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[/90/The\\_Moral\\_Landscape\\_How\\_Science\\_Can\\_Determine\\_Human\\_Values\\_by\\_Sam\\_Harris](#)

## *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* by Sam Harris

**Bill Meacham** finds Sam Harris's book intriguing but frustrating.

In this book, Sam Harris, a noted New Atheist, asks us to consider two lives:

Life A: Imagine that you are an illiterate and homeless African woman whose husband has disappeared. You have just seen your seven-year-old daughter raped and murdered at the hands of drug-crazed soldiers, and now you're fearing for your life. Unfortunately, this is not an unusual predicament for you. From the moment you were born, your life has been marred by cruelty and violence.

Life B: Imagine that you are a respected professional in a wealthy country, married to a loving, intelligent and charismatic mate. Your employment is intellectually stimulating and pays you very well. For decades your wealth and social connections have allowed you immense personal satisfaction from meaningful work which makes a real difference in the world. You and your closest family will live long, prosperous lives, virtually untouched by crime, sudden bereavements, and other major misfortunes.

Which is the better life? We would all no doubt say Life B. Harris takes this as evidence that there is an objective way to determine what is morally good and bad. In fact, as the subtitle of the book indicates, he claims that scientific inquiry can tell us what we should and should not value.

Harris feels he can say this because he thinks that the proper meaning of 'value' with respect to human life – that is to say, the proper meaning of *morality* – is that which leads to human flourishing, which means, living a satisfying life. Once he has made that move, the rest of his argument is straightforward and cogent: careful observation of what in fact fulfils people is not a matter of philosophical or religious debate, it is a matter of scientific inquiry. We can tell, objectively, what leads to happiness and what leads to misery. Facilitating good lives is what morality is about, says Harris, and that's why science can tell us what we should value and what we should not. As Harris says:

“human well-being entirely depends on events in the world and on states of the human brain. Consequently, there must be scientific truths to be known about it.” (p.2) “Once we see that a concern for well-being (defined as deeply and as inclusively as possible) is the only intelligible basis for morality and values, we will see that there *must* be a science of morality... As we come to understand how human beings can best collaborate and thrive in this world, science can help us find a path leading away from the lowest depths of misery and toward the heights of happiness for the greatest number of people.” (p.28)

There may be problems about the details, but the overall goal of peaks of happiness is quite achievable, says

Harris.

Harris's metaphor of a moral landscape is instructive. By 'moral landscape', he means the conceptual space of all possible experience. The peaks represent the heights of well-being, and the valleys the worst suffering. Different cultures and ethical practices are different ways of moving across this landscape – they can lead either up or down, and their effects are empirically knowable. Harris notes that there is no single best way for people to live: there are many peaks in the moral landscape, not just one. Morality is here like food. There is no one best food to eat, but there is still an objective difference between poison and tasty, nutritious cuisine. Similarly, there is no one best way to live; but there is an objective, specifiable difference between circumstances, actions and policies that lead to lives like Life A, and those that lead to lives such as Life B. If we want a life like B, and if we want that life for others too, then we should pay attention to what scientific inquiry tells us about how to get there, and take action accordingly.

It is a striking and plausible vision. But it depends, as I said, on the initial move, which defines 'moral' as that which concerns well-being (and not just human well-being, but that of all conscious creatures: "maximizing the well-being of conscious creatures... [is] the only thing we can reasonably value" (p.11)). To say that morality is exclusively concerned with well-being is a strong claim, and one which Harris does not quite pull off.

## The Well-Being of the Argument

Harris certainly recognizes that it is an issue. His argument goes like this:

- 1) Talk about value makes sense only for conscious creatures.
- 2) Well-being is all that we can intelligibly value.
- 3) Hence the only sense the concept of 'value' has, is the well-being of conscious creatures, and that is what morality should be concerned with.

He starts by claiming that consciousness is the only intelligible domain of value. But he does not so much argue for this proposition as deny its contrary: "I invite you to try to think of a source of value that has absolutely nothing to do with the (actual or potential) experience of conscious beings." (p.12) Whatever such a source would be, it would by definition have no effect on the experience of any creature, and hence would be the least interesting thing in the universe.

This first premise is problematic, but the problems are not fatal for his argument. Are plants conscious creatures? No? But adequate sunlight, water and nutrients are good for plants, and hence could be considered sources of value for the plants. How about amoebas? Adequate nutrients and water of a certain salinity are good for amoebas, that is to say, of value for amoebas. If plants or amoebas are not conscious, yet can still be subject to things of value to them, then Harris's first argument fails. (We could be generous here and say that 'conscious' means something like 'able to take into account one's surroundings'. This would encompass plant life. But Harris does not say this.)

Harris then asserts, "the concept of 'well-being' captures all that we can intelligibly value. And 'morality' ... *really* relates to the intentions and behaviors that affect the well-being of conscious creatures." (pp.12-13). Again, he does not so much argue for this proposition as deny and disparage its contraries. For example, to someone who says that it is important to follow God's law for its own sake, Harris says they are really acting out of concern for the consequences to themselves, either in this life or another. To someone who says it is

important to act according to duty, fairness, justice, or some other moral principle, Harris says that this can be so only because of the consequences of doing so. But he gives little evidence for these assertions, and in fact admits that he is *defining his terms* to mean this: “At bottom, this is purely a semantic point: I am claiming that whatever answer a person gives to the question ‘Why is religion important?’ can be framed in terms of a concern about someone’s well-being (whether misplaced or not).” (p.199) or “to say that we *ought* to treat children with kindness seems identical to saying that everyone will tend to be better off if we do.” (p.38)

## Off the Map

There is a serious meta-ethical issue here which Harris does not adequately address. Throughout the history of philosophy there have been two competing domains of discourse regarding ethics, which have been called the Right and the Good. (See for example Abraham Edel, ‘Right and Good’, *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, at [etext.lib.virginia.edu](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu), archived at [www.bmeacham.com/whatswhat](http://www.bmeacham.com/whatswhat).) The Right pertains to *duty* and *obligation* – the obligation to obey moral rules which are taken to be applicable universally and independent of one’s own preferences. The Good pertains to benefits and harms – that is, to the *consequences* of actions, which may be good or bad for the moral agent or others. Harris is solidly in the Goodness camp, and he does an admirable job of spelling out the implications of that position, particularly the value of a careful, disciplined, objective examination of reality, in short, of science, for determining what is good and bad, beneficial and detrimental, for humans and other conscious creatures. But he only *asserts* that Goodness trumps Rightness – that it makes more sense or is more cogent to speak of morality in terms of benefits and harms than to speak of it in terms of duty and obligation – he does not demonstrate his thesis.

To his credit, Harris does address the use of the terms ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. By right he means ‘factually correct or true’, and by wrong he means the opposite: “just as it is possible for individuals and groups to be wrong about how best to maintain their physical health, it is possible for them to be wrong about how to maximize their personal and social well-being.” (p.62) Thus, claims about what is good for humans and other conscious creatures can be right or wrong in the sense of being true or false.

So far, so good; but then Harris says that there are “right and wrong ways to move from our current position on the moral landscape toward one peak or the other...” (p.74) Now the term ‘right’ usually connotes one-and-only: there is one right answer to the question ‘What is 37 times 42?’, and many wrong ones. To say that there are right ways (plural) to move could connote several morally-acceptable methods to get to a happiness peak, but this does not fit the usual concept of rightness. No doubt what Harris really means is that there are more and less workable methods for moving up the landscape to a peak of flourishing.

A more problematic passage is: “physicians have a moral obligation to handle medical statistics in ways that minimize unconscious bias” (p.143). How does he get from the observable fact that minimizing bias has good effects, to saying the we have a *moral obligation* to do so? Unless we radically redefine what we mean by ‘obligation’, we are *not* morally obliged to minimize harm on Harris’s view. Instead, we are merely better advised to do so. Harris wants to redefine the concept of ‘moral obligation’ in terms of probable benefits and harms, but he does not make the argument for doing so clearly enough.

It is certainly easy to confuse the notions of Right and Good because both are used to evaluate, recommend, command or prohibit policies or courses of action. Despite his best efforts, Harris here falls into that confusion and strays from the paradigm in which his argument makes the most sense – the Goodness paradigm.

Even within the Goodness paradigm, he does not successfully make the move he wants to make – to the value

of a concern, not just for one's own self, or for all humans, but for conscious beings generally.

It is clear that a thoughtful and intelligent concern for one's own well-being would lead one to take actions intended to increase that well-being, and careful observation of what works and what doesn't would tend to increase one's skill in doing so. One of the things we observe is that we do not live in isolation: "Our own happiness requires that we extend the circle of our self-interest to others – to family, friends, and even to perfect strangers whose pleasures and pains matter to us" (p.57). But what about perfect strangers whose pleasures and pains do not matter to us? And what about dolphins, whales, chimps, elephants, dogs and cats, ants, termites and microbes? (Again, where do we draw the line about which ones are conscious?) It is not at all clear why, starting from a 'moral' desire to enhance one's own well-being, we should move to a concern for the well-being of conscious creatures generally. A crucial premise is missing.

The missing premise might be something like an assertion of connectedness among all beings, such that an injury to one is in some sense an injury to all. But Harris does not assert such a premise. Instead he universalizes the concern for one's own well-being, presumably because of the Kantian belief that moral premises should be consistent and generalizable. But he does not make that move explicit either.

## **The Value of *The Moral Landscape***

At least half this book is worthwhile reading indeed. A quarter, the rant on religion, which takes up a whole chapter, is mere recapitulation of points made elsewhere by Harris and others. Another quarter, the chapter on belief and brain structure, is intriguing and germane, but lacking in some important details. One hopes for a whole book on the subject.

I do not want to be overly harsh. Harris is on to something very important here: that careful observation of what actually works has a great deal to tell us about what is good and valuable. Thus despite not demonstrating the book's central premise, Harris provides a thought-provoking and highly readable account of a topic of great relevance: how we can survive and thrive in a world of increasing confusion and complexity.

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