

**Sam Harris, *Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010)**

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To the majority of the scientific community, the idea that ethics is an undeveloped branch of science may be, at best, an imprudent one. However, if the arguments for this thesis are consistent, it becomes quite an interesting hypothesis. This is Sam Harris' opinion and it is presented, in as much as a direct and pragmatic manner, in his book *Moral Landscape*, published at Free Press, New York, in 2010. As Harris states, "the goal of this book is to begin a conversation on how moral truth may be understood within the context of science." (p. 9.)

Harris' idea that moral truth may be scientifically understood is based first and foremost on the premise that there is no fundamental difference between values and facts (understood both as events from the world, and human brain experiences), since values reflect facts which can be measured, analyzed and clarified by means of science. Secondly, Harris thinks, science may clarify moral issues. The only obstacle to this point is, in his opinion, the structure of the academic community, which is divided between conservatives and liberals. Scientists' community, by the scientific code of ethics, sets barriers to the scientific discourse on moral issues, by the tendency that it lends to academic debates, by the way that it defines scientific research, by the scopes that science is traditionally allowed to cover, by the exhaustive and restrictive enumeration of the objects that the latter may thoroughly analyze. Therefore, although science might contribute, if allowed, to the clarification of moral issues, it currently does it only rather shyly. But, Harris thinks, this situation can be changed.

To Harris, the evolution of science, especially of neurobiology, which describes the recurrences of human thought and behavior, shows us that the difference between ethics and science begins to fade away. Even the cultural differences which influence the development of human thought and behavior are facts that depend on the organization of the human brain.

Harris rejects both the position of those who build morality on the idea of God, and the one of those explaining moral actions by means of the idea of

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cultural invention and evolution. In his opinion, since the moral truth can be scientifically established, both parties are wrong.

Certainly, Harris does not claim that we can clarify all moral situations by means of science. His claim is only that moral opinions and motivations are constrained by facts, so that science may explain the connection between facts and values.

Although some of Harris' hypotheses and presuppositions are to my mind pertinent, many of them are rather problematic. One of them is the idea that scientific progress shall also bring answers to moral questions. Of course, the development of neurobiology had a major contribution to the understanding of the contexts requiring moral solutions. Obviously, values and facts share, most of the times, a causal connection. But the scientific approach of facts does not produce an exhaustive discourse on values – those that in fact ground moral choices. Moral truth is not a correspondence with facts, but a symmetry of values with those facts that generate answers for them. The human being's welfare does, indeed, entirely depend on world events and on the experiences of his/her brain. Certainly, scientific answers influence the way our brain elaborates explanations of moral truths and values; but this does not automatically mean that "when talking about values, we are actually talking about an interdependent world of facts." (p. 9.)

Another problematic idea is that the scientific explanation sweeps off both the religious and cultural explanations of moral truth. In fact, his thesis contradicts only the religious explanation (according to which moral truth is first of all a personal experience, very likely an experience of the fear of God). The cultural explanation (according to which moral truths are the products of the cultural evolution of a society) remains untouched by Harris' hypothesis, since it is in itself a scientific explanation of moral truth.

According to Harris, the development of science (of neurobiology first of all) will eventually lead to the scientific establishment of moral truth. But academic opinions on the "quantity" of science vary: if some anthropologists believe that the cultural mixture (religion, art, science, etc.) remains constant by the transfer of categories between these fields and their metamorphoses, others claim the desacralization of the world under the impact of science. If, for the sake of argumentation, we adopt the former position, we could easily reject the author's projection under the label of "utopia". The greatest impact lays on moral truth, because its scientific establishment may only be an approximate one at most. But, if we give credit to the assumption according to which science prevails in outlining individuals' perspective of the world, the author's opinion becomes

important. Harris' observation that "[t]he relevant neuroscience is in its infancy, but we know that our emotions, social interactions, and moral intuitions mutually influence one another" (p. 13.) creates the premises of a historic reconciliation within the cultural process, science being conferred the role of a crucial instrument in clarifying individuals' moral positions.

However, the end of this book has the rather bitter taste of a lack of concrete solutions. Harris actually speaks of the future relation between science and ethics, and he underlines the signs of radical change. He is not a prophet, and his book is not a science fiction. The author is interested in manipulating reality, advertising the new neurosciences, showing us their strengths. The main probable repercussion of their development is a more adequate understanding of the relation between values and facts.

But if one thing is certain, it is that Sam Harris' book has achieved its purpose – to launch a debate on the relation between science and ethics. The author's structure of argumentation, the clear and concise language, and the pragmatic and persuasive style build a captivating book. The very idea that Harris promotes, the courage of his argumentation and his lack of intellectual cautions towards the scientific community lends an interesting mark to this book. The way he understands to address the reader turns the latter into an independent, sometimes caustic thinker.