

- [Patrick Neal Russell Julius](#) Of course, the idea that theism can magically solve these problems with an invisible man in the sky is so profoundly silly that it's amazing we take it seriously.

21 hours ago · Like



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[Phil Croft](#) What's compatibilism?

21 hours ago · Like



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[Patrick Neal Russell Julius](#) Compatibilism is the proposition (I would say "obvious fact") that rational volition and moral responsibility are not threatened by determinism.

In fact I rather like Eliez Yudkowsky's formulation, "requiredism", which recognizes that in fact *non-determinism* is a far more obvious threat to moral responsibility.

20 hours ago · Like



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[Ike Sharpless](#)

I haven't yet read Harris' new book (I've just seen various talks of his, and have read a number of reviews), but I'd caution against latching too strongly onto the idea that science alone can guide us ethically. Maybe it's because so many of the issues I study deal centrally with domains where various branches of science disagree with each other, let alone with religion or secular ethics, and maybe it's because I study policy (i.e., science informs policy, but it alone can't really create policy). You've clearly thought a lot about this, but I would caution against setting up a faulty scientism just because other isms are faultier. (You might also be interested in a blog post I recently wrote on a semi-related topic: <http://ikesharpless.com/?p=145>)

20 hours ago · Like



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[Patrick Neal Russell Julius](#) I'm watching more of the debate, and realizing it's not a debate. Craig gives a speech about Divine Command Theory, Harris gives a speech about the evils of traditional theism; repeat.

20 hours ago · Like



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[Patrick Neal Russell Julius](#)

@Ike: I will read your post tomorrow. I have to get to bed fairly soon.

Where is it that you see disagreement between branches of science? I see disagreement between "schools of thought" in particular sciences, but these are invariably at the cutting edge of inquiry. There is no serious doubt about Darwinian evolution or quantum mechanics.

Actually I think science COULD create policy, if we let it.

For instance: What is the best source of electrical energy? The science is clear: SOLAR, hands down. It produces more energy, more efficiently, more sustainably, than any other feasible source by far. The

argument would be over; put that black stuff back in the ground, for there are beams of energy pouring at us right this minute.

Another: Should abortion be allowed? Well, what kind of fetuses are conscious? How do bans on abortion affect social and economic circumstances? Wouldn't improved access to contraception have a greater effect on abortion rates than a simple ban?

All of these are empirical questions.

20 hours ago · Like



[Ike Sharpless](#)

Yes, but they're not *just* empirical questions. Whether you want them to be or not, they're deeply political, and in many cases appeals to 'sound science' are merely a mask for a specific policy preference. The science of Darwin and Gould (who has an interesting essay on Bakunin, mutualist anarchism, and evolution, by the way) isn't normative, and it's not, in my view, useful to say that there's a scientifically best answer to social problems. There are too many actors with too many diverse viewpoints, and saying that you can just empirically look at it and figure out what's best is questionable at best and authoritarian at worst.

20 hours ago · Like



[Ike Sharpless](#) Didn't mean to press return...was going to keep going, but the short of it is that science can only provide limited normative guidance. Looking to Darwinian evolution for clues on social policy hasn't exactly turned out to propitiously...

20 hours ago · Like



[Ike Sharpless](#) And as to science disagreeing with science - I meant simply that when looking at something like farm animal welfare, a veterinary pathologist will give you a different answer from a cognitive ethologist (etc, etc.), and the policy piece inevitably requires the balancing of various competing interests, with multiple potentially valid answers or solutions.

20 hours ago · Like



[Patrick Neal Russell Julius](#) One sentence of Harris's I really do like: "Is suffering bad? We have hit philosophical bedrock with the shovel of a stupid question."

20 hours ago · Like



[Patrick Neal Russell Julius](#)

@Ike: I share your concerns about the NAIVE application of science to morality, which Social Darwinism surely entails.

I also share your concerns about the ABUSE of scientific language in support of what are ultimately personal, political, or religious ideas.

That said, this isn't really an argument against my (and Harris's) position. We aren't saying that everyone who applies science to morality will do so correctly; we aren't even saying that necessarily anyone has. Rather, we are saying that it is POSSIBLE to do so, and indeed morally good.

20 hours ago · Like



[Patrick Neal Russell Julius](#) As for balancing interests, any procedure you use to balance interests is either objectively right or it is not. If it is, then it's no threat to my view. If it isn't, then why use it?

Multiple solutions are no threat to objectivity. The differential equation $dy/dx = k y$ has an uncountably infinite number of solutions, but that raises no doubts about the objectivity of mathematical truth.

20 hours ago · Like



[Patrick Neal Russell Julius](#) And by the way, I don't think veterinary pathologists and cognitive ethologists disagree as much as you suppose. Both would agree that animals have moral interests and deserve moral consideration; both would agree that animals have emotional experiences and ought not to be made to suffer needlessly.

These agreements alone would, if universally adopted, end the factory farming industry forever.

20 hours ago · Like · [1 person](#)



[Ike Sharpless](#) Sure, I agree with that, but only in the sense that science can and must provide guidance. But that's not the impression I've really gotten from Harris, which seems to say that science should be behind the helm.

20 hours ago · Like



[Ike Sharpless](#)

Dangit, I'm not able to write in paragraphs for some reason without posting. Oh well - I'm not sure I'm convinced by your response on balancing interests, although I see what you're saying. I also know a number of veterinarians who work in large animal agriculture, and who definitely call themselves scientists, so the evidence to them might look different than the evidence to you. I'm not fundamentally disagreeing that policy needs sound scientific underpinnings - my main problem with what I perceive Harris to be saying is that science can guide rather than just inform policy.

20 hours ago · Like



[Ike Sharpless](#)

It also strikes me as problematic that you dismiss some uses of science as naive and abusive - isn't this a bit tautological...how do we tell use from abuse, without a normative standard that reaches beyond the descriptive science? Especially in light of the inevitable resurgence of eugenics with the coming biotech and other revolutions (see iect.org for an organization that essentially embraces this view from a scientific perspective...not that they're necessarily wrong), I have a problem with saying that we're 'looking to science', when it seems to me that we're really using "science" as an over-broad umbrella for what is really a mishmash of ethics, policy, and science.

19 hours ago · Like



• [Ike Sharpless](#)

One last comment, then I'll stop bothering poor Phil with email updates (sorry, this science/ethics topic has been on my mind a lot recently). I think the core of my disagreement is with this: "As for balancing interests, any procedure you use to balance interests is either objectively right or it is not." For me, it's politics that shapes which interests and values have priority over which others, and how that prioritization is justified and implemented. So yes, any procedure used to balance interests may be internally coherent (e.g., Nazi science) but normatively incorrect by the standards of our currently dominant political (democracy) and maybe even economic (capitalism) systems. People have competing interests and values, both with themselves and with other people/nonhuman animals, so I'm not even sure what "objectively right" is supposed to mean, in context...keep in mind that this is all tempered by the view I share with Isaiah Berlin that we live in a "tragically configured moral universe," which is to say that not everyone can win all of the time. Sorry to write so much, and to write in unwieldy block paragraphs.

19 hours ago · Like



• [Patrick Neal Russell Julius](#) What does "objectively right" mean? I think you know already, but let's try this: "Morally better, regardless of what anyone thinks about it."

4 hours ago · Like



• [Patrick Neal Russell Julius](#) When you condemn the Nazis, you either are speaking nonsense, or else you are admitting that you, too, believe in an objective sense of moral truth, on which it is possible for a person or a community to be wrong about morality.

4 hours ago · Like



• [Patrick Neal Russell Julius](#)

As for science deciding moral claims, the point is precisely that it isn't just "descriptive" science---if there even is such a thing. Harris and I are trying to point out precisely the fact that science *is normative;* that values like rationality, fairness, openness to evidence, respect for autonomy, which are the basis of science in theory and practice, can form a solid foundation for morality.

Eugenics was not just bad politics; it was also bad science.

4 hours ago · Like



• [Ike Sharpless](#)

Thanks for indulging this back-and-forth, Patrick; It's helping me get a clearer idea of Harris'/your view on the issue (I'll buy his new book eventually, but will wait for the price to come down substantially...). I get the impression that we're not going to settle this with unedited facebook posts, but here goes.

On the merits: I'm a moral (and social) constructivist—which is rooted in my positive existentialism—

which may or may not be compatible with mild forms of moral realism, and I'm not sure where you're getting the permissive bit.

I still take issue with the 'objectively right' bit, but it makes more sense in context of your moral realism. I still don't see how what you define as normative scientific values can answer the question of whether deontology or utilitarianism is “morally better” (let alone virtue ethics, contractarianism, or the feminist ethic of care). I tend towards utilitarianism, but make concessions towards the other schools on an as-needed basis (this is where Rorty's liberal ironism comes in).

I'll wait until I read Harris' book to make this claim more robustly, but I see a bit of a bait-and-switch in what you're describing as scientific values (“rationality, fairness, openness to evidence, respect for autonomy”). This looks to me more like the Enlightenment project more generally, which is bound up in Western political philosophy, and which is, indeed, essentially a rephrasing of Francis Fukuyama's End of History thesis.

On the Nazi bit: why does it have to be a stark either/or between “nonsense” and “an objective sense of moral truth”? This is also where my concessions to the feminist ethic of care would come in (and on the potential overreliance on rationality as against emotion and what Rorty and Rifkin would call the priming of an empathic civilization through a sentimental education in literature and beyond), and where I would be wary of casting over-stark Manichaeic dichotomies. Then again, I'm definitely a lumper rather than a splitter, so I'm okay with gray areas. Indeed, I tend to be most afraid of people who think only in black and white. That said, I do tend to share a core revulsion with actions like genocide, which is part of my concession to rights-based deontology. I also tend to think that people can usually come to more of an agreement on moral wrongs (whether they're constructed or 'out there' doesn't really matter to me, and this is drawing on Rorty's pragmatism and may explain my indifference to the content of moral realism), while the question of what constitutes moral rights is often wide open to deliberation.

Would it be “bad science” to abort early-term acephalous fetuses? To use cognitive enhancement therapy to improve the eventual IQ of a fetus? What is this, if not eugenics by another name? And how can scientific values answer these bioethical dilemmas? The only one I can see as being relevant is 'fairness', and I don't really get why this value should be exclusive to science—Rawls would probably disagree, at the very least.