**Book Review**

**Sam Harris** *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*  
New York: Free Press, 2010. 291 pp. $26.99 ISBN 978-1-4391-7121-9

*The Moral Landscape* is Sam Harris’s first attempt to write a more scholarly book on what he sees as the necessary war between science and religion. While his *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* were popular bestsellers focused on tearing down religion, *The Moral Landscape* begins the construction of a completely alternative worldview to religion, a scientific worldview in which moral questions are solved by research into the consequences of moral behaviors for the well-being of conscious creatures.

Harris argues that just as science has contributed to improving human health, so science can be used to improve human morality. He is a moral realist as well as a naturalist and cognitivist, and, as such, rails against moral relativism like he rails against religion. In fact, moral relativism is what is keeping religion alive, in Harris’s view, because it has prevented morality from becoming a scientific subject. Harris rejects Hume’s is-ought problem and G.E. Moore’s naturalistic fallacy as philosophical obscurantism; all we have to do to make morality a scientific subject is to admit that good and bad exist, that we can know something about them, and that we prefer good. Once we do that, it becomes obvious that we can perform research into how to increase the good and decrease the bad in the world. As a consequentialist, Harris believes a science of morality to be the only reliable means to collect information on the consequences of actions, thus determining how we ought to behave in order to achieve well-being. The above traits set Harris squarely within the utilitarian tradition of Anglo-American philosophy.

Harris’s use of brain data and, particularly, his own neuroimaging work on belief forms a part of this book which is not entirely well integrated with the book’s purported purpose. While it is quite interesting that feelings (indicators of well-being for the utilitarian Harris) are detectable on brain scans, Harris never manages to make clear why a brain scan is necessary for determining morals. Perhaps it is because brain scans know what a conscious person does not: the scanner can see the real neural roots of human thought, belief, and feeling. For Harris, there is no free will, the brain is purely deterministic, and so the mechanism of the brain is more morally interesting than its epiphenomenal output, consciousness. The net effect of his denial of free will and belief in moral
realism is a sort of atheistic imitation of Calvinism, where the neurally elect prosper and the neurally damned do not, and where people are no more morally responsible for their actions than are grizzly bears or hurricanes, for which he notes “if we could . . . we would build prisons for them as well” (109).

On page 49, Harris gives an unusually direct insight into his project. He sees the scientific investigation of morals as having three aspects: a descriptive aspect (why do people act the way they do?), a normative aspect (how should we act to achieve better consequences?), and a persuasive aspect (how do we convince people to change their behavior so as to act to achieve better consequences?). Harris says he is interested primarily in the normative aspect, but in fact he is clearly using the normative aspect as a means to fulfill the persuasive aspect, which he willingly admits holds the real prize: behavior modification, via public policy, to fit the world to the research of the future moral-scientific elite. In his own words: “changing people’s ethical commitments . . . is the most important task facing humanity . . . every important goal . . . falls within its purview” (50). Simply wanting to “change ethical commitments” is morally neutral. The morality of it comes from what the ends are for these changes. Harris is rather vague throughout this work as to what the changes might be that he is pursuing, though they seem to coincide with the generic American political liberal: less traditional morality, more freedom of expression.

However, this revision of morality in itself is not enough for Harris, for he sees religion as the main obstacle to achieving these political ends. Therefore religion must go. This is a political book, like his previous books, and all people of religious belief are its target. While Harris does not here describe how he might go about disposing of such inferior belief systems, he has already discussed that in The End of Faith: controlling religion may necessitate killing (52–53), torture (194, 198–199), nuclear first strike (129), dictatorship (151, 230), and a world government (151).

The general thesis of this book—that science and morality are inseparable—need not be antithetical to religious ethics. Harris claims that all religious ethics are inherently supernaturalistic but this is clearly false, and the Catholic Church’s natural law tradition is the obvious counterexample. Catholic natural law draws moral norms from human nature; that is the principle of the endeavor. Harris seems to have no knowledge of this, and it deflates his thesis completely. It also illustrates the extreme superficiality of Harris’s engagement with religious thought: to Harris all religions are effectively the same, faiths have nothing worth knowing, so why even bother to look?

Sam Harris was one of the first and is one of the most well-known representatives of the “new atheist” movement. He may now be on the leading edge of a new wave focused on naturalizing ethics in the attempt to pull the discipline away from religion, thus rendering religion not only theoretically moribund, but also devoid of practical relevance. This two-pronged attack on both the theoretical and practical aspects of religion should be of keen interest to those involved in the science and religion dialogue, since it attempts to destroy this field of study. However, Harris’s book does little to accomplish this task on a scholarly level. Unfortunately, academia is not really his target audience, the larger reading
public is, and on this level it may accomplish its work of further marginalizing religion from public life.

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