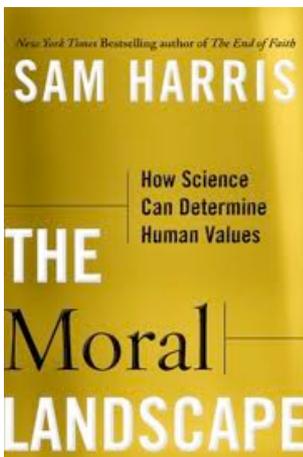


Books



The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values
Sam Harris, 2010, Free Press, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020, ISBN 978-1-4391-7121-9, 292 pp, \$26.99



Sam Harris

The Moral Landscape will be published in the UK in the Spring

William Harwood

Moral Maps

“Just as there is no such thing as Christian physics or Muslim algebra, we will see that there is no such thing as Christian or Muslim morality. Indeed, I will argue that morality should be considered an undeveloped branch of science”. With those words (p4), Sam Harris makes clear that he intends to offer a concept of morality based on something more realistic than, “My God says so, so there!” Robert Heinlein took a giant leap in the direction of rationality when he declared that sin means hurting someone unnecessarily, and all other “sins” are invented nonsense. But he did not spell out the logic behind his conclusion. Harris does so.

In criticising “Stephen Jay Gould’s doomed notion of ‘nonoverlapping magisteria’ (p6)—the idea that science and religion, properly construed, cannot be in conflict because they constitute different domains of expertise”, Harris writes, “I hope to persuade you that this is not only untrue; it could not possibly be true...”. And in reporting on his attendance at a three-day conference on science, religion, reason, and survival, attended by some of the world’s most rational, nontheist scientists, he expresses amazement that, “three days were insufficient to force agreement on the simple question of whether there is *any conflict at all* between religion and science” (p23).

Even when science and religion agree on whether an action is right or wrong, they disagree profoundly on why it is right or wrong (p6). “Faith, if it is ever right about anything, is right by accident.” Further (p5), “Religious conservatives tend to believe that there are right answers to questions of meaning and morality, but only because the God of Abraham deems it so.... Secular liberals, on the other hand, tend to imagine that no objective answers to moral questions exist.... It should concern us that these two orientations are not equally empowering. Increasingly, secular democracies are left supine before the unreasoning zeal of old-time religion... not knowing what is right—or that anything can ever be truly right—often leads secular liberals to surrender their intellectual standards and political freedoms with both hands”.

Harris is aware that even an infinite amount of falsifying evidence will not cure all believers, whether in religion, parapsychology, or tealeaf reading, be-

cause (p. 21), “There will always be people who are unable to grasp specific facts or believe certain true propositions.” But he rejects the dogma that absurdity can never be defeated (pp. 24-25). “Many assert that, while they can get along fine without an imaginary friend, most human beings will always need to believe in God. In my experience, people holding this opinion never seem to notice how condescending, unimaginative, and pessimistic a view it is of the rest of humanity—and of generations to come”.

Instead of expressing his own opinion on whether “God” is a good guy or a bad guy, Harris asks (p17), “What would we think of a person who said, ‘Well, I could have delivered all seven billion of us into the Good Life, but I had other priorities.’ Would it be *possible* to have other priorities?” Could even Joseph Ratzinger or Osama bin Laden read that sentence and delude himself that the “person” mentioned was not his imaginary lawgiver? Could its message that the Catholic or Moslem deity does not conform to even minimum standards of human decency penetrate the firewalls they maintain around their brains? Sure it could—when Pluto goes nova.

As an example of scientists’ reluctance to say that any particular concept of morality is plain wrong, Harris draws attention to the teachings of the Catholic Church. “Even among non-Catholics, its doctrines are widely associated with the concepts of ‘morality’ and ‘human values.’ However, the Vatican is an organization that excommunicates women for attempting to become priests but does not excommunicate male priests for raping children. It excommunicates doctors who perform abortions to save a mother’s life—even if the mother is a *nine-year-old girl raped by her stepfather and pregnant with twins*—but it did not excommunicate a single member of the Third Reich for committing genocide. Are we really obliged to consider such a diabolical inversion of priorities to be evidence of an alternative ‘moral’ framework? No. It seems clear that the Catholic Church is as misguided in speaking about the ‘moral’ peril of contraception, for instance, as it would be in speaking about the ‘physics’ of Transubstantiation.”

But while the Catholic Church and al Qaeda are the extremes, they are not the only dispensers of an evil and insane ↵

concept of morality. Three major mythologies claim to take their values from the same deity. Yet (p38), “The God of Abraham never told us to treat children with kindness, but He [sic] did tell us to kill them for talking back to us. And yet everyone finds this ‘moral’ imperative perfectly insane”. Furthermore (p53), “The fact that millions of people use the term ‘morality’ as a synonym for religious dogmatism, racism, sexism, or other failures of insight and compassion should not oblige us to accept their terminology until the end of time”.

In the chapter titled “Good and Evil”, Harris has no hesitation in validating the absolute morality of the Western World’s condemnation of what he calls (p74), “the low-hanging fruit of conservative Islam: there is absolutely no reason to think that demonizing homosexuals, stoning adulterers, veiling women, soliciting the murder of artists and intellectuals, and celebrating the exploits of suicide bombers will move humanity to a peak on the moral landscape. This is, I think, as objective a claim as we ever make in science”.

Also (pp 88-89), “It is undeniable, however, [on an issue of fact] that if one side is right ... the other side must be absolutely wrong.... Just as people are often less than rational when claiming to be rational, they can be less than moral when claiming to be moral”.

In response to researchers who have concluded that the tendency to maintain metaphysical beliefs is “tethered to the genome”. and therefore (p. 129), “any rational criticism of religious irrationality is an unseemly waste of time”, Harris points out that, “we could have said the same about witchcraft.... Is there a scientist on earth who would be tempted to argue that belief in the evil eye or the demonic origins of epilepsy is bound to remain impervious to reason?”

Harris notes (p145) that, “Marx, Freud, and Weber ... expected religious belief to wither in the light of modernity. It has not come to pass”. He imagines that Americans who “claim to never doubt the existence of God” is as high as 87 percent,⁽¹⁾ even though competent evaluation of the polls has shown the true figure to be less than 64 percent.⁽²⁾ But he hones in on the big reason religion is rising in the underdeveloped world and diminishing more slowly than expected in the industrialized world: “In fact, humanity seems to be growing more

religious, as prosperous, nonreligious people have the fewest babies”.

Dr Harris may or may not know that, until at least the time of the Babylonian Captivity, Jews believed that an individual’s only immortal part was his name, and that it could be kept alive by ancestor worship. That has changed, and Jews today share the belief of Moslems and Christians, that humans but no other species have immortal souls. This raises the question (p. 159), “If the joint ancestors of chimpanzees and human beings did not have souls, when did we acquire ours?”

“Humanity seems to be growing more religious, as prosperous, nonreligious people have the fewest babies”

Harris’s fifteen-page annihilation of Cuckoo’s Nest escapee, Evangelical Christian Francis Collins, appointed to the office of Director of the National Institutes of Health by the only-slightly-less god-addicted Barack Obama (Obama does not consign all non-Christians to Hell), can be compared to using a steamroller to crush an ant.

Possibly for no better reason than to dispel the impression that I think Harris can do no wrong, I am going to mention points on which I disagree with him. His consistent use of the proper name, “God,” to refer to the paramount deity of Islam, indicates a lack of awareness that, while Christians and Jews are taught by their puppet-masters to regard God, Allah, and Yahweh/Adonai as interchangeable names for the same mythical entity, only the most Westernized Muslims publicly profess to believe that “Allah” is identical with any other religion’s sky fairy.

He writes (p. 101), “Evolution may have selected for ... rape.” I respond that he could be right only if there was an era in hominid history when females lacked sexual needs, so that only rape kept the species in existence. As far as I am aware, no paleo-anthropologist has ever postulated the existence of such an era. And his paragraphs on the connection between religion and sexual mores, such as the institution of taboos designed to protect males from being cuckolded into raising offspring not of their own genes, and between religion and burial customs, date both religion and the discovery of the biological relationship between fathers and sons millennia earlier than they actually occurred.⁽³⁾

But the faults in *Moral Landscape* are negligible. This is a valuable contribution to human knowledge that should be taught in every ethics class, from junior high school to graduate seminars.

NOTES

- 1 *The Freethinker*, November 2010, p. 6. The statistics given in *The Moral Landscape*, written later, are lower (78 per cent think the Bible is non-fiction, p. 150), but still too high.
- 2 Ronald Aronson, *Living Without God*, Counterpoint Press, 2008, p. 12.
- 3 William Harwood, *God, Jesus and the Bible: The Origin and Evolution of Religion*, World Audience, 2009, pp. 42, 52n6, 58-59.

