

A Review of Sam Harris' "The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values"

by Ian Kluge

In *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, Sam Harris endeavors to demonstrate that science is sufficient to build a system of ethics and values both for individuals and societies. His ultimate goal is actually two-fold. He wants to establish science as the only rational and self-sufficient basis of ethics and he wants to eliminate religion and 'supernaturalism' from all ethical discourse. In doing so, he takes six radical steps. First, he rejects the distinction between facts and values.[1] Next, he asserts that "questions about values . . . are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures"[2] and that "Values . . . translate into facts which can be scientifically understood." [3] Third, he professes "moral realism,"[4] the position that there are definitive right and wrong answers to ethical questions, at least in principle. Fourth, he advocates consequentialism as the only viable moral theory[5] and fifth, on the basis of neuroscience, he rejects free will[6] as commonly understood both in the past and present. Finally, he posits an irreconcilable "clash between faith and reason." [7] Of course, he also promotes his one-sided views about the disastrous personal and social impact of religion but this is secondary to his main goal of replacing religion with science as the foundation of ethical thought and action.

Harris' argument is highly problematic, often unclear and flawed in conception and explanation. Much of the problem lies in the oversimplification of the subject matter and the issues involved and the failure to think them through carefully. For example, the relationship of facts to values is not as straightforward as he presents it; nor is consequentialism, his preferred ethical system, nor his theory of values. Furthermore, his attempt to use science and especially neuro-science as a way of deciding what is or is not ethical is confused. As we shall observe, his oversimplified and confused thinking lead Harris into severe difficulties that cause his argument to collapse.

Let us begin by examining Harris' claim that "science can determine human values"? Superficially, the answer seems clear enough: if "values . . . translate into facts which can be scientifically understood"[8] then we only need to know the scientific facts of a case in order to know what we should do. In this strong interpretation of Harris' position, science alone is sufficient to give us moral directions. This is untenable. There are countless moral quandaries no amount of scientific information can solve, not even in principle. Here are a few examples. Is it

ethical to torture a terrorist who has vital information that could save thousands? Should I cheat on my spouse? Was it moral to bomb German civilians (killing 650,000 to 1 million) during WW II? Is plea-bargaining just? Is it immoral to perform vivisection on unanesthetized humans or animals? We can all think of countless examples in which scientific facts are incapable of telling us what we should do, i.e. what is moral. Science is helpless here because these are not scientific questions and, therefore, have no scientific answers, i.e. answers based on the criteria of the scientific method: quantification, physicality, objectivity, repeatability and falsifiability. Even the neuro-science and brain scans on which Harris relies so heavily are useless in these cases. How could a brain-scan show our deep sense of well-being in vivisectioning unanesthetized cats is morally good or bad? As noted above, the kind of knowledge and knowing that characterizes science is different from the kind of knowledge and knowing that is required for ethical decision making.

Oddly enough, Harris shows his own confusion when he admits, “Science cannot tell us why, scientifically, we should value health.”[9] If science cannot tell us why we should value something as scientifically measurable as health, it is clear that science cannot tell us why we should value anything as a good. In short, science cannot give us moral guidance. The reason why is clear: the imperative mode – what we should do, what we must do to be moral – is an intrinsic part of ethics and science does not function in the imperative mode except in a secondary sense. Once we have decided that a certain goal is ethically good, science can sometimes prescribe better or worse ways to attain it. However, science cannot tell us whether our initial choice itself is ethically good, i.e. is imperative for us. Unfortunately for Harris and the new atheists, that initial choice is exactly the crux of the debate about ethics and science. If science cannot give us moral guidance about our initial choices, the main argument of *The Moral Landscape* fails.

An example will clarify the point. If I decide to murder my best friend, science cannot demonstrate that my initial choice of murder is morally evil. What experiment could even begin to show that murdering a friend is wrong i.e. something I am obligated not to do? What can science tell me about the intrinsic value of honesty, loyalty, respect for life and appreciation of person? However, science can tell me that my choice of chemical X is poor and that compound Y is better. To give a less extreme example: science cannot tell me if it is morally good to give to give a food bank. It can show me the advantages to the users, but it cannot show me I should care about those impoverished users, i.e. why it is imperative that I do so. Here, too, neuro-science and brain scans are utterly useless in making the initial moral decision.

Harris’ confused thinking also dogs his argument that facts and values “can no longer be kept apart.”[10] This causes two problems for him. The first is a basic self-contradiction. Historically, facts and values have not always been kept apart. The whole natural law tradition that dominated Western civilization and especially Christian philosophy until Hume in the 18th century was

based on the premise that natural facts could prescribe what behaviors were moral or immoral, i.e. natural or unnatural. For example, homosexuality was deemed unnatural and, therefore, immoral because, among other things, the divinely ordained natural requirements of reproduction and facts of anatomy directed us away from such behaviors. Given Harris' antipathy for religion, it is self-contradictory for him to advocate a view that has been a foundation-stone of religion thought for millennia. By his own standards, and notwithstanding his anti-religious rhetoric, religion has, in this area at least, done something positive that he wants to imitate.

The second problem traps Harris on the horns of a dilemma. It has been a staple of Western philosophy since Hume that facts cannot provide values. We can never go from an "is" to an "ought." Because something is the case does not necessarily mean it ought to be the case. For example, because children often bully other children from play does not mean they ought to. Facts by themselves are not imperatives.

But can they be? Certainly, and here Harris is correct as far as he goes. The problem is, he does not go far enough. Facts can provide imperatives if and only if they are placed into a context in which a framework of meaning is already pre-established, in which a prior standard of good already exists. And this is exactly what religion does. Natural law holds that the universe is created by God Whose work is intrinsically good, and that each thing has an essence which has its appropriate ways of acting. Natural law refers to the actions appropriate to each kind of essence. For example, it is a fact that scorpions poison other creatures and doing so is the appropriate expression of their essence, i.e. it is good in itself although bad in relationship to man.[11] With humankind the situation is more complex because humans have free will (pace Harris) and can choose to behave in ways that are not appropriate to their essence. It is a fact, for example, that humans eat and doing so is good. However, it is also a fact that humans overeat but this is not a moral good, because it violates our essence as a "rational soul." [12] Immoderate eating is a fact but it is not a moral good. In these examples, we observe how facts give rise to values – but only if the facts are placed in a meaningful religious context in which the standard of good is pre-established and if the good is guaranteed by God, Whose authority transforms a fact into an imperative, a should.

However, this will not work with the strictly empirical, scientific framework Harris advocates. Who is there to translate or sublimate any fact into an imperative, an obligation, a should? If we try to do this individually or by social consensus we will end with countless clashes of opinion and the moral relativism which Harris seeks to overcome with his "moral realism." [13] If we try to claim that somehow values are intrinsic to the empirical facts, we open the door to supernaturalism. Such a claim implies that the scientifically established facts have aspects that cannot be shown scientifically, e.g. by means of quantification, empirical observation, repeatability and falsifiability. In other words, the values somehow attached to the empirical facts exist beyond natural observation and verification. This is not far removed from Platonic

idealism, and theism, in which God also has non-empirical existence. This leaves Harris with a choice he seeks to avoid: he can embrace moral relativism or he can embrace supernaturalism – but on the basis of his own argument, he must accept one or the other.

Harris attempts to escape this dilemma by asserting that “questions about values . . . are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures”[14] and that “[v]alues . . . translate into facts which can be scientifically understood.”[15] In other words, if we scientifically study the behavioral and other consequences of a value or imperative that has been acted upon, we can observe and verify objectively which values are better or more conducive to well-being. In that case “good [is] that which supports well-being.”[16] As Harris admits “[d]efining goodness in this way does not resolve all questions of value”[17] but it does make clear for us that values are “the set of attitudes, choices, and behaviors that potentially affect our well-being.”[18] In this way he hopes to establish a standard of value that is immanent within the phenomenal world and does not need any supernatural agency or reference to decide what is right or wrong.

Even Harris knows this is highly problematical, admitting that this approach “leaves the question of what constitutes well-being genuinely open.”[19] But if that is the case, then Harris’ project in *The Moral Landscape* fails: if science cannot provide a definitive concept of well-being, how are we to judge the consequences of an action? How can science be used as a guide to identify the moral good we are obligated to seek in both ends and means? How are we to know if the value and associated action are good? Clearly a theory of ethics that fails on these points is not a very useful theory of ethics – if it is a theory of ethics at all.

Furthermore, if science cannot exclude other definitions of well-being, then at the very least Harris re-opens the door to the moral relativism he detests, i.e. conflicting definitions of well-being without any decisive criteria for arbitrating among them. Aristotle or Marx? Stoicism or Sartrean existentialism? There is no way of choosing. Even more appalling – from a new atheist viewpoint – is that religious concepts of well-being of man as a natural and spiritual being may return into the debate. After all, since there are no decisive criteria for arbitration and exclusion, on what rational basis can we bar them?

Similar to the lack of a decisive criterion for judgment among concepts of well-being, is the problem of not having a criterion to decide whether Harris’ scientific definition of “well-being” is itself ethical. The moral goodness of this standard is simply asserted as a prior criterion of judgment. But why should we accept this? What imperative is there to do so? Sanctioned by way of what authority? Harris leaves us no more than a bare assertion. By contrast, the Baha’i Writings, for example, base the approval of well-being on man’s existence as an image of God, and the appropriateness of honoring our Creator by honoring His highest creation. Although this

answer, too, may be subject to questions, unlike Harris' consequentialism, it solves the basic problems of all ethical system regarding what we should do, why we should do it and by whose sanction or authority it is done. Harris reliance on neuroscience and brain scans is insufficient because in ethics the key question is 'Are these things right, good, appropriate?' not 'Do they feel good?' He is in danger of conflating ethics with comfort. "If it feels good, do it" is a dangerous moral guide.

As Kant already understood in *The Critique of Practical Reason*, a purely immanent and phenomenal ethics cannot work. God, even if we cannot prove His ontological existence, must at least be postulated. We need at least a postulatory theism to provide a context or framework that makes value judgments possible by telling us what we should do and why and by lending these answers authority. At this point it is clear that scientific understanding alone cannot tell us whether the value or its factual results are moral or not. No amount of quantifiable, repeatable, experimentally verifiable and falsifiable data can tell what we should or should not do and why. Harris's attempt to construct a purely immanent and phenomenal ethics is unsuccessful.

One of Harris' major goals is to avoid moral relativism by a position known as "moral realism,"[20] according to which there are definitive and demonstrable rights and wrongs. By virtue of the universality of humankind's physical and psychological, these rights and wrongs are valid at all times and across all cultures.[21] For example, female circumcision is bad for well-being and therefore immoral no matter when or where it is practiced. So-called explanations and justifications based on culture are irrelevant since like individuals, cultures and societies can go away, i.e. depart from well-being and the good. On the other hand, education in all its aspects is morally good because it enhances well-being. Human brains feel and do better when actualizing their potentials. Here again, Harris finds himself in agreement with many if not all religions which also espouse "moral realism." The Baha'i Faith holds that certain basic ethical principles are universal in virtually all faiths and cultures and form the basis for a unified world religion. The problem with Harris' version of moral realism is not that it is wrong but that it cannot be based on a view restricting itself to the phenomenal world of scientific knowledge.

By now it is evident that Harris' suggestion of judging the morality of a value or act by the degree well-being it creates is an ethical theory known as consequentialism,[22] the belief that "the rightness of an act depends on how it impacts the well-being of conscious creatures." [23] Moral acts are those leading to the experience of well-being. Our experience of well-being in ethical issues is important because "[w]ithout potential consequences at the level of experience – happiness, suffering, joy, despair etc. – all talk of value is empty." [24]

We have already seen some of the problems inherent in consequentialism e.g. how are we to

decide that the joy we feel – maybe by boiling lobsters alive – is moral? In other words, by itself, our experience is no guide as to what we should or should not do. This does not mean our experience is irrelevant in ethical considerations, it only means that our experience is insufficient to decide the morality of a value or act. And that is one of the downfalls of Harris' consequentialism: it cannot do what he needs it to do – give us criteria for deciding which consequences determine right action. Large numbers of people – not just psychopaths – experience a measurable sense of well-being doing destructive and self-destructive things. Think of dog, cock, bull or hockey fighting the gladiator combats of Rome or the WWE in which destruction and/or injury are part of mass entertainment.

Because consequentialism is incomplete, it needs to be augmented by something else, by some external ethical standard. That, of course, requires us to reflect on the advantages of other ethical systems such as Kant's, and, to reconsider the role of religion. However, in trying to reject religion, Harris faces a new problem: by the standards of the experience of well-being, there is no sure way to exclude religion because given his commitment to science, he has no way of actually knowing how great a sense of well-being was produced by religion in the past or present. Since religion continues to thrive despite its supposedly irrational nature, we can logically conclude that many find it provides an experience of well-being – and is, therefore a good by Harris' own standards. Here again it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Harris has not really thought out his position very carefully.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of *The Moral Landscape* is Harris' rejection of free will.[25] On the basis of neuro-science he claims that “[we] seem to be an agent acting of [our own free will]”[26] but in truth we are not because we, our conscious selves, are not in control of our brain processes. Thus, we “cannot know what [we] will next think or do until a thought or intention arises.”[27] Our conscious self only becomes aware of what our inner brain processes have already decided without being able to influence them. Any ‘influence’ is just a brain-state of which we will become aware later. We cannot even say that – somehow – our conscious selves can affect the next decision because our conscious intentions are also brain-states capable of interacting with other brain-states. There are at least three reasons for our impotence in this regard: we have no way of knowing when these ‘decisions’ are being made by processes unknown to us; we can never know how decisive our conscious intervention is or even if our ‘interventions’ are being used at all. They may be off-set by other brain-states for all we know.

The philosophical name for Harris' position is ‘epiphenomenalism’ which maintains that conscious states are by-products of physical brain processes over which the conscious “I” has no influence. According to Harris, “each of us is like a phenomenological glockenspiel played by an unseen hand”[28] of which we are wholly ignorant and over which we, therefore, have no control. At most, “[t]he phrase ‘free will’ describes what it feels like to be identified with the content of each thought as it arises in consciousness.”[29] This view has one obvious

consequence: it comes perilously close to a computer model of human nature in which persons or personalities are reduced to a series of brain-states just as the out-put of a computer is no more than a series of CPU-states the results of which flash on the ‘screen of consciousness.’ (To argue that we can influence the CPU-states by manipulating icons on the screen is problematical because it assumes there is an operator external to the computer, just as in religion there is an operator, called the soul or mind, external to the body. Harris wants us to avoid the dualism of brain/computer and the soul/mind operator.) We cannot discuss all the difficulties inherent in the computer model of human nature but suffice it for now that it is self-defeating to argue for the value of human persons and personalities on the basis of such a reductionism. This undermines the new atheist goal of wanting a world with greater respect for persons.

Given Harris’ epiphenomenalism it is also difficult to see how a meaningful concept of free will – and the attendant concepts of choice and responsibility – could survive to become the basis of any kind of ethical theory, consequentialist or otherwise. How can our choices be morally good or bad if our conscious selves cannot really make them? Furthermore, in what sense can we be held responsible for decisions made before we even became aware of them, and consequently, what is the point of setting criteria for distinguishing the good we should do from the evil which we should not? If we cannot control the brain-states how can we consciously choose to follow or not follow these criteria? What is painfully clear is that Harris’ attempt to re-build ethics on a purely scientific foundation leads to the destruction of the very idea of ethics itself – a result that should warn us about the intrinsic shortcomings and dangers in the new atheists’ uncritical faith in science’s ability to solve all human problems. Undermining the very possibility of ethics and by extension, the concept of legal responsibility is certainly not in the interests of humankind.

At some level Harris seems aware of this problem because he tries to salvage the situation by telling us our “decisions, intentions, goals willpower etc. are causal states of the brain leading to specific behaviors.”[30] By this he means that as brain-states our intentions, for example, count for something – but this is in flat contradiction to his earlier statement that we “cannot know what [we] will next think or do until a thought or intention arises.”[31] Therefore, any intention we are conscious of forming has already been formed by unknown brain states.[32] In that case, what influence does the conscious “I” with which we identify ourselves really have over the formation of the intention? Moreover, if this “I” has no influence, how can it be our intention, and consequently, how can there be free will? Furthermore, if the intention is not really ours (I’m not guilty – my brain did it!) how can we speak of moral responsibility which must be consciously and personally ours if the concept of responsibility is to mean anything. That is why in law courts the ability to consciously form intent is such a crucial issue in establishing responsibility. Here again we see that if personal responsibility is undermined or eliminated, the very possibility of ethics and law slips away – and that is exactly what has happened to Harris in The Moral Landscape. The potential results of his position are disastrous for both individuals and societies.

Finally, Harris posits an irreconcilable “clash between faith and reason”[33] and argues that it is imperative for reason to triumph for the well-being of humankind. What he means, of course, is that he wishes for the triumph of his preferred concept of reason as defined by the scientific method and limited to empirical data immanent to the phenomenal world. However, as the foregoing review has shown, in ethics at least, this triumph would lead to severe difficulties, not the least of which is the destruction of ethics itself.

Let us take a few moments to evaluate his claim that reason and faith inherently clash. The historical record is not nearly as one-sided as new atheist accounts would have us believe. Against such examples as Bruno, Galileo and others, we have the work such great philosophers as Aquinas, Scotus, Avicenna, Averroes, Nagarjuna, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel and Whitehead to name only some of the most stellar examples. Their intellectual ideas and/or traditions are still flourishing today. Anyone who has actually read these authors – and not merely read about them – will realize how closely faith and painstaking logical reasoning work together in the analysis not just of and from scripture, but of all kinds of ideas in ontology and metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of man, philosophical psychology, logic and reasoning and social philosophy. It is improbable that anyone can actually read them without realizing there is no ground for thinking that faith necessarily and intrinsically excludes reason. When such exclusions happen, they are the result of humans erecting artificial barriers between them, a practice that leads to poor results whether it be faith excluding reason or reason excluding faith. Besides, as we have seen above, excluding religion or faith is more difficult than it would appear, even when we philosophize from a strictly immanent point of view.

This is not to say there are no branches of some religions that diminish reason and make unreflective belief in the experience of salvation their supreme goal, but these are parts of the entire phenomenon of religion and do not represent the whole. The Baha’i Faith for example, defines faith as being “first, conscious knowledge and second the practice of good deeds.”[34] In other words it is possible that religions can be in-formed by a reflective rather than a pre-reflective concept of faith. In the Western Christian tradition that is exactly what such thinkers as Aquinas, Scotus and Leibniz do, i.e. they practice reflective faith. Baha’is are told to do not less in the doctrine of the independent investigation of truth. It appears, therefore, that Harris’ insistence on the antipathy between faith and reason is based on a very selective reading of humankind’s religious history.

What, then, are we to conclude about The Moral Landscape? In my view, it is important for one major reason: it shows that when the new atheist ideology is focused one area – in this case, ethics – its arguments are neither intellectually powerful nor, at least in this book, carefully thought through. In ethics, the strictly scientific approach reveals its severe, often logically insurmountable short-comings even in a rather cursory review like this. If the new atheists want

to present an intellectually persuasive case for abandoning religious-based ethics, they are going to have to do better than Sam Harris' *The Moral Landscape*.

Footnotes:

[1] Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, p. 10, 14, 144.

[2] Harris, p. 1

[3] Harris, p. 1.

[4] Harris, p. 2.

[5] Harris, p. 62.

[6] Harris, p. 102.

[7] Harris, p. 158.

[8] Harris, p. 1.

[9] Harris, p. 36; original emphasis.

[10] Harris, p. 10.

[11] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 263.

[12] Abdu'l-Baha, *ibid*, p. 208.

[13] Harris, p. 62.

[14] Harris, p. 1

[15] Harris, p. 1.

[16] Harris, p. 12.

[17] Harris, p. 12.

[18] Harris, p. 12.

[19] Harris, p. 12.

[20] Harris, p. 2.

[21] Donald Brown, *Human Universals*.

[22] Harris, p. 62.

[23] Harris, p. 62.

[24] Harris, p. 62.

[25] Harris, p. 102.

[26] Harris, p. 102; emphasis added. Also, p. 103, 105.

[27] Harris, p. 103.

[28] Harris, p. 104.

[29] Harris, p. 105.

[30] Harris, p. 105.

[31] Harris, p. 103; emphasis added.

[32] Harris, p. 106.

[33] Harris, p. 158.

[34] *Baha'i World Faith*, p. 383.

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