

# 'Moral Landscape' examines science behind human values

The goal of this book is to begin a conversation about how moral truth can be understood in the context of science. There is an epidemic of scientific ignorance in the United States. This isn't surprising, as very few scientific truths are self-evident and many are deeply counterintuitive."

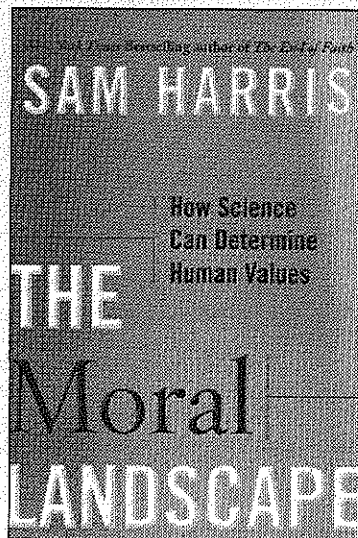
So writes Sam Harris in his latest best-seller, "The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values." Harris is co-founder and CEO of Project Reason, a nonprofit foundation that advocates for science and secular values; he has degrees in philosophy and neuroscience from Stanford University and UCLA. His previous books include "The End of Faith," which won the PEN Award for Nonfiction in 2005, and "Letter to a Christian Nation."

At the heart of "The Moral Landscape" is the notion that all human values have their genesis in the natural order and, as such, we do not need "God" or anything else to define concepts of right and wrong or to otherwise make judgments about the inherent efficacy of different behaviors. To illustrate this point, he examines a number of values that tend to be common to people in most societies. For instance, acting in one's own self-interest has often been characterized as being beneficial from an evolutionary perspective. Conversely, most religions tend to articulate, in one way or another, that cooperation and empathy for others are higher-order aspirations that allow us to transcend our more primal tendencies.

"Many people imagine that the theory of evolution entails selfishness as a biological imperative," Harris observes. "This popular misconception has been very harmful to the reputation of science." He then proceeds to provide several examples of how selfishness has been counterproductive to the evolution of some species, while cooperation has led to a competitive advantage for others.

"We have good reason to believe that much of what we do in the name of 'morality' – decrying sexual infidelity, punishing cheaters, valuing cooperation, etc. – is borne of unconscious processes that were shaped by natural selection," Harris adds.

Harris thinks that scientists should not shy away from passion-



"The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values," by Sam Harris. New York: Free Press, 2010, 291 pages, \$26.99

ately extolling the virtues of their particular medium for pursuing new insights into reality that bring us closer to defining the perpetually elusive "absolute truth." Specifically, he would like to see his colleagues become a lot more vocal in their critique and criticism of the proponents of religion. "The scientific community's reluctance to take a stand on moral issues has come at a price," Harris notes. "It has made science appear divorced, in principle, from the most important questions of human life."

When you dig a little deeper into his thesis, however, it becomes increasingly obvious that Harris has embedded his own self-serving agenda in "The Moral Landscape." As is the case with so much of what is done in the name of motives that are alleged to be altruistic and pure, the allocation of financial resources – i.e., money – seems to be a driving force behind this book. "Many of our secular critics worry that if we oblige people to choose between reason and faith, they will choose faith and cease to support scientific research," Harris contends. "Currently, federal funding is only allowed for work on stem cells that have been derived from surplus embryos at fertility clinics."

The author also seems to understand that the scientific community can sometimes be its own worst enemy. "There is no question that

scientists have occasionally demonstrated sexist and racist biases," Harris concedes. At the same time, he seems in denial when he argues that science is somehow impervious to these deleterious attitudes. After providing several examples of where less than admirable human qualities have arguably distracted from the quest to advance knowledge, he comes to the rather dubious conclusion that "none of these facts, alone or in combination, remotely suggests that our notions of scientific objectivity are vitiated by racism or sexism."

To his credit, very few books are as extensively researched and referenced as "The Moral Landscape." There are 43 pages of notes in the back, together with 40 pages of citations. Harris is intimately familiar with both the current and the historical literature that forms the nucleus of his work. When discussing the debate concerning whether creationism should be included in curriculum, he does a reasonably balanced job of providing both sides of the issue, although his personal bias does tend to shine through in various passages.

A primary problem with Harris' argument is that he assumes the scientific method is the only valid method of inquiry; i.e., the only mechanism through which legitimate knowledge can be satisfactorily derived. Ultimately his belief in science comes down to a matter of faith, and this is the glaring contradiction at the core of "The Moral Landscape." The scientific method is admittedly very useful for dealing with the empirical world, but it does exhibit rather severe limitations when it veers outside that realm.

"The Moral Landscape" is not a bad book. It is a fairly interesting read that tends to stimulate critical thought and reflection in an area of life that touches us all, although the author's intolerance and contempt for opposing perspectives is definitely a distraction. It's one thing to passionately advocate for your position – it's quite another to claim that your position is the only viable way of understanding and interpreting the world.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.

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