

The Morality of Sam Harris: Response to The Moral Landscape 2013

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As a social scientist, I am in agreement with Harris that it is certainly desirable for scientists to involve themselves in the careful study of social values and the issue of comparative morality. I agree that scientists can make progress on this important matter and that scientists must give up their reticence to engage, their irrational excuses for avoidance, and their apologies for the negative effects of religious dogma.

My primary reservation with Harris' work, The Moral Landscape [New York, 2010], is that Harris limits the scientific pursuit of morality to the study of the objective/rational/ material domain and excludes what can be the scientific study of the subjective/intuitive/spiritual sphere of reality. The rational and the intuitive reveal reality in different dimensions and in very differently ways. The rational accommodates the material, physicalistic, and biological perspective of self-interest while the intuitive faculty is in tune with the domain of connectedness where benefit is a matter of an ever more inclusive sense of identity. These two faculties of mind are always present and "competing" with one another for influence in the assessment of events. In his physicalistic, reductionistic orientation, Harris does not see the importance of this essential underlying dynamic in his effort to claim a stage for a scientific study of human values and their relationship to belief, morality, and well-being [happiness].

Beyond this problem, Harris does not seem to appreciate the complexity of the task of actually developing a model to account for and evaluate the comparative merits of human values across the huge number of interacting variables across an equally huge range of social levels, all of this occurring within multiple alternative perspectives at every juncture. While it may be "easy" to characterize the effects of singular actions within a singular perspective at a single level of social consideration at a single point in time and "determine" it to be more or less positive or negative to an individual's wellbeing, it is quite another matter to make these determinations across the broader social complex. It is even a challenge to objectively make a determination on the value-based effects of specific actions within many dyadic [two person] relationships.

Unfortunately it is the case that the analytical units in psychology [self, personality, thoughts, images, memories, emotions, self-esteem, self interest, mind, consciousness, schizophrenia, depression, etc.] do not collect to nest in the sociological units of analysis [dyad, family, community, etc] in the same way

that material units [protons, atoms, molecules, planets, solar systems, galaxies, etc.] collect and interrelate at all levels in micro and macro physical analysis. So, what we may be able to determine about individual values does not add up in any systematic way to reveal what values can be ascribed at any of the increasingly more inclusive social levels. Harris skirts this essential and extremely important challenge for the analysis of social values and their relationship to well-being and morality.

Harris bases his excursion into human values on a scientific research paradigm that derives mostly from a consideration of individual physiology, psychology, and neurology. The complexity that arises as our view shifts to larger and larger social units puts impossible stress on Harris' simple "personal" level "good" and "bad," "right" or "wrong" model for making moral assessments. Arriving at a scientific "judgment" on the comparative validity of social values in different groups from evidence based on individual neurology and psychology and the perspective of the individual fails to recognize the much more complicated condition that pertains when individuals operate in groups. With every increase in the level of social complexity from the dyad to the family to the tribe to the international community, a new perspective on what is good or bad arises as individuals and groups cooperate or compete and as they may cooperate on some issues and compete on others. Harris' glib assessment based on his simplistic individual model of analysis does not respect the actual complexity of evaluating comparative social values, and especially as these evaluations accumulate across different levels of sociological analysis. Harris cannot escape this problem of practical complexity by just claiming the distinction between "answers in practice" and "answers in principle." In this case, the possible is simply too distant from the attainable.

Humans are predators in a competitive world where survival is the ultimate species necessity. Social cooperation occurs where it benefits the survival ability of some group at some level. But cooperation within one group at one level in seeking its own benefit often results in another group losing in the larger competitive environment. If gain is good and loss is bad, where do we fix our perspective for making a moral judgment on activities that bring these results? Whose wellbeing are we talking about, and how do we account for the variation in value positions that exist within the unit of social analysis upon which we are focused?

Given his individual and physiological based model, Harris just does not adequately appreciate the complexity of what is involved in his proposal for science to systematically evaluate human morality cross culturally. What Harris reaches for rather naively is admirable as a goal in science, but identifying a

high order goal for science is valuable only to the extent that there is some real way identified to pursue it. Otherwise, the goal is one left properly to philosophy to address, and much of value can be achieved at this level of consideration in the interim. Harris can and does stimulate this worthy philosophical exploration, which itself can be grounded in evidence from human cross cultural history at different levels of social complexity [family, clan, tribe, chiefdom, kingship, empire as human groups have moved from nomadic hunter-gathers to settled city states to nation states to international federations to united nations].

At the sociological level, we may be able to identify value principles [fairness, equality, creativity, reward, etc.] that inform all human individual and social behavior, and we may be able to argue that these principles need to be balanced as they inform human behavior at all individual and sociological levels so that all needs at all levels – including the needs of the surrounding non-human ecology – are respected in a manner that is sustainable in the broadest sense. But to propose that we are even close to being able to assess values comparatively throughout the fabric of all human relations – much less throughout the ecology of the planet – and come to a scientific judgment about their relative positive and negative “ranking” is either scientific naiveté or hubris.

1) Understanding the dynamic role human reason and intuition play in perceiving reality at the objective and subjective levels and the effect this dynamic plays in determining how humans evaluate events, 2) Appreciating the perspective difference that arises from these two mental capabilities – self-interest and communal benefit – and the role this dynamic plays in how events are alternatively evaluated, and 3) Accepting the huge task of tracking this dynamic complex across the entire span of social relations at all scales, defines the challenge posed for the scientific study of human values and morality. Until the time comes when such a vast task can actually be pursued scientifically, the issue is best left to an evidence based assessment within social philosophy – properly conducted within social science. If neurological evidence from the study of the human brain can contribute to this effort, well and good. But, at least at present, such study is not sufficient to either define the task or provide the way to move from careful, evidence based social philosophy to systematic science.

As always the pulsing nature of Harris’ discussion is stimulating. And certainly Harris’ call is admirable for scientists to seriously consider the issue of the comparative nature of human values and morality. Unfortunately, there is close to a vacuum in Harris’ work for how to actually go about addressing this challenge – scientifically.