## Walking the Moral Landscape

A review of Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*. Free Press: New York, NY, 2010, 291 pp., US$26.99, ISBN #978-1-43917-121-9 (hardcover).

Jaimie N. Wall, Department of Psychology, Oakland University, Rochester, MI, 48309, Email: jnwall@oakland.edu (Corresponding author).

Todd K. Shackelford, Department of Psychology, Oakland University, Rochester, MI, 48309.

## Introduction

Sam Harris, a neuroscientist and philosopher, is famous for being a provocateur in both worlds.  He has not deviated from this style in his new book, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*.  With eloquence and wit, Harris effectively takes an axe to the argument that one cannot make moral claims derived from a scientific understanding of human and animal well-being. He clearly demonstrates how empirical study of objective reality can bridge the apparent gaps between human values, moral questions, and scientific answers. By explaining how human actions are rooted in our evolved psychology and neurobiology, Harris shows how we can answer (in principle, if not yet in practice) moral questions about how to maximize human and animal well-being. Only moral realism, not moral relativism, can lead us to an enlightened understanding of objective human experience. Where to begin? According to Harris (p. 7), "Only a rational understanding of human well-being will allow billions of us to coexist peacefully... A science of human flourishing may seem a long way off, but to achieve it, we must first acknowledge that the intellectual terrain actually exists."

## Arguments of Well-Being, Value, and Moral Truth

To understand what Harris's moral landscape looks like, it is important to clarify what "well-being" means and, even more pressing, why we *should* value the well-being of conscious creatures.  Harris readily admits difficulty in defining well-being. He likens well-being to the idea of "health" and, just like health, well-being "resists precise definition" (p. 12). This resistance to definition, however, does not invalidate the idea of "health," and neither should it invalidate the idea of "well-being." Harris presents the reader with a

hypothetical situation: walking one mile on your 100th birthday could, in time, be defined as unhealthy if most individuals are able to run a marathon at 500 years of age. Harris (p. 12) comments:

> Such a radical transformation of our view of human health would not suggest that current notions of health and sickness are arbitrary, merely subjective, or culturally constructed. Indeed, the difference between a healthy person and a dead one is about as clear and consequential a distinction as we ever make in science. The differences between the heights of human fulfillment and the depths of human misery are no less clear, even if new frontiers await us in both directions.

Harris describes (human) well-being as a point of many possibilities between the heights of human fulfillment and the depths of human misery in which a person experiences feelings of happiness and personal fulfillment. Actions and decisions that are "good" promote the well-being of conscious creatures and move them toward higher peaks on the moral landscape. Actions and decisions that are "bad" diminish the well-being of conscious creatures and move them toward lower peaks on the moral landscape.

Many critics (e.g., Blackford 2010, Horgan 2010, Jollimore 2010, Nagel 2010, Robinson 2010) have dismissed in part (if not in full) Harris' argument regarding the role of science in determining human values. One facet of his argument that seems to trouble critics is the postulation that it is important to ask moral questions in principle, even though they may be difficult to answer in practice. Harris explains that there are many questions that we cannot answer, but that nevertheless have definite answers (e.g., How many fish currently reside in the Atlantic Ocean? How many trees currently stand in North America?). The same, Harris argues, can be said for questions pertaining to the morality of valuing human and animal well-being. However, it is not *answering* these questions that is vital to promoting well-being. According to Harris, understanding *how not to answer* these moral questions is crucial for avoiding the worst possible misery for conscious beings. For example, how can we increase the well-being of women in the Middle East? There may be a range of defensible affirmative responses and suggestions. But what can be said is that denying women and young girls education, mutilating their genitalia, wrapping them completely in black cloth, stoning them to death for "adultery," and slaughtering girls for familial honor are extraordinarily unlikely to increase the well-being of women in the Middle East.

## Ought We to Care? Why We Should Value Well-Being

Harris describes values as "the set of attitudes, choices, and behaviors that potentially affect our well-being, as well as that of other conscious minds" (p. 12). He explains that science can address values by identifying the ways in which values flow from the objective experience of conscious creatures. If something cannot experience anything—that is, if that something is not conscious—it is not worth discussing the value of its well-being. But what about situations in which there are conflicting concepts of values and

morality among conscious beings? Harris explains that there are people that do not value the well-being of others. Jeffery Dahmer, he explains, would have had an idea of morality such as, "the only peaks on the moral landscape that interest me are ones where I get to murder young men and have sex with their corpses." The opinions and desires of someone who cares so little for the well-being of other conscious beings cannot be taken seriously. Most disagreements on well-being will not be as stark, but disagreements will exist nonetheless. Nevertheless, "[m]ost boats will surely rise with the same tide" (p. 188). Harris argues that caring about the well-being of others is integral to moving toward a higher peak on the moral landscape for all. By taking steps in the direction of increasing well-being on a global scale (decreasing nuclear proliferation, curing HIV, ending malaria, facilitating human cooperation, etc.), the lives of individuals are sure to improve as well.

In his thoughtful review of *The Moral Landscape,* Blackford (2010) takes issue with a few of Harris's ideas. Blackford comments that Harris's definition of well-being is problematic because much is presupposed, such as that we *should* be motivated to value well-being. However, in Harris's view, there *will* be presuppositions—there *must* be presuppositions. In his response to critics, Harris (2011) argues that presuppositions are vital in many fields. In medicine, for example, we do not question the presupposition of valuing the health of patients. In science, we do not question the presupposition of the value of facts and understanding of the universe. According to Harris, we must value the well-being of conscious beings if we desire to act morally. Blackford argues that this valuation cannot be determined by science. According to Harris, however, by valuing actions known empirically to reduce the suffering of conscious beings, a state that is as measurable as physical health, we are able to make scientific decisions on right and wrong.

**Religion and Morality**

Harris's moral landscape leaves little room for religion. His argument against religion as a moral system aptly shows the detrimental effects that religion plays in the lives of adherents and non-believers. Not only does he throw a blowing punch of shock and awe descriptions of the atrocities committed by the Taliban and the Catholic Church, but also he provides a stellar review of why religious belief is not only not special in its current form but also how it hinders a better understanding of our world and a better vision of morality.

Harris discusses how religion may have come into existence from our evolutionary history, and how it continues in its many forms today. Pertinent to his argument, he shares several important facts about our current religious landscape (p. 146):

1. State-level religiosity is strongly correlated with perceptions of societal insecurity. The US, the most religious developed nation, also has the greatest economic inequality.
2. The majority (57%) of Americans think one must believe in God to be moral and 69% desire a president who is guided by "strong religious beliefs."
3. Secular countries are far better off in many, *many* more areas than are more religious countries: "Countries like Denmark, Sweden, Norway and the

Netherlands—which are the most atheistic societies on earth—consistently rate better than religious nations on measures like life expectancy, infant mortality, crime, literacy, GDP, child welfare economic equality, economic competitiveness, gender equality, health care, investments in education, rates of university enrollment, internet access, environmental protection, lack of corruption, political stability, and charity to poorer nations, etc."

Harris explains that religion—at its best—is a distraction, but that it quickly tumbles into delusional behavior and, for some, violent and vindictive actions against those not subscribing to a given set of beliefs. Harris begins by asking: does religion matter? Is it religion that leads people to perform the more unsavory behaviors associated with a prescribed religion, or is it something else? Harris argues that it is absolutely religious belief. This is in contradiction to some prominent researchers in the field. One such researcher is Scott Atran:

> On the other hand, one often encounters bewildering denials of the power of religious beliefs, especially from scientists who are not themselves religious. For instance, the anthropologist Scott Atran alleges that "core religious beliefs are literally senseless and lacking in truth conditions" and, therefore, cannot actually influence a person's behavior. According to Atran, Muslim suicide bombing has absolutely nothing to do with Islamic ideas about martyrdom and jihad; rather, it is the product of bonding among "fictive kin." Atran has publicly stated that the greatest predictor of whether a Muslim will move from merely supporting jihad to actually perpetrating an act of suicidal violence "has nothing to do with religion, it has to do with whether you belong to a soccer club" (p. 155).

With Harris, we find it difficult to embrace Atran's argument that religious beliefs matter little, especially in motivating actions such as suicide terrorism. Atran's argument is especially incredible upon reading actual interviews with would-be suicide terrorists, during which they voice heavenly rewards as a reason for committing suicide terrorism (Stern 2004). In the words of a 14 year-old failed suicide terrorist:

> I thought there would be a little bit of pain, and then I would be in heaven…Where I used to go to school, there were Taliban all around. One day one of them told me to go with him to become a suicide bomber, but I told him if he wanted to kill people he should do it himself, not ask children. But he kept coming back. He said there was no point studying. He told me that nothing was better than paradise, and that you could earn that by killing non-believers. The Taliban prayed all the time and read the Koran, so I thought they were good people. My heart told me to go and train with them (Maqbool, 2011).

Religious beliefs are important motivators of the actions of religious adults, but they

also are a potent tool for the indoctrination of children, who rely heavily on information from older, experienced sources. Gervais, Willard, Norenzayan, and Henrich (2011) provide an overview of the literature that addresses how children are affected by religious belief and religious education from their peers. This literature indicates, for example, that children understand and track the accuracy and reliability of sources to gauge reliance on the source for future information. In addition, children are more likely to prefer sources that appear to be certain and confident. Finally, children are more likely to value an adult source over another child.

Indoctrination is a common tool adults use to socialize children into a religion. Another common tool is the use of scare tactics. Harris details horror stories about the abuses committed by Catholic clergy, and the promise of hell-fire they used to silence their many young victims (p. 200). To say that religious belief does not matter in the actions committed by those that live their lives according to those beliefs is disingenuous and naïve. Harris may seem like he has an axe to grind with the religious community, but in light of the effect that religious beliefs can have on the most vulnerable of minds (i.e., children), we support his forthright criticism of the hypocrisy involved in what many (billions, actually) see as the only form of morality.

**Moral Relativism**

One of the most convincing arguments Harris makes is that against moral relativism. Moral relativism is the notion that all moral values are equal in that they are all culturally created and are therefore valid and *moral* within their cultural context. Harris emphasizes how dangerous moral relativism can be when used by the minds of otherwise intelligent individuals to defend the detrimental cultural practices of others in the name of tolerance. Harris argues that Westerners use moral relativism as "intellectual reparations for the crimes of Western colonialism, ethnocentrism, and racism" (p. 45). He is quick to explain that he does not view the West as more "enlightened" than any other culture. He is arguing instead "that the most basic facts about human flourishing must transcend culture, just as most other facts do" (p. 45). Harris explains that the Taliban may truly believe that they are on a mission to better the lives of all Muslims. Their beliefs, however, are incompatible with human flourishing insofar as they encourage suicide bombing, compulsory veiling, excision of the genitals of children, denying women education, and punishing those that attempt to avoid these fates with beatings, acid, or death. Clearly, these actions do not increase the well-being (or health, for that matter) of the targets of these actions. Harris shares a quote by anthropologist Donald Symons that Steven Pinker (2002) included in his book, *The Blank Slate*:

> If only one person in the world held down a terrified, struggling, screaming little girl, cut off her genitals with a septic blade, and sewed her back up, leaving only a tiny hole for urine and menstrual flow, the only question would be how severely that person should be punished, and whether the death penalty would be a sufficiently severe sanction. But when millions of people do this, instead of the enormity being magnified millions-fold,

suddenly it becomes "culture," and thereby magically become less, rather than more, horrible, and is even defended by some Western "moral thinkers," including feminists (p. 46).

There are many defenders of moral relativism; feminists, philosophers, and anthropologists make up a large number of them. Harris details a startling encounter with a woman (who has since been appointed to President Obama's Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues) following a talk he gave at an academic conference. She asked him how science could say that forcing women to wear burqas is wrong. He explained his stance that right and wrong "are a matter of increasing or decreasing well-being" after which she said that that was only his opinion. He then posed to her a hypothetical culture that is discovered which gouges out the eyes of every third child at birth, according to instructions from God detailed in scripture. To which she replied, "Then you could never say that they were wrong." It is positively disturbing how common beliefs like this are among otherwise intelligent and well-educated people. How they manage to abandon their intellectual faculties long enough to defend such a position is baffling and indefensible, and Harris is right to say as much.

## Problems with *The Moral Landscape*

### Psychopaths

Harris provides an interesting overview of why psychopaths function differently, human evil as a natural phenomenon, and a fascinating description of the results of fMRI studies that counter (if not eradicate) the notion of free will. But Harris leaves the reader hanging here. For example, what exactly is society to do about psychopaths? In his 2011 book, *The Psychopath Test,* Jon Ronson details his experiences with a handful of psychopaths and offers the hypothesis that some of the most powerful people in control of major industries and our economy are psychopaths with a penchant for violence and glee over the suffering of others. Robert Hare, a leading researcher in the field, estimates that 1 in 100 adults is a psychopath. That is a startlingly high estimation, especially when presented with descriptive accounts of how psychopaths commit some of the most horrific crimes against humanity.  Those incapable of knowing that what they are doing is wrong cannot be *reasoned* with to do right, and part of participating in the Moral Landscape is the acceptance of the valuation of the well-being of all conscious creatures, making psychopaths the most dangerous sort of humans. Harris does not adequately address how we are to deal with psychopaths in *The Moral Landscape*, but in an interview with Richard Dawkins in 2011, he presents an analogy that somewhat clarifies his position:

> So what we condemn in an evil murderer is not the fact that he truly, really, and metaphysically is the source of his actions; all these evil murderers have either bad genes or bad parents or bad lives or bad ideas or some combination thereof and they're not the author of any of these things. But we still need to lock them up. When you go to death row and you interview the sociopath and you ask him, "What are you going to do when you get

out," and he says "I'm just going to keep raping and killing people," that should make it pretty clear that you want to keep him in there. But we would keep earthquakes and hurricanes in prison if we could, and we would never think they're evil earthquakes or evil hurricanes. So some things would change about our notion of retribution, but the idea that we have to lock up killers is not one of them.

As Harris explains, by looking at individuals who act in ways that are harmful to others because of chemical, familial, or genetic abnormalities, we are able to avoid blind retribution but nevertheless imprison them, treat them when possible, and perhaps one day address the real causes of their behavior. Some may say the notion of "correcting" the abnormalities in the brain sounds too "1984"—Orwellian and nightmarish. But if living in a world where one need not worry about mindless killing for another's pleasure is not appealing, then an important point of this book (and this review) is lost.

*Animal well-being*

One issue with Harris's book that does not appear to have been discussed by other reviewers is that he often invokes "human and animal well-being" simultaneously, but only briefly does he touch on the well-being of nonhumans. Perhaps Harris did not feel this book was the place to address the issue further. Or perhaps he chose not to address in-depth the well-being of nonhuman animals because of his personal beliefs on the matter. Regardless, it is something that he must elaborate on if he chooses to use encompassing phrases such as "human and animal well-being" and the well-being of *all* "conscious beings."

In a 2011 entry in his blog, "Why Evolution is True," Jerry Coyne provides a detailed description of a meal he shared with Harris following a lecture that Harris gave at the University of Chicago. They ate at a Chicago steakhouse that is known "for dry-aging its meat in rooms lined with Himalayan salt," where they consumed 40 and 55-day old "specimens" of meat. They "washed down" their aged meat and bacon gnocchi with a bottle of wine. It is this sort of excessive indulgence in the flesh of nonhuman species that confuses us. One of the simplest ways for one to lessen the suffering of conscious beings in this world is to stop eating them.

Harris's main argument on the consumption of animals is consigned to an endnote (p. 210, *n*50): "One cannot claim to be 'right' about anything—whether as a matter of reason or a matter of ethics—unless one's view can be generalized to others" (p. 82). Harris's argument, in short, is that it is ethical for *some* people to eat *some* animals because it "yields a net increase in well-being on planet earth" (p. 211). But, which people and which animals fit this description? Surely there are more ways for Harris to increase his well-being and that of the planet other than consuming an expensive, aged slab of cow flesh. Harris appears to use Robert Nozick's concept of "utility monsters" to defend the "ethical" consumption of meat: "Nozick draws the obvious analogy and asks if it would be ethical for our species to be sacrificed for the unimaginably vast happiness of some super beings. Provided that we take the time to really imagine the details (which is not easy), I think the answer is clearly 'yes'" (p. 211). However, do most humans receive unimaginably vast happiness from consuming cheeseburgers at their local drive-thru? We doubt it.

It is not clearly and generally morally defensible to consume meat when a plethora of alternative options for sustenance exists. When speaking of decreasing the suffering of sentient beings, it is crucial to consider that many factory animals enter the butchering process while still breathing, newborn offspring are forcefully separated from their mothers, their body parts mutilated, only to be left for the duration of their miserable lives in small confined spaces without ever seeing sunlight (Monson, 2005). Many nonhuman animals are in a place very much like what Harris describes as "the worst possible misery" from their first moments of post-natal life. The created misery of these animals exists solely because of human use and consumption. The use of these animals for human consumption and testing does not put the animals in a place of well-being, and neither does it clearly increase "unimaginably and vastly" the well-being of humans.

Is there ever a moral defense for the testing of products and treatments on nonhuman animals? Peter Singer, the philosopher who literally wrote the book on animal rights, *Animal Liberatio*n, explains that there has to be a tremendous net gain from experimentation on nonhuman animals for an extraordinarily large population to justify the practice. Importantly, Singer also defends using brain-dead humans in the same capacity, challenging the speciesist notion that only non-humans are acceptable targets of experimentation. In a 2006 article in *The Times*, Singer states:

> Since I judge actions by their consequences, I have never said that no experiment on an animal can ever be justified. I do insist, however, that the interests of animals count among those consequences, and that we cannot justify giving less weight to the interests of nonhuman animals than we give to the similar interests of human beings.

In Harris' own words, "One cannot claim to be 'right' about anything—whether as a matter of reason or a matter of ethics—unless one's view can be generalized to others" (p. 82) and he should apply that logic to animal well-being as well.

## Conclusion

*The Moral Landscape* is an important addition to the literature on morality. It is refreshing to read a no-nonsense description of a moral system in which all may benefit upon careful consideration for the well-being of all. In practice, it is not attainable now. In principle, however, a meditation on a landscape where all actions are rooted in the desire to lessen suffering and increase well-being, is already a step in the right direction.

## References

BBC (2004, December 1). *Spotting Psychopaths at Work*. Retrieved May 2011, from BBC: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/4057771.stm
Blackford, R. (2010). Book Review: Sam Harris' The Moral Landscape. *Journal of Evolution and Technology, 21*, 53-62.
Coyne, J. (2011, April 9). *Our visit with Dr. Sam*. Retrieved April 9, 2011, from Blog: Why

Evolution is True: http://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2011/04/09/our-visit-with-dr-sam/

Dawkins, R. (2011, April 12). *Who Says Science has Nothing to Say About Morality?* The Sheldonian Theatre, University of Oxford, England.

Horgan, J. (2010, October 11). *Be Wary of the Righteous Rationalist: We Should Reject Sam Harris' Claim That Science can Be A Moral Guidepost* . Retrieved April 2011, from Scientific American: http://www.scientificamerican.com/blog/post.cfm?id=be-wary-of-the-righteous-rationalis-2010-10-11

Jollimore, T. (2010, October 22). *Review: The Moral Landscape.* Retrieved April 2011, from Barnes and Noble Review: http://bnreview.barnesandnoble.com/t5/Reviews-Essays/The-Moral-Landscape/ba-p/3477

Maqbool, A. (2011, April 18). *Pakistan: Teenager tells of failed suicide bomb mission.* Retrieved April 18, 2011, from BBC: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13111948

Monson, S. (Director). (2005). *Earthlings* [Motion Picture].

Nagel, T. (2010, October 20). *The Facts Fetish.* Retrieved April 2011, from The New Republic: http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/magazine/78546/the-facts-fetish-morality-science

Robinson, M. (2010, October 2). *What Unitarians Know (and Sam Harris Doesn't).* Retrieved April 2011, from Wall Street Journal: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703882404575520062380030080.html

Ronson, J. (2011). *The Psychopath Test: A Journey Through the Madness Industry.* New York: Riverhead.

Pinker, S. (2002). *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature.* New York: Penguin Group.

Singer, P. (2006, December 3). *Setting limits on animal testing.* Retrieved May 28, 2011, from The Times: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/article658128.ece

Stern, J. (2004). *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill.* New York: Harper Perrenial.