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Sam Harris, the Moral Landscape - does this book show science grounds morality?

An attempt to make a case for morality being factually true (objectively true) without any reliance on God or faith in God but on science is made in this book.

What is science? Any reliable or reasonably reliable method of testing truth claims. We are all scientists - it is only that some of us use equipment. We live and breath science. We know we want sugar in our tea and put it in and that is science. Science is not all about labs, it is about life and the hearth and the home and everything. Everything is science - what is called unscientific is in fact not unscientific it is just bad science.

Sam Harris wrote The Moral Landscape which argues that science gives us real and objective morality by showing that pain must be avoided. Harris says morality and wellbeing are just two different words for the same thing. Science can show there are goals that make us healthier and happier and closer together. Harris is claiming that science and morality can and do go together. So science makes it a fact that we should respect everybody else. We are talking about morality as in trying to find the fairest, most respectful and most compassionate thing to do. Fairness, respect and compassion are moral principles and Harris says science is about them and teaches them so morality is science. How to put them into practice is a different matter. So morality as in principles can be objectively true but morality as in pragmatism can be a different matter. We can fail to find the best way to implement the principles.

Sam Harris asserted:
@Morality is whatever improves human wellbeing.

@Science can measure wellbeing. Harris means science in the broad sense of the word.

@Wellbeing is a state of the human brain and the science of neurology can tell us if the person is well. It is also a physical state such as when you are healthy and fit.

@Therefore morality can be based on science.

PROBLEM: Morality is not just wellbeing. You cannot change the meaning of the word morality and call it wellbeing.

ANSWER: The critics mean morality is rules such as be fair and compassionate and respectful. When the rules are programmed into us and we stick to them even if they destroy us they are still part of our wellbeing. If living up to them destroys us so does trying to flush them out of us for that is self-violence.
Morality may not be just wellbeing but it is clearly very very close to it. So does it matter if the words are not exactly the same? What use is a morality that does not try to help people?

PROBLEM: Evolution or survival of the fittest (fittest really means the most adaptable not necessarily the strongest and the most brutal) do not care if we respect each other and in fact tell us not to for we could be devoured by people stronger than us.

The tree does not care if you get shelter under it or not but that does not mean you cannot treat it as if it exists just for that! You can use evolution in your favour. Its coldness and indifference is not the point. Survival of the fittest makes respect possible and that is all we need to think about. It is not survival of the fittest so much as survival of the most adaptable and to adapt you need a measure of respect for what is around you.

ANSWER: Evolution is a description not a force or power or principle therefore it does not matter if it is unsupportive of reason or happiness. It lets them happen and that is enough. Evolution is really nature being at war with itself so defying evolution is an option.

PROBLEM: Harris at best is just right enough but not just right or simply right. There are problems.

ANSWER: A morality can be a bit fuzzy and still the only best option.

PROBLEM: The fact that people are or can be well does not prove they ought to be.

ANSWER: Maybe it doesn't prove it but if it indicates it that is enough. Being unable to prove you should be fair does not mean you cannot be fair for ought implies can.

Morality tells us to try to do what we can. It is not our fault if we have to go by inconclusive hints that an action is the right one. Belief in morality is based on the perfectly reasonable assumption that if people can be happy or well they should be as long as it is in a way that allows them to stay happy and well.

Most of the time, we do what we think is right not what we know is right.

If people being well or being able to be well does not prove that they ought to be then that amounts to saying that if you are trying to work out what is moral, wellbeing does not come into it. This is incoherent. It means our morality is pretending to intend to do good. It opens the door to fanatics who say that as morality is unconcerned about wellbeing God can be moral and command you to eat your baby for lunch.

PROBLEM: Science cannot tell us what we should value.

ANSWER: If it cannot then it is clear that it enables the question to be asked. It shows you that a baby given good nourishment will be healthy. Without that you cannot ask if you should value this. So science is far more important than the moral question in one sense. In another sense, it is moral to be scientific. You need to be before you can talk about what the baby needs. Science is morality in the sense that it is about the question for there would be no science unless something was valued.

PROBLEM: Science has to take a detached view of suffering.

ANSWER: Is a scientist to look at pain and suffering in a detached and clinical way? Is it about how the machinery registers the pain not the person? If he is then does it make sense to talk about morality being an outgrowth of science? What about scientific morality when a baby suffers? Am I right to expect a scientist to see pain as something to be prevented meaning bad and not merely as something to be analysed?
To look at pain coldly means you see it as pain in theory and nothing else. That is not seeing pain and its not scientific. Science requires that you fine tune your sense of reality as best you can. The senses are what do science through the experiments and the machines so it is scientific to look at pain in an attached way.
The notion that science has to treat a person like a computer is nonsense for a person might be a computer yes but not like any ordinary machine. How it affects the mind and emotions is a part of science.

PROBLEM: There is no real way to test if a person is happy or how happy she is.

ANSWER: But we have an idea if they are and that is enough. Religion and popular psychology say that questioning if a good or happy person is really good or happy is immoral. Here we see how they oppose science on moral grounds.

PROBLEM: If machines can do everything for us, why don't we take a happy pill that makes us think that we are happy all the time? Why not force us to take it?

ANSWER: If machines can do everything for us, why don't we take a morality pill that makes us think we are just and good and merciful all the time? Why not force us to take it?

It is said we are not really moral if we are forced to be. But what if we could be REALLY just/loving/respectful?

It is wrong even then which shows that morality is indeed about wellbeing - it is about letting a person be free even if it means moral collapse.

Truth is too important. If you take the happy pill to fool yourself you cannot know if you are fooling yourself in a good way or a bad one. Once you detach from reality anything terrible can happen. Better to adhere to truth and hope for the best than to seek the best without truth.

Science is based on the notion that we must follow truth no matter what it leads to or if it makes us unhappy. It is adamantly opposed to using those happy pills. That is another reason Harris is right to say that science is morality.

Your happiness is certain if the pill works. If there is no pill then it is uncertain. But you are robbed of the chance to make your happiness and to earn it. The pill makes you feel happy but robs you of the happiness of being self-made happy.

We have to see that this happy pill objection is the essential and principle objection - it was the other objections are trying to get at. Refute it and you vindicate The Moral Landscape.

PROBLEM: Scientists have abused people and animals in the name of research and science.

ANSWER: But abused is not the right word. The sentence should be, "Scientists have needed to use and hurt people and animals in the name of research and science." It has to be a real pressing need. The Christians are trying to demean science. But in fact, what is demeaning is to oppose science which had to be done and which had to learn at great cost in terms of human and animal suffering. They are demeaning those people and animals - it is not science.

They are the first to benefit from how people and animals have suffered in the name of science.

PROBLEM: Many scientific people think that if those who weaken the human gene pool were sterilised then that would be scientifically good and thus you can say science requires it.
ANSWER: It is very important to answer this question for Nazi style eugenics is the biggest fear people have of science. But science does not demand that we exercise eugenics for science does not engage in it itself. Most of us are born without any such manipulation. It is man using science that does eugenics. Science does not make man do so or demand that man must do so!

PROBLEM: Science looks at the physical nothing else. You may ask science why your coal is hot and you will get information about temperatures and molecules etc. That is science speaking. It is said that it will not even look at how you are the one that heated the coal for you wanted to be warm. So it is not thinking of you so it is not about morality

ANSWER: Science will look at you if it decides to. Morality is about purpose and so is science and so science and morality have got that in common. Purpose is just purpose and morality is a kind of purpose so there is at least an indirect relationship with morality and remember indirect does not mean weak. An indirect link can be the strong one. A link can be strongest because it is indirect not direct. You walk from a to b and that is a direct link but it would not happen without the more important link, the indirect one, of gravity.

Science will say that something called morality is inspiring the person even if it does not consider or cannot consider what morality is. Arguments that science and morality have nothing to say to one another are confusing science with the brute, the mechanical and the physical. Physical and science are not exactly the same thing.

If somebody thought that justice and compassion and love were physical things would that affect them as moral persons? No. They are still moral if they live up to them. Science does allow for considering if these forces are physical for science forbids assumptions. We see that even if science only cared about energies and materials it can still ground morality.

Science's cardinal doctrine that claims and opinions must have suitable support from evidence. The scientist is searching for truth. Truth is an ethical matter. Thus science indicates a need for the scientists to follow ethical principles. Science values truth and thus it is endorsing an ethical principle in doing so. Even love and compassion are about truth. You cannot value a person unless the person should be made happy or allowed to be happy. It has to be true that the person needs to be happy.

Psychology is a branch of science. It shows how we consider things moral if these things are better for our group or community. We do not think of all humanity but of our group. Science seeks knowledge for all humanity and not just any group.

PROBLEM: Science deals with the biological and psychological causes of our ideas about morality. Science is not about morality but does study how we come up with moral ideas. It is about the process not the validity of morality.

ANSWER: So science examines the innate moral tendencies we have. Let us assume for the purpose of argument that is all it does. Then in that case science can only be morality or ethics in a very broad sense. In the case of detailed moral arguments it cannot pick a side. For example, pain by definition is bad so science will determine that a baby is being hurt and so bad is being done to it. But what it cannot do is test if those who say this hurting is needed for a better good are right. At least it asks if it is or isn't. That is a moral question. No matter what you try to ground morality in you are faced with that question. Morality is about the question.

So the problem shows science is morality in a broader and looser way than Harris would envisage.

PROBLEM: The idea that God is justice and love and compassion and morality is a duty for it simply calls us to be like him is beautiful. We don't want to believe moral principles come from science.

ANSWER: Those who are addicted to God and related ideas have started a backlash against Harris for they hate what he proposes. It matters little to them that it is an argument for love and compassion and justice. They only want them on God terms or no terms.

PROBLEM: An is does not give rise to an ought. The owning of money does not mean you morally ought to have it or keep it. Harris by equating wellbeing and morality makes that category mistake. The reason is simple, ought and is, are two different kinds of statements.

ANSWER: To ask if the universe should be better and different seems to confuse an is with an ought or an is not with an ought. In other words, its pretty awful now and it should not be. But it does not change the fact there is a should there even if not a moral one. There is a descriptive should. Unless there is a descriptive should there cannot be any moral should so the former in a sense is more important.

So morality says, "If the only should you can come up with is a descriptive one then fine for I don't ask you to do the impossible. You are rejecting me to affirm me."

SHOULD

If you want cake then you SHOULD go to the cake shop. But SHOULD is you saying you should get it for you deserve it. A should is never avoidable. If you want cake and you decide you SHOULD NOT go to the cake shop that is just another should. A should in reverse is a real should. Every should is a should and it is short-sighted to think a moral should is always obvious. The should about the cake is as much a should as, "I must give Billy his fair wage."

Wellbeing may not talk about should but it has should written all over it.

PROCESS OF ELIMINATION

A process of elimination can help you find and work out how to define and ground morality as factually true. It does not follow that if you want moral beliefs that you have to work them out directly - it is enough if you have a list of options and find what is left after you dismiss them.

Let us see.

Here are two options.

1 If I do the good I do because I feel happier for doing so then the downside is that I am resolved to care most about what I feel instead of doing good.

2 If I do the good simply because of the other person then the downside is I am denying that my happiness is important too. That is following a rule and rules never satisfy. I am kind of telling them that if my happiness does not matter then theirs does not so we have a complex mixture with passive aggression being one ingredient.

We are stuck with the problems but involving a God who grounds or commands either action only makes it worse. It is not right to say a perfect being grounds or sanctions something that can only be imperfect. Why would you want to?

Real goodness does not need or care about being commanded. It is just done because you want to do it. Morality when linked to commands from a person such as God is just self-contradictory nonsense. By a process of elimination and a simple one we should agree with Harris. Objective goodness is grounded in science not God and certainly not religion.

There is nothing wrong with a view being put on us by a process of elimination. It is not direct proof but that does not matter. It is all we can do and process of elimination can be very strong as proof. And it is in this case. Harris is right.

THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Harris says moral good is wellbeing and everybody else says it is not. Describing something as morally good is a judgement on what is already good as in wellbeing in the first place.

Anyway suppose they are not the same thing and you can have one without the other.

Good as in wellbeing matters more than good as in being morally good. If a gun were put to your head and you had to support and endorse one it would have to be wellbeing. Paradoxically morality would say you are right to drop it in favour of wellbeing when there is no choice. Thus Harris stands vindicated as being the true defender of good and true opponent of bad.

If there is nothing at all then good still exists. It is good that there is nobody to suffer. So good is just a fact that even nothing cannot get away from! Good does not depend on moral good but moral good if it exists depends on good. But moral good is always a suggested option - never a totally necessary option. When it can be discarded if you are forced it is obviously not as important as people want to think.

Morality then by definition is about being practical. Again Harris is proven right.

HAIDT SHOWS HARRIS IS RIGHT

Jonathan Haidt says that there are at least six moral foundations and Harris's account only fits two of them. One is harm/care. Two is reciprocity/fairness.

Everybody accepts Haidt's account of morality but Harris has been met with controversy.
There is a but.

In Lindsay's Everybody is Wrong about God we read, "Both Harris and Haidt are right, though at first it seems impossible. Haidt and Harris seem to be talking about the same topic on two different levels. Haidt is talking about the moral systems that individuals and groups adhere to, and Harris is clear that he is talking about something else that would include evaluating the moral frameworks themselves, and thus the people who adhere to them by extension."

So Lindsay says he agrees with Harris that morality is about helping people to flourish.
Haidt said we are "selfish primates who long to be a part of something larger and nobler than ourselves" in his book, The Righteous Mind, page 255. It is selfish in the way wanting to be royalty is. Thus if we think we are part of this bigger thing, say part of God, that is another form of selfishness. It is selfish if it is true. And it is selfish if it is not. If it is not true then the evil of lying to yourself must be happening at some level. This is an additional manifestation of selfishness.

Clearly even if Harris were wrong he would be pointing in the right direction. All critics complain that God is needed to ground morality. The opposite is true.

LAST WORD

The book is a good reply to arguments like this: "Many businesses and entities today such as clinics have to use and embrace what scientific disciplines have learned about biology, physiology, anatomy, chemistry, physics and much more more. But no scientific discipline can tell you what you morally should or should not do. It may say you should treat a chest infection with an antibiotic but only if you choose to but it cannot tell you that it is morally right or wrong to make that choice or otherwise. It can tell you how to put a terminally ill person to their rest but not if it is really morally good, fair and loving to do so. So science then is not about morality all. The word for it is amoral. It is not about right and wrong. It is up to persons not science to worry about that. Science being used to do moral good does not mean it is about being morally good any more than a knife is bad for being used to stab somebody."

Harris then is correct. Wellbeing and morality can be counted as the same thing. They ought to be.

Science knows when you are trying to hurt somebody. Hurting is a matter for science. While morality is said to be different from hurting, hurting is an ingredient of it. So science has something to say about that part of morality. Morality works with what is there so if that is all the far you can get that makes causing pain as good as the same as immorality.

APPENDIX - MORALITY AS HATE FOR INJUSTICE AND CRUELTY

What puts hatred for evil in you? Is it just nature? Or God. Both? Why does it matter? God controlling nature which puts it in you is the same as God putting it in you directly. But if nature is doing it and is just doing it and there is no God involved that is all we need. It does not make sense to get a horse as a gift and then look in its mouth in the hope the giver put a gold coin in it. Nature is bigger than us and if it is making us hate what challenges our existence then you don't need God for morality. Morality is a spectrum and if this is not the perfect morality who cares if it works says work with what you have got and that is the perfect morality. So perfect morality is a spectrum too!

"Killing babies is bad but good [or perhaps morally neutral] when God says it is" is just frankly unbelievable. Nobody really accepts this logic. Even "Killing babies is bad but MIGHT BE good [or perhaps morally neutral] when God says it is" is frankly out too. It proves believers despite what they say, do hold God not to be morality but to be subject to it. That is what their minds and hearts and emotions tell them. That will never change. Bringing God into it is trying to fit into a moral theory that you cannot fit into. It is forcing yourself and real morality does not force like that does not make you lie. If God is subject to a moral standard then which one? It comes back to what suits us best overall. Morality is about us not God so Harris is right on that point.

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