

The Moral Landscape
How Science Can Determine Human Values by Sam Harris
[Free Press] 2010

Review

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2011

Harris contends that as competing approaches neither religion nor secular humanism provide a useful answer to determine what constitutes moral behavior among humans. He further contends that science can provide the solution by objectively/rationally determining what constitutes human well-being and what behaviors and cultural institutions lead to it or undermine it. Thus a science of morality can expose the false basis for the morality claims of different religions while forcing secular relativists off their fence of non-committal relativism where they are paralyzed and only able to argue for tolerance among all moral systems.

In making this claim, Harris elevates the Culture of Science to the status of a Superculture – the arbitrator across all cultures of what constitutes “correct” morality. Although Harris avoids the issue, he is proposing that Science can and should replace God as the determiner of what constitutes moral behavior and ethical values. Harris’ argument is akin to the much broader argument of David Bidney in his much earlier work, Theoretical Anthropology [1963, 1970, 1995], which also seeks to justify evaluating the comparative merits of different cultures in terms of a set of universal humanistic principles.

As in Harris’ earlier works, The End of Faith, and Letter to a Christian Nation, he exposes the fallacy in the argument for what constitutes “correct” morality based on religious dogma, which is hailed as inspired by God. Since different religions all equally assert that they are divinely inspired [some even by the same God], and yet since these same religions frequently define moral behavior in nearly contrary terms [especially in areas like the treatment of women and the definition of appropriate punishment for wrongdoing], they cannot all be correct. So, unless Science can objectively determine that one among these “equal” religions has exclusive or more substantial access to the divine source, the religious claim of divine inspiration as the basis for defining morality cannot be relied upon – in general. And, of course, there can be no objective proof of the divine as a source of anything since the divine by definition exceeds human awareness and is excluded from the demands of Science regarding evidence. Therefore, no religion can be proposed as the legitimate source of what

constitutes “true” morality so long as Science is assigned the role of arbitrator – Harris’ position.

As in his earlier works, Harris runs the gamut exposing all of the unsatisfactory ways in which humans have struggled to answer and address the challenge posed by comparative morality. The clear conclusion is that morality is culturally determined, and that humans are the source of both their different cultures and the religions and moral systems that reside within them. Since culture is a human creation, Harris asserts that Science can objectively evaluate the truth-value of morality in these different cultural systems by determining the degree to which they promote well-being – individually, socially, and across cultures/societies/nations. Of course, this claim ultimately requires that Science take on two much more grand tasks: 1) determining what objectively constitutes well-being on a cross cultural basis – somehow escaping the fact that culture itself [and Science is a culture!] plays a key role in assigning what is good and bad, and 2) evaluating the well-being “score” of the different cultural systems as wholes since from an objective standpoint morality only exists in the context of a surrounding cultural framework. Harris wants to claim that what constitutes well-being can be scientifically determined and that it can be confirmed at the physiological/ neurobiological level. But he would do well to consult with cultural anthropologists who are well aware of both the extent of cultural diversity that accords with claimed human happiness and who in the past made the horrendous mistake of permitting themselves the privilege of judging cultures comparatively and so justified efforts in the nineteenth century to first denigrate and then “convert” the savage and the barbarian in the name of enlightened Science.

For all of his disclaimers, Harris cannot escape the full consequences of his argument, and they take him inevitably to a Science driven program of worldwide, enforced cultural change. Harris wants to claim there can be many alternative “peaks” [cultural settings] where equal versions of human well-being can exist [requiring an idealized condition of cultural tolerance that Harris denies being possible otherwise]. But while equal peaks may occur with respect to individual variables or single social institutions, a full comparative evaluation of the “well-being” interrelationship of all aspects of different cultures must reveal that there is some one system that exceeds the others in its “total” score – and that it therefore is “preferable.” And when we discover what this ideal culture of well-being is, we will be obliged in light of our enlightened awareness to impose it on all humans “for their own good” abiding by the authority of Science and Rationality. Harris wants to deny that his argument leads to this eventuality, but the result cannot be escaped! It just takes knowing that one’s position is right, and Science can be one route to such audacity.

When Harris' argument is followed to its logical conclusion, it ends by identifying a Scientifically derived, singular, Ideal culture with human individual and social well-being as the key determining variable. Does anyone doubt that with western science leading the "objective" effort to discover the ideal cultural conditions generating human well-being that it could possibly find its key institutions of political democracy, and regulated capitalism, and the rule of law, and an independent judiciary, and science as the progenitor of future progress, and, especially for Harris, the separation of church and state as not being most desirable in generating human well-being? Anthropologists have been here before, and they learned the hard way how important it is to avoid cultural hubris in the name of Science! As a neuroscientist, Harris seems to feel comfortable venturing into the broadest zone of social science, but he has not learned this critically important lesson!! This is NOT where most humans want, or should want, to go, whatever the need may be for a science of human well-being.

Harris is always interesting and provocative, and The Moral Landscape is no exception. It contains many accurate observations, and it may even be the case that Science [some consortium of the Social and Biological Sciences] can and should accept the challenge of evaluating morality comparatively in terms of both cultural and universal notions of well-being. But, as in his earlier works, the contentious duality of secular humanism versus religion, which Harris relies upon to motivate the need for Science to take the lead in determining morality, is not necessary. There is another way to get to the end that Harris seeks without going to the extreme of making intellectual and objective Science THE ultimate Answer.

If Religion recognizes that Spirituality – centered on the unification experience – is at the core of all individual religions, and if secular humanism recognizes and accepts as essential and productive the subjective dimension of reality that the intuitive human faculty accesses, then the antagonistic duality upon which Harris' argument rests dissolves. In this context, secular ethics become religious morality without the need for either the dogma of religions or the relativistic denial combined with the invocation of totally unrealistic tolerance of secular humanists. I have explored the need and basis for shifts of this kind by both of these points of view in my work, Dynamic Humanism, and in my prior review of Harris' The End of Faith, both available on my website: www.dynamic-humanism.com