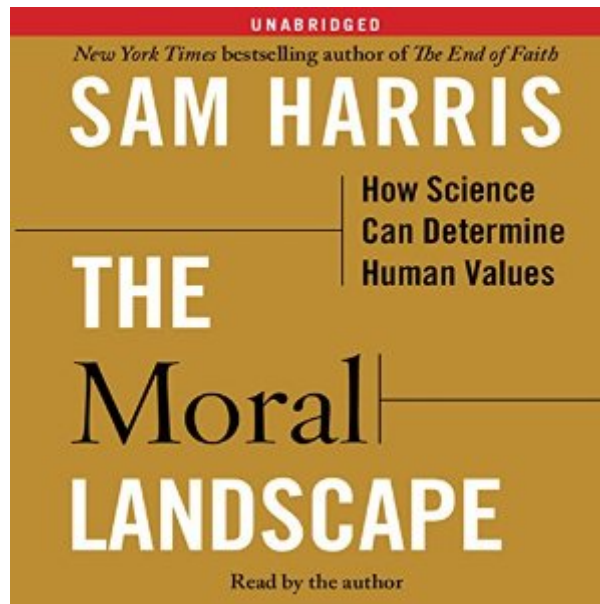# The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values

Synopsis

Sam Harris's first book, The End of Faith, ignited a worldwide debate about the validity of religion. In the aftermath, Harris discovered that most people-from religious fundamentalists to nonbelieving scientists-agree on one point: science has nothing to say on the subject of human values. Indeed, our failure to address questions of meaning and morality through science has now become the most common justification for religious faith. It is also the primary reason why so many secularists and religious moderates feel obligated to "respect" the hardened superstitions of their more devout neighbors. In this explosive new book, Sam Harris tears down the wall between scientific facts and human values, arguing that most people are simply mistaken about the relationship between morality and the rest of human knowledge. Harris urges us to think about morality in terms of human and animal well-being, viewing the experiences of conscious creatures as peaks and valleys on a "moral landscape". Because there are definite facts to be known about where we fall on this landscape, Harris foresees a time when science will no longer limit itself to merely describing what people do in the name of "morality"; in principle, science should be able to tell us what we ought to do to live the best lives possible. Bringing a fresh perspective to age-old questions of right and wrong and good and evil, Harris demonstrates that we already know enough about the human brain and its relationship to events in the world to say that there are right and wrong answers to the most pressing questions of human life. Because such answers exist, moral relativism is simply false-and comes at increasing cost to humanity. And the intrusions of religion into the sphere of human values can be finally repelled: for just as there is no such thing as Christian physics or Muslim algebra, there can be no Christian or Muslim morality.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Sam Harris seems to have a knack for staying on the cutting edge of the religious debates. His first book, "The End of Faith," ignited the so-called New Atheist movement. Now after several years and after earning a Ph.D. in neuroscience from UCLA Harris returns igniting a new debate, this time about the moral landscape of our world. People have been arguing back and forth whether there was anything new in the so-called New Atheist movement. But if this book counts as part of that movement then Harris does succeed in bringing something new to the table.Theists like to remind atheists of the old days, the days of Nietzsche, Camus and Sartre, the so-called robust atheists of the past who didn't think there could be an objective morality for us all. Now with this book there is truly a new atheism, one that affirms an objective morality based in the sciences. And it will be hotly contested by both sides.In this book Sam Harris admirably attempts to steer between a moral absolutism that has answers to most moral questions and a relativism that has nothing objective to say about them. For him moral facts exist, but relativism is false. For him the answers to moral questions do not come from religion, which can and does produce more harm than good, but from science, which helps us understand what makes for human flourishing. Science should be able to tell us in principle how we ought to live our lives.Given that our experience is constrained by the laws of the universe, Harris argues there must be scientific answers to the question of how best to move up to the peaks of this moral landscape, toward greater happiness.According to Harris there can be no such thing as Muslim algebra or Christian neuroscience so also there can be no religion specific morality.While there are conflicting moral claims that might never be solved, most moral issues are not like this, he argues. For if we could eliminate "war, nuclear proliferation, malaria, chronic hunger, child abuse," etc. this would provide for human flourishing and be morally good for everyone.He argues that at bottom moral questions are about neurology, biology, psychology, sociology, and economics.According to Harris: "It seems to me that the only way we are going to build a global civilization based on shared values--allowing us to converge on the same political, economic, and environmental goals--is to admit that questions about right and wrong and good and evil have answers, in the same way the questions about human health do."I hope his argument succeeds. It should. He argues for it in a masterful way.

In this book, Sam Harris advocates for the relevance of science to moral judgments and moral

decisions. Harris defines himself as a consequentialist or utilitarian moral theorist, and within that tradition in moral philosophy, the relevance of science to morality is not so controversial. If you can define "happiness" (or some other condition to be maximized), and you can adopt a definition of "maximized", and you can calculate the contribution of any act to what you've defined as happiness, you've provided at least a rudimentary method for determining the morality of those acts. And scientific research is certainly relevant to that determination, especially if you've defined "happiness" ("well-being" for Harris) in scientifically friendly terms. Harris does so, claiming that "well-being" has to do with the brain states of conscious creatures.That's a coherent position to take. It's not without controversy or refinement. Figuring out what "maximize" means, for example, is pretty critical to whether or not we value equal distributions of happiness across a population or only the sum total. If only the sum total, then radically unequal distributions are morally superior so long as they sum out higher than more equal ones.Harris knows about such problems. In fact, he discusses but takes no stand on the average vs. sum question in Chapter 2 of his book. Nor does he offer any sort of detailed guidance on how such a question would be settled scientifically, if he thinks that can be done.Harris has less to say about debates between consequentialist moral theory and other main strains of thinking about what morality is. As he himself says, he is not going to provide any sort of strict definition for his key term "well-being", referring rather to an analogy to the term "health", in which numerous approaches to what is "healthy" can be mutually consistent without supposing that the term itself thereby becomes radically undetermined or meaningless. I think he's right about that. But it's exactly that indeterminateness that is the root of a great deal of philosophical debate about morality.Philosophers sometimes distinguish three main branches in the history of moral philosophy. One is consequentialism, Harris' branch. Another is Kantian moral thought, in which it is not the consequences of an action that make it moral or immoral, but rather what Kant calls the "subjective principle of volition" behind the action -- we can call that the "intention" behind the action just for the sake of argument (but Kantians will howl). And the other is Aristotelian moral thought, based on the concept of virtue and the development and exercise of virtue in a life. Harris has little to say about either of those lines of thought, except to say that his notion of "well-being" is elastic enough to encompass whatever other people may mean when they talk about things like "duty" (a core Kantian term), "justice", etc.Harris thinks, like some other consequentialists, that any validity those other strains of thought have can be captured within the consequentialist framework. After all, as Harris argues, if those things matter, they must matter because they contribute to someone's well-being. Sounds reasonable.But I think that without more fully addressing those alternative strains of moral thought, Harris doesn't address some pretty central questions. For example, how

much does the fact that I am the one causing pain or happiness for others count in my moral decisions as opposed to just anyone causing that same pain or happiness? If I were asked to fire an employee I manage, and I believe the firing to be unjust, should I refuse to do it, even though I know that if I do so, I will be fired for refusing, and the employee will be fired anyway? That's not a made-up case -- among others, that was Elliot Richardson's position, when his boss, Richard Nixon, ordered him to fire Archibald Cox. On one way of thinking about morality, my character (and my virtues) count centrally in the decision. On strict consequentialist grounds, it doesn't, except in so far as we can reconstruct my character in terms of "happiness" or "well-being", detouring around the central question of whether character in itself counts.There are also more radical strains of thought. One that is particularly relevant to Harris' arguments, is that the moral autonomy of human beings extends to the very definition of well-being itself. Put in terms closer to Harris, what makes us happy is then something we can influence ourselves, by training, or by commitment, or other methods. At times, Harris seems to admit such possibilities (see his discussions in Chapter 2 of the faults in our moral intuitions and the possibility of training ourselves out of them, or his remarks there about how we might alter our moral perceptions with drug treatments). Should we train ourselves to value equality, so that we perceive our own well-being served by equality (with the resulting positive conscious brain states Harris associates with well-being)? Or conversely, should we train ourselves to value extreme distributions, finding satisfaction in the lives of others even if we can't achieve those heights ourselves? If so, then we might be able to increase our collective well-being by simply training ourselves to positively perceive a given state of affairs. Should we do that?The opponents that Harris aims at are not alternative theories of morality per se, but rather religion and moral relativism. He thinks that many immoral acts and institutions are purportedly justified by religious belief, and he liberally cites the Taliban and Muslim extremism in general as examples. Then he decries modern liberals for shrinking back from moral judgment against those acts and institutions on relativist grounds.Understood this way, as I said, I don't see that much to object to in Harris' claim that science can contribute to determining the moral value of actions, at least in consequentialist terms.We could object that his sweep across "religion" makes little room for distinctions among fundamentalist believers and others. That's probably a topic better addressed in reference to his book on "The End of Faith" than this one. Chapters 3 and 4 of this book concentrate on "Belief" and "Religion", but I don't think that any of the claims in those chapters bear directly on unanswered questions relating to consequentialism and its alternatives.We could also object to Harris' rhetoric -- his style is polemical, not academic. He seems to think that anybody who disagrees with him is an idiot or a fool.For my part, I just don't think that he has solved the problems

of moral philosophy, either the ones within his consequentialist branch or the ones between consequentialism and others strains of thought about what morality is. And I don't think that Harris has shown that those problems can be solved scientifically, if he intended to do so.

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