other depredation. The new moral science—*in itself*—provides no resources for either affirming any moral ideals or resisting any injustice common to human existence.

Happiness? Well-being?

We have observed already just how historically and culturally tendentious the concept of happiness or subjective well-being is in the new moral science and how poorly it is operationalized for scientific purposes. The *prima facie* case against it as a scientifically useful concept is very strong for people find subjective well-being in as many different sources as one can imagine. What could be more variable? Middle-aged introspective academics, Nepalese Sherpas, horny American teenagers, religiously observant Jews, Kalahari bushmen, Tibetan monks, members of a biker gang, construction workers, ISIS fighters, etc., etc., all find happiness in different ways. What is the happiness they share in common? Except for the word itself, what is the common currency of utilitarian exchange by which conflict would be resolved? By which justice would be pursued? As we have observed, on the face of it there is no way to compare one person's happiness to another and, over time, to compare a single person's experience of happiness at one moment to anything she experience in the past. There are no natural units by which comparison can be made.

Not least, it is possible for people to find subjective well-being within regimes the new moral scientists would certainly regard as evil. We know, for example, that years spent in the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth) were among the happiest of the lives of 7.3 million young Nazis, for there they found camaraderie, fellowship, common purpose, opportunities to grow, develop and

work together. In that context, their PERMA levels were fantastically high. Now there was a social consensus!

In the end, happiness (well-being, flourishing, PERMA), as it is understood today, is a highly subjective category reflecting the historically contingent cultural consensus of late modern Western, middle and upper-middle class liberalism.<sup>20</sup> It is doubtful that that consensus is shared in Teheran, Soweto, Beijing or in the blighted areas of L.A., Washington, and Birmingham, or among any of their citizens. It is dubious whether one could find a partial social consensus across such differences. But even if one could, there is a genuine question about whether it would be capable of resisting conflict or of sustaining passion toward any collective moral ideals.

The question will seem rhetorical, but it is entirely justifiable to ask: would the civil rights movement in the United States have achieved its successes because of the kind of the utilitarian consensus Joshua Greene speaks of? Would Apartheid in South Africa come to an end because people worked through the calculations of shared happiness? By contrast, could the aspirations of radical Islam be addressed through a conversation about subjective well-being? And could everyday heroism—such as caring for an elderly parent or a severely disabled child over many, many years, taking a risk of losing one’s job for blowing the whistle on corruption at work, or providing a kidney for a stranger needing a transplant—be achieved and sustained through a rational calculation of cost and benefits alone? Evidence suggests that the answer is no.<sup>21</sup>

**VI.** The sources of moral conflict in the world are as present as they have ever been, the intentions to do harm are as ruthless as they have ever been, the means to do violence are greater than they have ever been, and thus the misery we humans are capable of inflicting on each other and to the earth are as great if not greater than ever before. It strikes us as minimally sensible, if not urgent, to search for any humane way through our deepest differences.

The question is, will current science of morality get us there?

For all that science has taught us and for all the good that it has brought about, it has *not* provided a Newtonian solution to the problem of morality or anything close to it. The new moral synthesis—comprised of Hume's mind-focused sentimentalism, Darwin's evolutionary account of the mind, the utilitarian calculus of Bentham and Mill all embedded within a disenchanting naturalism committed to empirical study of the mind with new technologies—has been a redoubtable development in recent academic history, to be sure, but it has failed thus far, to deliver on its promise.

Will it ever? There are those who say we eventually will; that it is inevitable. The problem is that this kind of “promissory naturalism” imputes teleology to science that science cannot justify. The fact is, it hasn’t happened yet and we have no idea whether it will or not. What we *do* know is that there are formidable challenges to getting there.

At this stage, against the moral challenges of our age, the new moral science looks rather weak and unconvincing. Absent an engagement with history, culture, and the humanities and absent an engagement with particular traditions of moral reasoning and practice, the new moral science appears impoverished, superficial, and trite.

We can do better. And for the sake of the young people in our care and the world they are inheriting, we must.

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<sup>20</sup> See Jackson Lears, “Get Happy,” *The Nation*. November 6, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the work of William Damon, *The Power of Ideals*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015 and (with Anne Colby) *Some Do Care*, New York, Free Press, 1994.