Navigating Sam Harris' The Moral Landscape
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SUMMARY

What is the best foundation for the existence of objective moral values and duties? What grounds them? What makes certain actions good or evil, right or wrong? If God does not exist, what foundation remains for objective moral values and duties? Can science answer questions of morality? New Atheist Sam Harris thinks so.

NAVIGATING SAM HARRIS' *THE MORAL LANDSCAPE*

A great merit of Sam Harris' recent book *The Moral Landscape* is his bold affirmation of the objectivity of moral values and duties. To say that moral values and duties are objective is to say they are valid and binding independent of human opinion. For example, to say that the Holocaust was objectively evil is to say it was evil even though the Nazis who carried it out thought it was good. And it would still have been evil even if the Nazis had won World War II and succeeded in brainwashing or exterminating everyone who disagreed with them, so everybody who was left thought the Holocaust was good.

Harris inveighs against what he calls "the overeducated atheistic moral nihilist[s]" and relativists who refuse to condemn as objectively wrong terrible atrocities like the genital mutilation of little girls. [1] Citing Donald Symons, he rightly declares, "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, … the only question would be how severely that person should be punished." [2] What is *not* in question is that such a person has done something horribly, objectively wrong.

Objective Moral Values and Duties

The question then is, what is the best foundation for the existence of objective moral values and duties? What grounds them? What makes certain actions good or evil, right or wrong? Traditionally, God has been the highest Good (*summum bonum*) and His commandments constitutive of our moral duties. But if God does not exist, what foundation remains for objective moral values and duties?

Consider first the question of objective moral values. On atheism, what basis is there for affirming objective moral values? In particular, why think that human beings have objective moral worth? On the atheistic view human beings are just accidental byproducts of nature who have evolved

relatively recently on an infinitesimal speck of dust called planet Earth — lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe — and are doomed to perish individually and collectively in a relatively short time. On atheism it is hard to see any reason to think that human well-being is objectively good, anymore than insect well-being or rat well-being or hyena well-being. This is what Harris calls "The Value Problem." [3]

The purpose of Harris' *The Moral Landscape* is to solve the "value problem," to explain the basis, on atheism, for the existence of objective moral values. [4] He explicitly rejects the view that moral values are Platonic objects existing independently of the world. [5] So his only recourse is to try to ground moral values in the natural world. But can he do that, since nature in and of itself is morally neutral?

Naturalistic view

On a naturalistic view, moral values are just the behavioral by-products of biological evolution and social conditioning. Just as a troupe of baboons exhibit co-operative and even self-sacrificial behavior because natural selection has determined it to be advantageous in the struggle for survival, so *homo sapiens* — their primate cousins — exhibit similar behavior for the same reason. As a result of sociobiological pressures there has evolved among *homo sapiens* a sort of "herd morality" that functions well in the perpetuation of our species. But on the atheistic view there does not seem to be anything that makes this morality objectively true.

The philosopher of science Michael Ruse reports, "The position of the modern evolutionist … is that humans have an awareness of morality … because such an awareness is of biological worth. Morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth. … Considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, ethics is illusory. I appreciate that when somebody says, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself,' they think they are referring above and beyond themselves. … Nevertheless, … such reference is truly without foundation. Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction, … and any deeper meaning is illusory." [6]

If we were to rewind the film of human evolution back to the beginning and start anew, people with a very different set of moral values might well have evolved. As Darwin himself wrote in *The Descent of Man*, "If … men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters, and no one would think of interfering." [7]

For us to think that human beings are special and our morality objectively true is to succumb to the temptation to species-ism — an unjustified bias toward one's own species.

If there is no God, any basis for regarding the herd morality evolved by *homo sapiens* as objectively true seems to have been removed. Take God out of the picture, and all you seem to be left with is an apelike creature on a tiny speck of dust beset with delusions of moral grandeur.

Richard Dawkins' assessment of human worth may be depressing, but why, on atheism, is he mistaken when he says, "There is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pointless indifference. … We are machines for propagating DNA. … It is every living object's sole reason for being." [8]

So how does Sam Harris propose to solve the "value problem"? The trick he proposes is simply to *redefine* what he means by "good" and "evil" in *non*moral terms. [9]He says we should "define 'good' as that which supports [the] well-being" of conscious creatures." [10] He states, "Good and evil need only consist in this: misery versus well-being." [11] Or again: "In speaking of 'moral truth,' I am saying that there must be facts regarding human and animal well-being." [12]

So, he says, "Questions about values … are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures." [13] Therefore, he concludes, "It makes no sense … to ask whether maximizing well-being is 'good'." [14] Why not? Because he's redefined the word "good" to *mean* the well-being of conscious creatures. So to ask, "Why is maximizing creatures' well-being good?" is on his definition the same as asking, "Why does maximizing creatures' well-being maximize creatures' well-being?" It is simply a tautology — talking in a circle. Thus, Harris has "solved" his problem simply by redefining his terms. It is mere word play.

At the end of the day Harris is not really talking about *moral* values. He is just talking about what's conducive to the flourishing of sentient life on this planet. Seen in this light, his claim that science can tell us a great deal about what contributes to human flourishing is hardly controversial. Of course, it can — just as it can tell us what is conducive to the flourishing of corn or mosquitoes or bacteria. His so-called "moral landscape" picturing the highs and lows of human flourishing is not really a *moral* landscape at all.

On the next to last page of his book, Harris more or less admits this. For he makes the telling admission that if people such as rapists, liars, and thieves could be just as happy as good people, then his moral landscape would no longer be a *moral* landscape; rather it would just be a continuum of well-being, whose peaks are occupied by good and evil people alike. [15] What is

interesting about this is that earlier in the book Harris observed that about 3 million Americans are psychopathic, that is to say, they do not care about the mental states of others. On the contrary, they *enjoy* inflicting pain on other people. [16]

This implies that we can conceive of a possible world in which the continuum of human well-being is not a moral landscape. The peaks of well-being could be occupied by evil people. But this entails that in the actual world the continuum of well-being and the moral landscape are not identical either. For identity is a necessary relation. There is no possible world in which some entity A is not identical to A. So if there is any possible world in which A is not identical to B, it follows that A is not in fact identical to B. Since it's possible that human well-being and moral goodness are not identical, it follows necessarily that human well-being and moral goodness are not the same, as Harris has asserted. By granting that it's possible that the continuum of well-being is not identical to the moral landscape, Harris has rendered his view logically incoherent.

Thus, Harris has failed to solve the "value problem." He has not provided any justification or explanation of why, on atheism, objective moral values would exist at all. His so-called solution is just a semantic trick of providing an arbitrary and idiosyncratic redefinition of the words "good" and "evil" in nonmoral terms.

That takes us to a second question: Does atheism provide a sound foundation for objective moral duties? Duty has to do with moral obligation and prohibition, what I ought or ought not to do. Here reviewers of *The Moral Landscape* have been merciless in pounding Harris' attempt to provide a naturalistic account of moral obligation. Two problems stand out.

First: Natural science tells us only what *is*, not what *ought* to be, the case. As philosopher Jerry Fodor has written, "Science is about facts, not norms; it might tell us how we are, but it wouldn't tell us what is wrong with how we are." [17] In particular it cannot tell us that we have a moral obligation to take actions that are conducive to human flourishing.

So if there is no God, what foundation remains for objective moral duties? On the naturalistic view, human beings are just animals, and animals have no moral obligations to one another. When a lion kills a zebra, it kills the zebra, but it does not *murder* the zebra. When a great white shark forcibly copulates with a female, it forcibly copulates with her but it does not *rape* her — for there is no moral dimension to these actions. They are neither prohibited nor obligatory.

So if God does not exist, why think we have any moral obligations to do anything? Who or what imposes these moral duties on us? Where do they come from? It is hard to see why they would be

anything more than a subjective impression ingrained into us by societal and parental conditioning.

On the atheistic view, certain actions such as incest and rape may not be biologically and socially advantageous, and so in the course of human development have become taboo, that is, socially unacceptable behavior. But that does absolutely nothing to show that rape or incest is really *wrong*. Such behavior goes on all the time in the animal kingdom. On the atheistic view the rapist who flouts the herd morality is doing nothing more serious than acting unfashionably, the moral equivalent of Lady Gaga. If there is no moral lawgiver, then there is no objective moral law; and if there is no objective moral law, then we have no objective moral duties.

Harris is impatient about such questions: "How much time should we spend worrying about such a transcendent source of value?" he sniffs. "I think the time I will take typing this sentence is already too much." [18] He makes a half-hearted stab at showing that the divide between facts and values is illusory in three ways: [19]

1. *Facts about maximizing the well-being of conscious creatures must translate into facts about brains*. Perhaps; but this point is irrelevant, since the question remains, why think that on atheism we have a moral obligation to maximize the well-being of conscious creatures (or that so doing is objectively good in the first place)?

2. *Objective knowledge already has values built into it, since we must value logical consistency, reliance on evidence, etc*. Here again we see Harris' equivocal use of value terminology. This means that objective knowledge requires logical consistency, reliance on evidence, *etc*. as necessary conditions of knowledge. It has nothing to do with *moral* value.

3. *Beliefs about facts and beliefs about values arise from similar brain processes*. So what? Does Harris think this implies that they are the same belief? This confuses the *origin* of a belief with the *content* of the belief. Just because two different beliefs arise from similar brain processes does not imply they have the same meaning or information content. Whatever their origin, beliefs about what *is* the case, and beliefs about what *ought* (or*ought not*) to be the case are not the same belief. One belief could be true and the other false. Harris' view thus lacks any source for objective moral duty.

Second: "ought" implies "can." A person is not morally responsible for an action he is unable to avoid. For example, if somebody shoves you into another person, you are not to blame for bumping into this person. You had no choice. But Harris believes that *all* of our actions are causally determined and that there is no free will. [20] Harris rejects not only libertarian accounts of freedom

but also compatibilistic accounts of freedom. But if there is no free will, no one is morally responsible for anything. In the end, Harris admits this, though it's tucked away in his endnotes. Moral responsibility, he says, "is a social construct," not an objective reality: "in neuroscientific terms no person is more or less responsible than any other" for the actions they perform. [21] His thoroughgoing determinism spells the end of any hope or possibility of objective moral duties on his worldview because we have no control over what we do.

Harris recognizes that "determinism really does threaten free will and responsibility as we intuitively understand them." [22] But not to worry! "*The illusion of free will is itself an illusion*." [23] The point, I take it, is that we do not really have the illusion of free will. Not only is such a claim patently false phenomenologically, as any of us can attest, but it is also irrelevant. The fact remains that whether we experience the illusion of free will or not, on Harris' view we are thoroughly determined in all that we think and do and can therefore have no moral responsibilities.

Conclusion

On Harris' view there is both no *source* of objective moral duties and no *possibility* of objective moral duty. Therefore, on his view, despite his protestations to the contrary, there is no objective right or wrong.

Thus, Sam Harris' naturalistic view fails to provide a sound foundation for objective moral values and duties. If God does not exist, we are trapped in a morally valueless world in which nothing is prohibited. Harris' atheism thus sits very ill with his ethical objectivism.

What the theist offers Sam Harris is not a new set of moral values — by and large we share a wide range of positions of applied ethics — rather what we can offer is a sound foundation for the moral values and duties that we both hold dear.

Footnotes

[1]

Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 198. He adds, "I sincerely hope that people like Rick Warren have not been paying attention."

[2]

Ibid., 46.

[3]

Sam Harris, "A Response to Critics," *Huffington Post* (January 29, 2011); http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/a-response-to-critics_b_815742.html. Accessed 11 January 2012.

[4]

Harris, Moral Landscape, 102.

[5]

Ibid., 30.

[6]

Michael Ruse, "Evolutionary Theory and Christian Ethics," in *The Darwinian Paradigm* (London: Routledge, 1989), 262,268,289.

[7]

Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2d ed. (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1909), 100.

[8]

Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), cited in Lewis Wolpert,*Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 215. Unfortunately, Wolpert's reference is mistaken. The quotation seems to be a pastiche from Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden: a Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 133 and Richard Dawkins, "The Ultraviolet Garden," Lecture 4 of 7 Royal Institution Christmas Lectures (1992), http://physicshead.blogspot.com/2007/01/richard-dawkins-lecture-4-ultraviolet.html. Accessed 11 January 2012. Thanks to my assistant Joe Gorra for tracking down this reference.

[9]

Harris repeatedly conflates moral and nonmoral senses of "good" and "bad" throughout his book. For example, he says that there are objectively good and bad moves in chess (*Moral Landscape*, 8). Clearly a bad move in chess is not a morally evil move, nor is a good move

good in the sense of moral worth. Harris fails to appreciate that in English "good" and "bad" are used in a wide range of nonmoral senses, as when we say:

"That's a good way to get yourself killed."

"That's a good game plan."

"The milk has gone bad."

"That's a bad idea."

"The sunshine felt good."

"That's a good route to East Lansing."

"She's in good health."

Similarly, Harris' contrast of "the good life" and "the bad life" is not an ethical contrast between a morally good life and a morally evil life, but a contrast between a pleasurable life and a miserable life. He gives no reason to identify pleasure/misery with moral good/evil or right/wrong.

[10]

Harris, *Moral Landscape*, 12.

[11]

Ibid., 198.

[12]

Ibid., 31.

[13]

Ibid., 1.

[14]

Ibid., 12.

[15]

Ibid., 190.

[16]

Ibid., 97–99.

[17]

Cited in ibid., 11.

[18]

Harris, *Moral Landscape*, 32.

[19]

Ibid., 11.

[20]

Ibid., 104.

[21]

Ibid., 217.

[22]

Ibid., 218, citing Greene and Cohen.

[23]

Ibid., 112.