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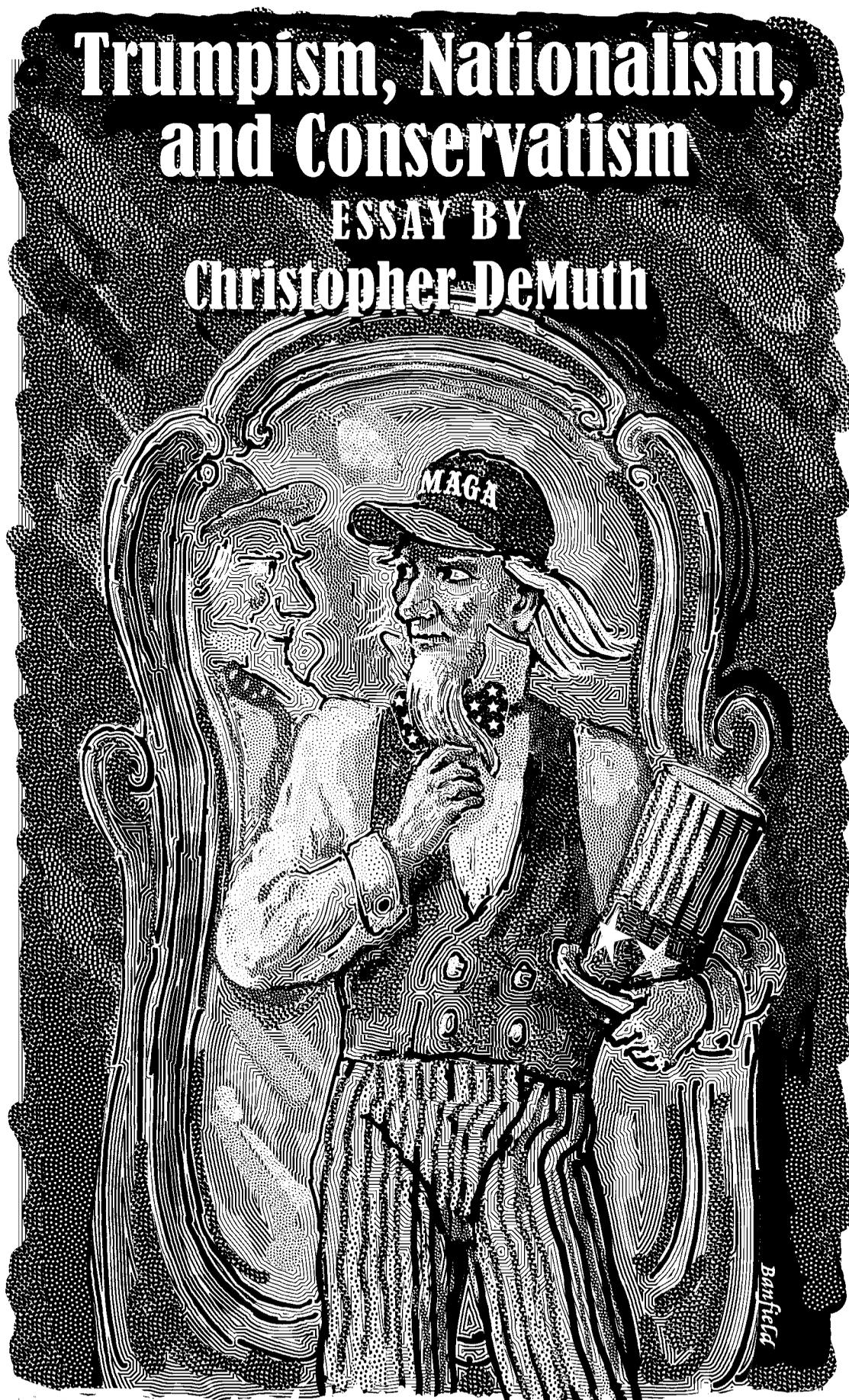
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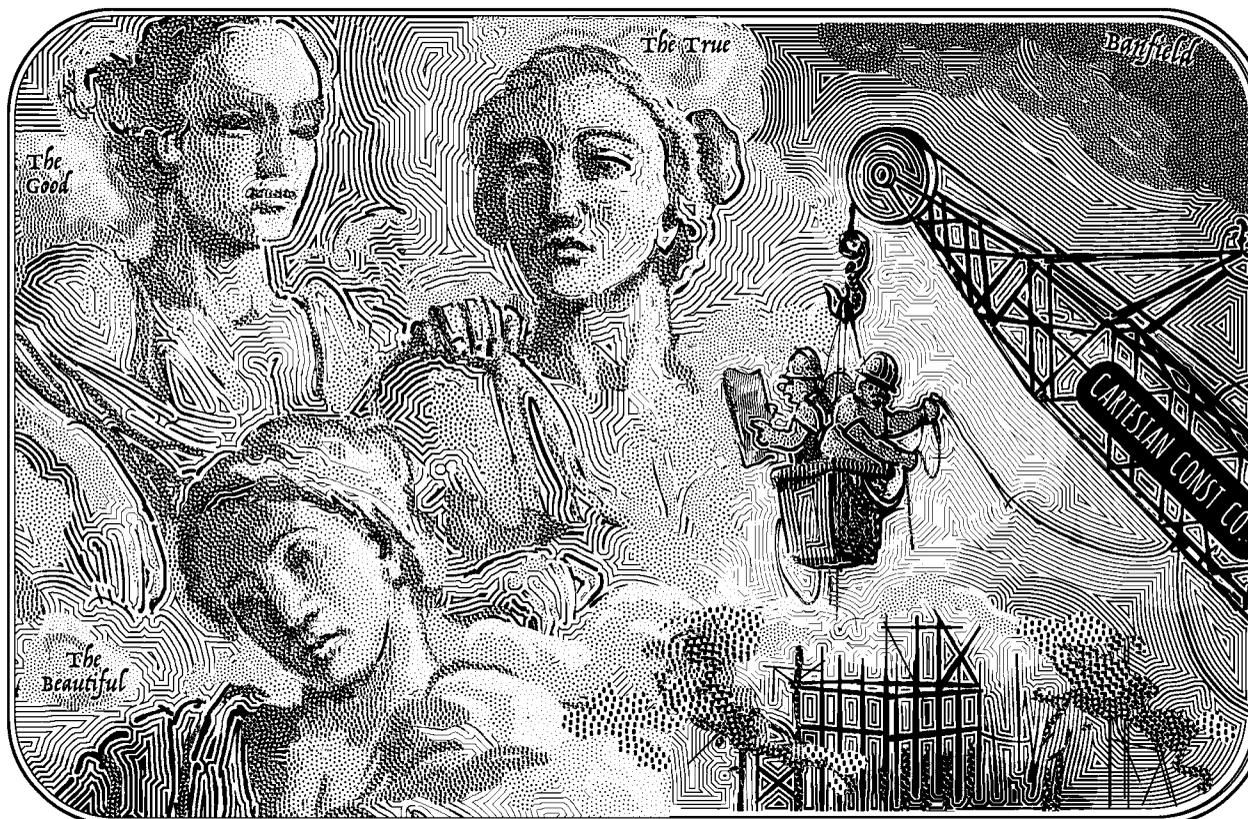
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## MORALITY AND HAPPINESS

*Science and the Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality*, by James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky.  
Yale University Press, 312 pages, \$26



*The Illusion of Technique*

**S**CIENCE AND THE GOOD: THE TRAGIC *Quest for the Foundations of Morality* is a serious work, useful for its thoughtful overview of what today's neuro and evolutionary scientists teach us about morality. Its title, of course, overpromises—how could it not? Authors James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky insufficiently analyze “the good,” and ways of knowing (“science,” generally) other than modern natural science are largely ignored. The book's protagonists, moreover, are not “tragic” figures but mostly earnest academics and the occasional publicity-hound. Some are vain; none is pitiable, and reading *Science and the Good* is not cathartic but, at best, soberly educational.

Hunter is a professor of religion, culture, and society at the University of Virginia, where he directs the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. He has written many books on character, Christianity, and morality, including *Culture Wars*, the 1992 best-

seller. Nedelisky is a fellow of the Institute. Their book has two main parts: a history of the “quest,” beginning in the 17th century, to ground morality on the methods and discoveries of modern natural science, and a discussion of contemporary findings. The authors call the quest “tragic” because it is doomed to fail.

**H**UNTER AND NEDELISKY'S INTERESTING historical discussion is, unfortunately, unreliable. It runs from Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes to Charles Darwin and his followers, via David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill. Immanuel Kant, for whom the relation among nature, natural science, and morality was a central conundrum; G.W.F. Hegel, who believed he had solved this and all other seemingly intractable problems; and Friedrich Nietzsche, the psychological wizard who plumbed *The Genealogy of Morals*, make no appearance.

Most of the book's historical account is devoted to Hume and Bentham because they seem closest to current views of pleasure and moral psychology, and because Hume's notion that we cannot derive an “ought” from an “is” plays a large role in the authors' thinking.

The book's second part is characterized by Hunter and Nedelisky's healthy skepticism of the inflated claims of sociobiologists, philosophy professors, publicists, neuro-economists, neuro-psychologists, and social psychologists. In the authors' view, the modern scientific approach to morality does not and cannot tell us what we ought to do. It can indicate *something* about the sentiments or neurochemistry that accompany morality, and the evolution of these sentiments—but even there, not much has been discovered. The authors do not exaggerate these findings, although scientists sometimes do.

One finding is that oxytocin is central to trust; the study behind this claim has not

been replicated. Another is that moral judgments are tied to two different parts of the brain, one that calculates in a utilitarian manner, and one that intuits “deontological” matters such as rights’ violations. But this discovery rests on experiments involving small numbers of today’s Ivy League students—hardly a representative group—and the conclusions rest on a far-fetched example about whether and how you would kill one or a few to save many. A third finding involves (perhaps) discovering empathy in other primates, but with no indication that this involves moral choice. A fourth lists some general areas, or “receptors,” that call forth a spectrum of moral behavior, but with no sign of which behavior one ought to choose.

SEVERAL OF THE SCIENTISTS DISCUSSED apparently understand that their methods cannot tell us if the behavior they study—“loyalty,” but to whom?, “equity,” but judged how?, “empathy,” but for the innocent or the criminal?—is in fact morally choice-worthy. But all submit to “the proclivity to overreach” and treat their half findings as telling us what we ought to do. When they do recognize their limits they tend to stop treating morality as a “mind-independent reality” and (silently) embrace “moral nihilism.”

One reason they overreach is because they do not understand the phenomenon of morality sufficiently. As the authors say, the scientists fail to “define” it, so they can hardly demonstrate much about it. Modern science’s “disenchanted naturalism” tries to discover laws based on hypotheses about and observations of the rudimentary elements to which things can be reduced. Such “naturalism” is inadequate for determining what we ought to do.

In making this criticism the authors are on the right track. After all, a key difficulty in chemical, neurological, and similar studies of complex human phenomena of consciousness, ethical action, politics, art, and thought is failing to examine sufficiently the phenomena being explored, on their own terms. The little that is amenable to science’s methods stands in for and narrows the phenomenon as a whole. This is not only a difficulty for natural science: could one understand the conditions of “leadership” if one had never heard of Abraham Lincoln, but only surveyed a sample of human resources professionals?

Unfortunately, the authors themselves suffer from these faults. It would be unfair to expect them to provide a fully developed description of moral phenomena. Nonetheless, their purportedly more adequate stand-

point relies on an excessively compressed discussion of “re-enchanting” phenomena (without making them irrational). They also assert, but insufficiently defend, criticisms of contemporary life that seem based on Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and other Frankfurt School writers. There is an “elective affinity,” they claim, between “the new moral science,” “instrumental and technical rationality,” and “the cultural and structural dynamics of power at the heart of the contemporary world.”

THE AUTHORS’ BROADER PROBLEMS OF definition begin with an imprecise statement of their subject. Often they seem to identify, or to act as if their subjects identify, morality, happiness, and what is good. Other times they differentiate them, and act as if the moral scientists’ question is whether morality serves human happiness. They also largely ignore the connection between justice and punishment, a significant omission when a major issue for them is what “science” says about why and whether we direct ourselves to others’ good.

Hunter and Nedelisky, that is, fail to make distinctions central to their topic—such as between “morality” and what is good. We cannot treat our direction (or its lack) toward morality as identical to our direction toward what is good. Kant, for example, distinguishes morality and happiness because happiness involves natural desire and, therefore, what is naturally or materially caused, and morality involves freedom or self-legislation that is not subject to nature.

The question of whether correctly distributing goods and mandating certain actions—justice—is natural or conventional has been fundamental since Plato and Aristotle. Something’s nature means, for Plato and Aristotle, what about it we do not make, what is essential to it, what covers all its instances (if not equally), and what in it is understandable by reason. Speech, for example, is a (or the) pre-eminent natural human ability. We cannot well address the possible connection between understanding “nature” and morality by leaving matters with modern natural science. Nor can morality be reduced to altruism, as the authors tend to do, if we wish to understand its connection to happiness. Just and responsible behavior, after all, may benefit oneself as well as others, and, as Aristotle suggests, virtuous actions such as courage, generosity, and friendship that help others are central to one’s own happiness.

Another notion the authors explore insufficiently is human “flourishing”—which many

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“scientists” fall back on when discussing what is good. It is not in fact an unimportant criterion, even if the scientists have only a vague or narrow understanding of what they mean by it. What is good for us is connected to the full use of our abilities—indeed, to their fullest use. What could our “good” or happiness mean were it simply separated from our abilities? Such a “good” directs us, but not effortlessly. “Morality” or justice, moreover, can help to achieve what is good, but not merely psychologically or automatically. Justice requires training, education, punishment, and effort. We should not dismiss flourishing as a way to understand happiness, but need to discuss it more substantively than the authors and their subjects do.

**T**HE COMPLICATIONS UNCOVERED IN fully analyzing happiness and what is good complicate morality and law. But these complications do not disprove the fact that happiness involves a certain group of activities in relation to a certain group of abilities. And we cannot all flourish equally unless our abilities are equal and sufficient resources exist to allow equal flourishing. This is not the case when one considers the greatest political efforts, and some of the greatest artistic ones.

The authors seem too wedded to an undefined equality, or universality, when discussing the place of equality in morality and happiness. Their useful discussions of Grotius, Hobbes, and John Locke too quickly pass over the substance of natural equality as these thinkers see it—as equality in rights. Hunter and Nedelisky say little about what rights are, their link to equal will or choice, and their connection to property and religious toleration as ways to reduce conflict. This is unfortunate, because reducing conflict appears to be one of their and their subjects’ chief goals. Much that Hobbes and Locke tried to uncover about the link among happiness, pleasure, and desire is inseparable from their view of equal rights and the need for a commonwealth with punishing power and control of religion, or its redirection through toleration. Happiness as pleasurable satisfaction is, for Hobbes and Locke, inseparable from equality as equal rights—not a mysteriously undefined equality—and from common obedience—not as free-floating morality or altruism, but obedience to law.

The authors believe that “twenty-five hundred years of philosophical debates” have “not given us a consensus on moral questions.” They appear to desire such a consensus. But

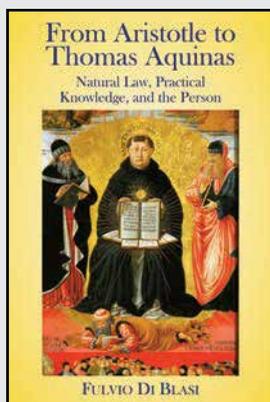
perhaps “moral” questions are inherently disputable, even if one can understand them rationally. Perhaps we cannot achieve “consensus” apart from an explicit effort, such as that advocated by Hobbes and Locke, where agreement is won through legal effort and persuasion, and justice and happiness are pursued in a particular manner.

To see what we can discover about happiness through the methods of modern natural science we must first consider carefully what the human good and morality are on their own terms. This will also clarify the limits of the scientific effort. Although Hunter and Nedelisky insufficiently explore this problem, they properly make the issue of “definition” a centerpiece of their questioning. In general, they have produced a thoughtful summary and able criticism of the contemporary scientific quest for morality’s foundations, and have brought to light important matters.

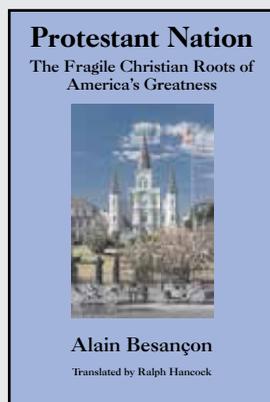
*Mark Blitz is the Fletcher Jones Professor of Political Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College. He is the author of Plato’s Political Philosophy (Johns Hopkins University Press) and Duty Bound: Responsibility and American Public Life (Rowman & Littlefield).*

## St. Augustine’s Press / Books for the Spring

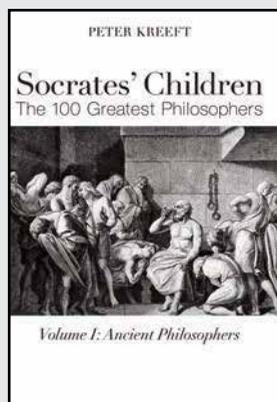
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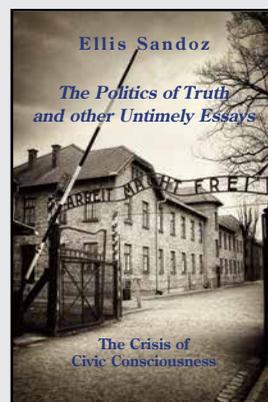
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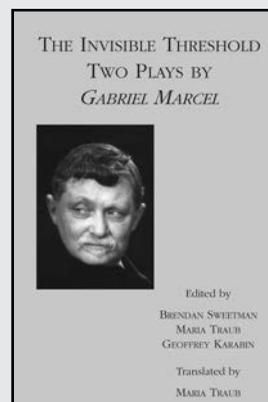
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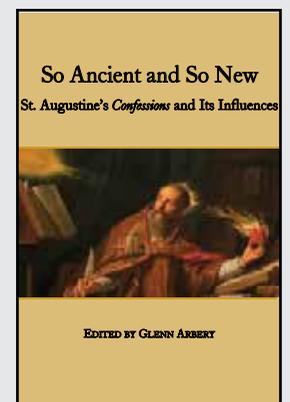
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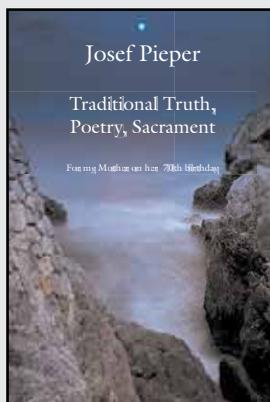
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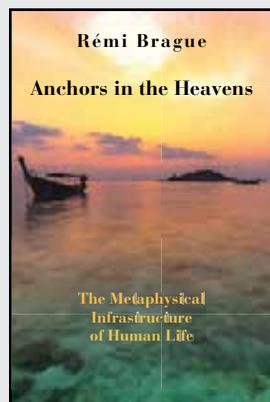
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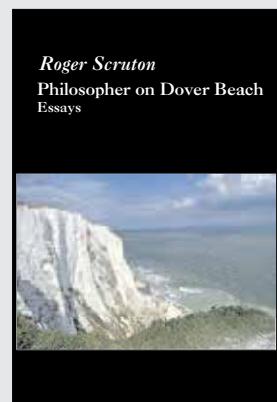
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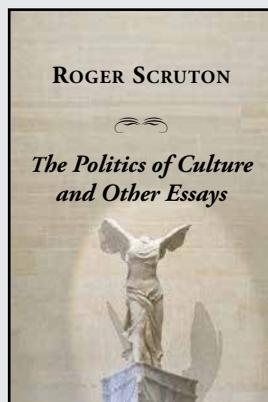
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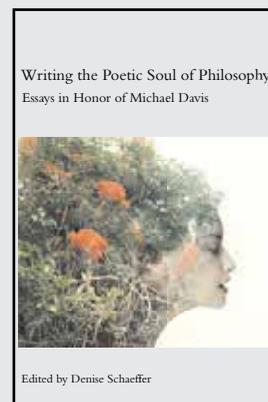
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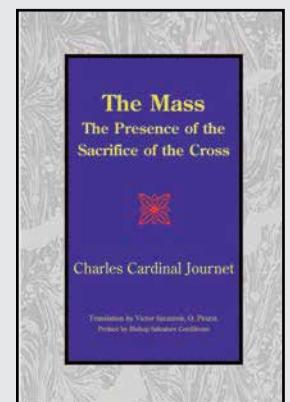
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