

# SCIENTISM AND MORALITY

CRITIQUE OF MASTER'S THESIS  
*ETHICS, NATURALLY*  
TORE SKÅLEVIK, MA.

By Sivert Thomas Ellingsen

The movement known as “New Atheism” is defined by two things above all else: Its scientism – i.e., roughly, its view that natural science tells us everything there is to know – and its fierce moral denunciations of organized religion. There is, some charge, an inconsistency here. Scientism, after all, threatens the viability of every kind of language whose statements are allegedly truth-apt, but not susceptible to empirical investigation. Usually included in this group are metaphysical, theological, aesthetic, and – importantly in this context – ethical language. According to scientism, statements that belong in such categories of language are meaningless, meaningful but not truth-apt, universally false, or unknowable. In the case of moral language, this would seem to leave us with some flavor of moral anti-realism or skepticism. The problem is that such views are all apparently incompatible with said fierce moral denunciations, which the New Atheists clearly take to be not only truth-apt, but also true.

New Atheist Samuel Harris’s 2010 book *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (henceforth *ML*) is, among other things, an attempt to answer this objection, and the broader objection on which it is founded, viz., that moral realism is incompatible with a naturalistic and scientific worldview. This is not a novel view for philosophers, among whom meta-ethical naturalists are legion; but as Harris points out, it is largely new to the extra-philosophical world, where secularism is often thought – even by its own adherents – to go hand in hand with moral relativism or nihilism (*ML*:5).

*ML*, as its subtitle informs us, is dedicated to defending the view that “science can determine human values.” It is a scientifically sophisticated text, and far more philosophically sophisticated than almost anything else produced by a New Atheist. However, it is still a text meant

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mainly for a general audience, and Harris explicitly notes that he does not directly engage much with the meta-ethical literature (*ML*: note 1 to ch. 1). This is where Tore Skålevik’s 2013 thesis, *Ethics, Naturally: On Science and Human Values* (henceforth *EN*), comes in. There, Skålevik sets out to formulate and defend Harris’s theory in a more precise and sophisticated way than Harris himself and to show that it has the theoretical resources to play with the big boys of modern meta-ethics. (Harris as Skålevik reads him will henceforth be referred to, “Kripkenstein”-style,

as “HS.”)<sup>1</sup> More specifically, Skålevik argues (*EN*: chs. 3–8) that a refined version of Harris’s theory can not only account for the truth-aptness of moral statements and beliefs, but also show that such statements have truth-conditions that are entirely empirical. He then argues that it is possible in practice as well as in principle that Harris’s theory can

give us substantial moral knowledge, and that it can play a useful role in resolving moral disagreement (*EN*: chs. 9–11).

As already suggested, there are at least two ways of reading *EN* and *ML*. On one reading, they are texts in meta-ethics, devoted to defending a particular, naturalistic conception of what it is for something to be morally good. On another, they are texts in meta-philosophy, devoted to defending the view that the conjunction of scientism and moral realism is a perfectly reasonable and defensible position.<sup>2</sup> They aim to do this by means of a concrete counterexample to the view that moral realism cannot plausibly be held in conjunction with scientism, describing a realist meta-ethical theory which, when conjoined with scientism, *does* yield a plausible position. For these meta-philosophical purposes, the theory need not be true – it need only be plausible in conjunction with scientism.

After giving a short, non-critical exposition of some

aspects of HS's meta-ethical theory (those presented in chapters 3 to 8 of *EN*), I will attack his meta-philosophical ambitions from two fronts. First, I shall argue that scientism, taken on its own, is either self-refuting or trivial, so that the conjunction of scientism and any other theory will be either self-refuting (and hence, I take it, not plausible) or only as good as that other theory taken on its own. Second, I shall argue that HS's use of teleological language in the exposition of the meta-ethical theory is problematic from the naturalistic and scientific point of view that he adopts, and hence endangers his meta-philosophical enterprise. I will end with some brief observations about how what has just been said affects the meta-ethical aspect of these texts, and matters meta-ethical more generally.

HS posits a theory of natural value that owes a great deal to Peter Railton (*EN*: chs. 3–4). What is naturally valuable for an agent is, roughly and intuitively, what is *good*, in a non-moral sense, for that agent. On this theory, for something to be naturally valuable to an agent *just is* for it to be conducive of that agent's well-being. Well-being, as HS sees it, seems to straddle the utilitarian concept of pleasure and the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia*, consisting of the profound satisfaction and happiness of an agent. It is a key part of HS's theory that the well-being of an agent supervenes on its physical state: Given enough information about the state of the agent's body, we could also, in principle, know everything about its well-being or lack thereof.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, Skålevik suggests a link between well-being and homeostasis, the physical state a body "wants" to be in (*EN*:22). Thus, a thing's value for an agent supervenes on the agent's well-being, which in turn supervenes on the state of the agent's body. Statements about natural value seem to have truth-conditions that are entirely empirical, and hence susceptible to scientific inquiry.

This theory of natural value also entails a rejection of value absolutism, the idea that things can be valuable *simpliciter*: On the HS view, a thing can only be valuable *for* an agent, and there is no guarantee that anything is valuable for *every* agent. But in this case, relativism does not entail subjectivism: There clearly is an objective fact of the matter – i.e. one which is nowise affected by my thoughts and feelings – about whether or not this or that is naturally valuable to an agent. If I see a glass of water that has, unbeknownst to me, been poisoned with arsenic,

I will nonetheless judge that drinking it will be naturally valuable to me. However, because of the arsenic, that judgment will be objectively *wrong*, as drinking the poisoned water could be shown to decrease my well-being.

The next step is intuitively plausible (at least to me): HS claims that moral value is a subspecies of natural value (*EN*: chs. 5 & 6). Hence, moral judgments are not only truth-apt, but they can be true, since judgments about natural value can be both these things. Moreover, since science can tell us what is *naturally* valuable to an agent, it can tell us what is *morally* valuable to an agent. However, HS's rejection of value absolutism causes some problems. If we are relativists about natural value – and if we want to ground moral value in natural value – must we not also be moral relativists? If things are never naturally valuable *simpliciter*, but only naturally valuable for this or that agent – and if being morally valuable is merely a special way of being naturally valuable – does it not follow that things

are never *morally* valuable *simpliciter*, but only morally valuable for this or that agent? HS thinks not. He believes that something is morally valuable if it is naturally valuable to humans in general (as, e.g., water is, and arsenic is not), and casts moral statements as inductive hypotheses: more or less strongly confirmed, but never certain. Also

central here is an analogy between health and morality (*EN*: ch. 8). The idea is that many of the apparent troubles with HS's concept of moral goodness would also affect medicine and its concept of health. For example, apparent troubles with how to get an account of what is healthy in general from knowledge about what is healthy for particular people mirror (in some ways) HS's apparent troubles with obtaining an absolute account of moral value from a relative account of natural value. Since medicine seems to be doing just fine – the reasoning goes – such uncertainties need be no hindrance to a science of morality.

I have so far outlined HS's meta-ethical project. In doing so, I think I have also given the reader a good idea of his meta-philosophical project. The projects link up in the following way. If there is a plausible meta-ethical theory that makes the truth-conditions of moral statements and beliefs investigable by science, it seems that the conjunction of scientism and moral realism is a plausible theory. Nevertheless, at least two problems remain. Firstly, scientism taken on its own is questionably cogent; secondly, HS's theory may be committed to a teleological worldview

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that is at odds with any kind of substantive scientism or naturalism.

Scientism may initially be divided into ontological scientism (OS) – the view that all truth is scientific truth – and epistemic scientism (ES), the view that all knowledge is scientific knowledge. As already noted, scientism is very common among New Atheist authors like Harris (who sometimes speak about reason and science as if they were one and the same thing).

However, scientism is self-defeating, for the simple reason that scientism itself, in either variety, is a *philosophical* thesis that cannot be empirically confirmed or disconfirmed, and hence not a scientific thesis at all. In the case of ontological scientism, this leads to a blatant contradiction: If OS is true, then every truth is a scientific truth; but OS, if it is true, is not a scientific truth; hence OS, if it is true, is false. The same would seem to hold for epistemic scientism. Presumably, the ES advocate would, by definition, claim to know that ES is true. But if ES is true, he can only know what science tells him is true. Science cannot tell him that ES is true. Hence, the ES advocate is committed both to the claim that he knows that ES is true (in virtue of being an adherent of ES) and to the claim that he does not know that ES is true (in virtue of being an adherent of a theory, namely ES itself, which entails as much).

The scientism advocate might now try to broaden his definition of “science,” insisting that the discipline includes philosophy. In that case, we could accuse him of making the concept “science” so broad as to render scientism trivial, or even, perhaps, of using the word “science” in a way that bears no important relation to the way it is normally used.<sup>4</sup> He might try to weaken his thesis by claiming that science is merely our *best* (rather than our *only*) source of truth or knowledge. Then he must either claim that empirical induction on a hypothesis provides more certainty than, say, an axiomatic logical proof, or define “science” in such a way as to include such things as axiomatic logical proofs (in which case triviality looms again). He might also have to dampen his confidence that scientism is true, seeing as he cannot have its truth on the

authority of what he regards as our best source of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, he might reframe scientism as an *attitude* rather than a *doctrine*. But attitudes, though not beliefs, can still commit their adherents to beliefs. For example, scientism-as-attitude would seem to commit its adherent to the view that science is a good way of discovering facts. Thus, the adherent’s attitude may still end up committing him to the views that got him into trouble earlier, in which case he has accomplished nothing. Alternatively, it may lack such stringent implications, in which case it is hard to see how it can amount to more than a vague respect for science with which all sane and reasonable people – including all sane and reasonable religious believers and other anti-naturalists – can wholeheartedly and self-consistently agree.



Illustration: Åshild Aurlien

It seems, then, that scientism is either self-refuting (if it amounts to either OS or ES as initially sketched out, or if it commits its adherent to either of these views in some other way) or trivial (if it defines “science” too broadly, or if it amounts to nothing more than a vague respect for science). If the former is the case, it is clear that – and why – HS’s meta-philosophical endeavor fails. If the latter is the case, the plausibility of the conjunction of scientism and HS’s meta-ethics seems to hang entirely on the plausibility of the conjunction “Snow is either white or not white, and Oswald shot Kennedy” hinges entirely on the plausibility of “Oswald shot Kennedy” alone. While this means that

the meta-philosophical endeavor might, for all that has been said so far, technically be a success, it also makes it utterly mysterious why it should be of any interest over and above that of HS's meta-ethics alone – never mind why authors like Harris seem to hold that scientism is an important and hotly contested view.

On to teleology. In trying to reduce moral value to natural value, HS echoes Aristotle and the modern natural lawyers and virtue ethicists inspired by him. Much like Aristotle's account of *arete* (i.e., roughly, "proper functioning" or "amoral goodness"), HS's account of natural value is shot through with teleological language. An example already touched on is the definition of homeostasis as the state a body "wants" to be in. But a naturalist and scientism advocate like HS is arguably committed to a mechanistic worldview that seeks to explain the universe entirely in terms of interactions between colorless, purposeless bits of matter, or forces and fields. In Aristotelian jargon, such a worldview invokes only efficient and material causality in its explanations, leaving irreducible formal and final causality out of the picture.<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, HS gets much of this teleological talk from biology itself. But if what I have

said so far is true, it seems that biology itself, if it wants to be naturalistic in either method or doctrine, can only help itself to such talk as a *façon de parler* which we will some day be able to cash out in mechanistic terms. This is not yet accomplished, and Stove (2006), among others, has questioned whether it ever will be. If such doubts are correct, HS's meta-philosophical project seems doomed to failure, or committed to a definition of "science" which does not exclude non-naturalistic entities such as irreducible purposes, and which, again, seems far broader than HS wants and believes it to be. The analogy with health offers scant consolation here, since "health" is, if anything, an even more blatantly teleological concept than is, say, homeostasis.

If what I have said so far is true, it seems that we should not be advocates for scientism (or that we all already are such advocates, but to no great effect). Once we have abandoned belief in scientism as a substantial thesis, the motivation for HS's project largely disappears. If there are sources of truth other than science – especially if philosophy is one of these sources – then we can search for *moral* truth in these other places.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In other words, when I say that HS claims that *p*, I mean that Skålevik claims that Harris claims that *p*. Incidentally, the reference to "Kripkenstein" is not meant to suggest that Skålevik's reading of Harris is as fanciful as Kripke's (1982) reading of Wittgenstein is often held to be.

<sup>2</sup> These readings are not, of course, mutually exclusive: I certainly do not wish to deny that HS thinks the theory is *true*, and not merely a useful counterexample.

<sup>3</sup> That HS seems to simply presuppose a physicalist theory of the mind is not as problematic as it might sound. On one reading of HS, it is enough that physicalism is a plausible theory – it need not actually be true. More on this later.

<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, Quine and others have held to a philosophy of science somewhat like this. But, the key word is "somewhat." Quine, if I understand him correctly, did not claim that e.g. philosophy and mathematics are really subdisciplines of science, but that they are separate disciplines that are continuous with science (and that, as it were, science should wear the pants in their relationship).

<sup>5</sup> He will certainly have to do this if he is a New Atheist.

<sup>6</sup> See Feser 2010 for a good (and sharply worded) account and critique of the mechanistic worldview and its role in philosophical scientism and naturalism.

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