Rezoning the Moral Landscape:
How Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas Can Fix Sam Harris's Attempt to Ground Ethics in the Sciences

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Introduction:

How do we determine what "the right thing to do" is? How do we "live good lives?" or "become good people?" Our answers to these questions will invariably shape every aspect of our lives and how we strive to organize our societies. Yet today, it is not uncommon to see claims that such questions are unanswerable, or else have answers that are entirely relative, varying from culture to culture, or even from individual to individual.

In this context, it is not surprising that many would consider turning to the sciences for answers. After all, science has been incredibly successful in answering many of our questions about the world. Medicine, for instance, seems to tell us *something* about what is "good for us" and "good for others."

Sam Harris's 2011 work, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* is an example of such attempts to "ground morality in the sciences." In the book, Harris argues that science can answer our most pressing questions about morality. Harris claims that, if "moral good" is to be meaningful, it must relate to the "well-being of conscious creatures."[1] Although perhaps imperfect, science gives us the means to measure well-being. For instance, terms like "health" and "harm," can be usefully defined in terms of biology, even if our current definitions are subject to revision. Hence, it is not impossible to rank actions or policies on the basis of how they affect well-being, in turn revealing to us which actions or policies are more or less choice-worthy.

This paper offers a critique of Harris's approach through the lens of the philosophy of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. Reviews of Harris's work have often mentioned Aristotle as a comparison, noting how Aristotle can provide us with a more robust notion of "well-being" and "human flourishing." However, this paper attempts to extend these critiques by investigating how Aristotle's metaphysics, particularly his analysis of the "Problem of the One and the Many" and his notion of how goodness relates to unity and self-determination, can serve to better situate the role of the sciences vis-à-vis ethics. In particular, Aristotle and St. Thomas can help Harris by:

- Explaining how the sciences are organized and why they will not produce multiple, competing measures of goodness and well-being;

[1] Sam Harris. The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values. Free Press. (2011) pg. 7

- Resolving the "moral paradoxes" that Harris finds himself unable to find a solution to, by demonstrating how the human good essentially involves a "common good," and how goodness always relates to the whole;
- Providing us with a better explanation for why selfless behavior is good and why it is "good *for us*" to be virtuous;
- Providing Harris with a better definition of freedom as self-determination; and
- Showing how neither a recognition that the sciences must play a major role in ethics, nor naturalistic explanations of human behavior, need to preclude our orientation towards a transcendent good.

The pairing of Harris, the aggressively anti-religion champion of "New Atheism," with a Dominican friar and a philosopher widely regarded as the "greatest natural theologian," might seem strange at first sight. Yet, as we shall see, there are some crucial similarities in how they think about well-being, with the latter offering powerful insights than can benefit Harris's project.[2]

Why *The Moral Landscape*?

Given the general tenor of reviews of *The Moral Landscape* by academic philosophers (i.e.,often not particularly positive), I feel that I should point out why Harris's work makes for a good example of proposed "scientific approaches to morality." Prior to entering a graduate program in philosophy, I worked in government for many years, at the state, federal, and local level. During that period, I earned a master's degree from Duke University's well regarded public policy program, and completed an executive management program in public administration through Suffolk University. Both programs gave me ample time to discuss the more philosophical aspects of public administration with experienced leaders, including senior officers in the military, town managers, state officials, and municipal department heads.

During this period, I had Harris's work recommended to me on several occasions. Moreover, the general approach Harris recommends— i.e., that we resolve questions of morality by looking at how policies, actions, etc. are likely to affect human well-being through the methods of the social and natural sciences—is largely in line with the views I encountered throughout my education and career. To be sure, I do not recall ever finding myself discussing the "is-ought gap" with my staff as I prepared to present my policy recommendations and

[2] **Note:** This paper is written with skeptics in mind. Hence, I have included detailed end notes in many places, which take up what I expect to be common objections to Aristotle and St. Thomas's positions.

funding requests to our city council. However, the general attitude towards the relationship between the sciences and ethics was largely in keeping with Harris's views (a key exception being Harris's highly critical attitude towards religion, which was not widely shared).[3]

By contrast, in my experience, appeals to deontological reasoning, or any notion of virtue, tended to be confined to discussions about human resource decisions, and this remained true even when I shifted over to working primarily in education policy. Hence, something *roughly like* Harris's position already has significant cachet with those who have influence over areas we might tend to think are especially relevant to ethics: the justice system, education, governance, foreign policy, etc. Thus, I believe it will be particularly valuable to explore how we can preserve and extend what is valuable in Harris's position, while also identifying what is unhelpful and best removed. That is, even *The Moral Landscape*'s shortcomings will be valuable, allowing us to highlight where some popular opinions are in need of reform.

The Moral Landscape

Harris argues that ethics can be objectively grounded in science, allowing us to determine "moral truths."[4]Further, if "good" is to have any coherent meaning, it must refer to "the well-being of conscious creatures."[5,i] Harris challenges us to think of any standard of goodness that does *not* bear any relation to the experience of some being. Any such standard cannot—by definition—make any difference to any of us.[6] Hence, to say that something is "good" is to say that it promotes well-being or reduces suffering.

Harris makes this initial point by using extreme cases. For instance, there is a clear sense in which it is "not *good* for children" to have high levels of lead in their water, to receive head injuries, etc. Further, if we compare the lives of the most fortunate, (i.e.,those with high status, material wealth, supportive childhoods, rewarding careers, etc.) and the lives of the least fortunate, (i.e., those subject to childhood abuse, warfare, starvation, exposure to toxins, etc.) we are left with an obvious contrast in well-being that it seems foolish to deny.[ii] Hence, claims to the effect that: "*it not good to for children to have high levels of lead slipped into their water,*" is a sentence bereft of any truth value, or that its truth bears no relation to facts about how lead affects

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3 I will largely ignore Harris's diatribes against religion, both for this reason and because they are ancillary to his thesis.
4 Sam Harris *The Moral Landscape.* (2011) pg. 18
5 Ibid. pg. 7
6 Ibid. pg. 20

children, are on a level with other forms of radical skepticism—e.g, the denial the people have bodies, the denial that *anything* is true, etc.[iii]

Another way to say this is that there is a truth about what is "good for us." We do not always know what will be to our benefit, and we are not always able to make ourselves do what we think will be best for us. Yet this does not preclude our being able to experience things that are *truly* better or worse for us. Nor is it impossible to identify things that have been "truly good" or "truly bad" for us. When a heroin addict claims that her addiction has "ruined her life," she does not lack epistemic warrant for such claims.

Harris reasons that, if we are able to make such judgments in the extreme cases—e.g., between the beleaguered refugee who has lost their livelihood and their family and the successful retiree surrounded by friends and family—then it seems that making judgments about cases in between, or on more complex questions, is possible. Further, the sciences will often be able to inform our decision making here. For instance, will it truly be better for most people if an additional tax is placed on alcohol, as an incentive aimed at deterring problematic drinking, or will this just place an additional financial burden on the families and individuals already harmed by alcoholism?

This is the sort of question that the social sciences can, in principle, provide an answer to. Likewise, while it might be obvious that "getting head injuries is bad for children," it is less obvious that the risk of head injuries is grounds for not allowing children to play sports. With this sort of question, data from the medical sciences can help us make better decisions about what is likely to be the better choice in any particular case, even if the "right choice" depends on the particularities of the individual child in question.

Harris proposes that we envision the possibility space of outcomes vis-à-vis the well-being of experiencing creatures as a landscape. The peaks on this landscape represent those possible worlds where more organisms have a higher level of well-being. The valleys represent worlds where more organisms have a lower level of well-being. We can conceptualize the limit cases as worlds where every organism is flourishing and those where all experiencing entities are subject to abject misery.[7]There might be very many peaks on the moral landscape, different potential worlds that preference the well-being of some conscious entities over others. It might be very difficult to discover exactly how to move from one place on the landscape to another. However,

[7] Sam Harris. *The Moral Landscape.* (2011) pg. 24-26

this does not negate the fact that we can, in principle, discover *how* to traverse the landscape and *where* it would be good to move to. Further, for Harris, it is principally the empirical sciences that can show us how to do both.

Having presented this position, Harris spends much of his time trying to refute extreme versions of moral relativism (e.g. "what is good varies entirely from culture to culture"), fundamentalism (e.g., "what is good can only be known through divine revelation and reason cannot play a large role in ethics), and skepticism (e.g. "it is impossible to know what truly promotes well-being").

Aristotle and "The Problem of the One and the Many:"

Aristotle, and the tradition that follows him, has tremendous depth. Here our intention is only to touch on the core elements in Aristotle's thought that can most benefit Harris's project. Much in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is readily applicable. For Aristotle, it is *eudaimonia*—often translated as "happiness," "flourishing," or, notably, "well-being"—which is sought for its own sake. The other things we seek, we seek *in order to achieve eudaimonia*. Clearly, Harris's position is close to Aristotle's here. Yet, as we shall see, Aristotle's richer notion of well-being will allow us to resolve ethical issues related to trade-offs between our own and others' well-being that present Harris with significant challenges.

However, Aristotle's ethics, like his conception of the sciences, flows from his metaphysics, and so we must begin our analysis here. Aristotle begins both the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics* with a review of how past thinkers have tried to explain the world and the causes at work in it (i.e,. its *principles*). The problem upon which past explanations had foundered was that of "the One and the Many."

Here is the problem: initially, it seems that being must be in some way "one," a unity. For, if there were many different "types of being," then we would be left with the question of how these sui generis "types of being" interact. This is the same problem that plagued Cartesian "substance dualism." Further, if these discrete "types of being" interact, then this interacting whole must itself be a "unity," a "one."

At the same time, the world we experience is one of tremendous multiplicity, where everything seems to be undergoing constant change. Yet for us to be able to "say anything true about anything," there must be at least *something* that "stays the same" across this ceaseless change. Otherwise, our words would mean something different on each occasion, and whatever we referred to would constantly be passing out of being. If, as

Heraclitus says, we "cannot step twice into the same river," then it also seems we cannot speak of the same river twice either.[8,iv]

It is important to stress that modern thought has not escaped this problem. The world described by contemporary science is one of tremendous diversity. It includes many types of star and galaxy, a vast number of animal species, each with their own complex biology, a "zoo" of fundamental particles, etc. At the same time, science paints a picture of a word that is unified. There are no truly isolated systems. Causation, energy, and information flow across the boundaries of all seemingly discrete "things," such that the universe appears to be not so much a "collection of things," but rather a single continuous process. How do we reconcile this seeming multiplicity (the Many) with the equally apparent unity of being (the One)?[9,v]

Aristotle, like Plato before him, attempts to chart a *via media* between the Scylla of Parmenides, whose elevation of the unity of being led him deny the reality of change (and thus of all the evidence of the senses), and the Charybdis of Heraclitus, whose elevation of multiplicity seems to make it impossible to come to know *anything*.[vi] For Aristotle, this meant affirming the reality of the vast multiplicity experienced by the senses, while also affirming *principles* of unity that exist within this multiplicity. It is these principles which produce a "One" from the "Many."[vii]

There is much in Aristotle's solution to this problem, and later commentators' developments of it, that is relevant to Harris's project. However, we shall focus specifically on how Aristotle and St. Thomas:

A) Overcome the epistemic problems represented by multiplicity;
B) Explain how we can move from the unity of Being to a plurality of being**s**;
C) Explain why being is primarily said of substances (things), and why "being" and "good" are predicated *analogously*;
D) Explain how the unity by which anything is *any thing* at all relates to goodness;
E) Explain how the virtues make us self-determining and are essential to any sort of *stable* well-being (i.e. not dependent on good fortune), and how *science is itself a virtue;*

[8] Heraclitus. *Fragments*. (1920; 1898; 1948). See fragments 12, 49a, and 91.
[9] Modern approaches to this question have tended to focus on its epistemic import. For instance: "is the existence of discrete entities illusory, the product of 'mental constructs?'"

A. Generating Principles - Moving from Many to One

The epistemic issues raised by multiplicity and ceaseless change are addressed by Aristotle's distinction between *principles* and *causes*. Aristotle presents this distinction early in the *Physics* through a criticism of Anaxagoras.[10] Anaxagoras posits an infinite number of principles at work in the world. Were Anaxagoras correct, discursive knowledge would be impossible. For instance, if we wanted to know "how bows work," we would have to come to know each individual instance of a bow shooting an arrow, since there would be no *unifying* principle through which *all* bows work. We

> cannot come to know an infinite multitude in a finite time.[11]

However, an infinite (or practically infinite) number of causes does not preclude meaningful knowledge if we allow that many causes might be known through a *single* principle (a One), which manifests at *many* times and in *many* places (the Many). Further, such principles do seem to be knowable. For instance, the principle of lift allows us to explain many instances of flight, both as respects animals and flying machines. Moreover, a single unifying principle might be relevant to *many* distinct sciences, just as the principle of lift informs both our understanding of flying organisms (biology) and flying machines (engineering).

For Aristotle, what are "better known to us" are the concrete particulars experienced directly by the senses. By contrast, what are "better known in themselves" are the more general principles at work in the world.[12,viii] Since every effect is a sign of its causes, we can move from the unmanageable multiplicity of concrete particulars to a deeper understanding of the world.[ix]

For instance, individual insects are what are best known to us. In most parts of the world, we can directly experience vast multitudes of them simply by stepping outside our homes. However, there are 200 million insects for each human on the planet, and perhaps 30 million insect species.[13] If knowledge could only be acquired through the experience of particulars, it seems that we could only ever come to know an infinitesimally small amount of what there is to know about insects. However, the entomologist is able to understand much

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10 Aristotle. *Physics.* (Book I, Ch. VI)

11 This is for the same reason that one cannot cross an infinite space, at a finite speed, in a finite amount of time.

12 Aristotle. *Metaphysics. (*Book VII, Ch. III) Aristotle makes this observation in many other places as well (see end note).

13 Smithsonian Institute. "Numbers of Insects (Species and Individuals)." (1996)

about insects because they understand the principles that are unequally realized in individual species and particular members of those species.[x]

Some principles are more general than others. For example, one of the most consequential paradigm shifts across the sciences in the past fifty years has been the broad application of the methods of information theory, complexity studies, and cybernetics to a wide array of sciences. This has allowed scientists to explain disparate phenomena across the natural and social sciences using the same principles. For instance, the same principles can be used to explain both how heart cells synchronize and why Asian fireflies blink in unison.[14] The same is true for how the body's production of lymphocytes (a white blood cell) takes advantage of the same goal-direct "parallel terraced scan" technique developed independently by computer programmers and used by ants in foraging.[15]

Notably, such *unifications* are not reductions. Clearly, firefly behavior is not reducible to heart cell behavior or vice versa. Indeed, such unifications tend to be "top-down" explanations, focusing on similarities between systems taken as *wholes*, as opposed to "bottom-up" explanations that attempts to explain wholes in terms of their parts.[xi]

This understanding of principles is crucial for Harris's project because it will be precisely what allows the sciences to be unified vis-à-vis the study a *single* notion of "well-being" or "goodness." For Aristotle, the good is "that at which all things aim."[16] If this is so, then goodness and well-being must be extremely general principles.[17] Yet, this only makes sense, since these principles would seem to relate to almost every aspect of the world and our lives in it.

Further, Aristotle's definition makes a good deal of sense. Presumably, when we act, we *do* aim at *some* good, else *why* would we be acting? It would not make sense to run, to build cars, to eat, etc. if we did not think these would attain some good. One might object that this would seem to leave out unintentional acts. However, when we unconsciously scratch at an itch it is for the good of relief. Likewise, the beating of our heart has a

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14 Steven Strogatz. Sync: How Order Emerges from Chaos in the Universe, Nature, and Daily Life. "Chapter One: Fireflies and the Inevitability of Sync." (2004)

15 Melanie Mitchell. *Complexity: A Guided Tour*. "Chapter XII : Computation Writ Large: Information Processing in Living Systems." (2009)

16 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book I, Ch. I)

17 Indeed, as we shall see, goodness is among the *most* general principles. In the later Scholastic tradition, including in the works of St. Thomas, the Good is one of the "transcendental properties of being," i.e., attributes considered to be inherent to all existence.

function, it is a teleonomic process directed towards a goal.[xii] To be sure, it seems implausible that rocks have an aim when they fall. Yet, as we shall see, rocks do not constitute proper beings for Aristotle, and this is in part *because* they lack their own aims.

B. Moving From Being to Beings:

At the outset of the second book of the Physics, Aristotle identifies proper *beings* as those things that are the source of their own production. (i.e. "possessing a nature"). Beings make up a whole—a whole which is oriented towards some end. This definition would seem to exclude mere parts of an organism. For example, a red blood cell is not the source of its own production, nor is it a self-governing whole.

On this view, living things would most fully represent "beings." By contrast, something like a rock is not a proper being. A rock is a mere bundle of external causes. Moreover, if one breaks a rock in half, one simply has two smaller rocks (i.e., an accidental change). Whereas, if one cuts a cat in half, the cat—as a being—will lose its unity and cease to exist (i.e. death, a substantial change).

There are gradations in the level of unity something can have. Aristotle maintains that substantial change (i.e., the change by which one type of thing becomes another type of thing, e.g. a man becoming a corpse) involves *contradictory opposition*. That is, a thing is either man or not-man, fish or not-fish. It would not make sense for anything to be "half-man."[xiii]

By contrast, unity involves *contrary opposition*.[18] Things might be more or less unified, and more or less divisible. For instance, a volume of water in a jar is very easy to divide. A water molecule less so. We can think of the living organism as achieving a higher sort of unity, such that its diverse multitude of parts come to be truly unified into a whole through an aim.[xiv]

For Aristotle, unity, "oneness" is the ground for saying that there are any discrete things at all. To say that there is "one duck" requires an ability to recognize a duck *as a whole*, to have "duck" as a *measure*. Likewise, to say that there are "three ducks" requires the measure "duck" by which a multitude of wholes is demarcated. Magnitude is likewise defined by unity, since it would not make sense to refer to a "half-foot" or a "quarter-note" without a measure by which a whole foot or note is known.[19]

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[18] See: Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. (Book XIV, Ch. I)
[19] See: Aristotle. *Metaphysics.* (Book X, Ch. I)

C. The Primacy of Substance (Thinghood)

The third key concept we need to explore, the notion of *analogous predication*, is presented in the fourth book of the *Metaphysics*. In the sentence: "*I walked from the river's bank to my bank's ATM*" the term "bank" is used *equivocally*. It means something entirely different in each case. By contrast, in: "*Tom Brady is a good athlete and Michael Jordan is also a good athlete,*" "athlete" is predicated of each *univocally*. We use the word in exactly the same way in each instance.

Aristotle's key insight is that our terms are not always completely equivocal, nor completely univocal. For instance, when we say that "*tuna fish is a healthy food*," "*Achilles's bloodwork is healthy*," and "*Achilles is healthy*," we do not mean "healthy" in precisely the same way in each instance.[20] We say that tuna fish is healthy because it *promotes* health, and that Achilles's bloodwork is healthy because it is a *sign of* health. The tuna and the bloodwork are both said to be "healthy" *in virtue of* how they relate to human health. It is Achilles who possesses health most fully, and his health (i.e. human health) is the *measure* by which the others are said to be healthy.

Crucially, this applies to being as well. Being is said most properly of substances (i.e. things, especially proper beings). A ball can be red, but "red" does not exist unattached to any *thing*. A dog can run, but we cannot have just "running," unattached to any entity.

We can predicate things of non-substances, e.g. "light" of green, or "fast" of motion, but these will always relate back to a substance. *Something* must be moving in a "fast motion." Further, since "science deals chiefly with that which is primary, and on which the other things depend, and in virtue of which they get their names," (i.e., *per se* predication versus *per accidens*) the sciences will be primarily oriented towards substances and their "principles and causes."[21]

As we shall discuss is more detail below, this insight is extremely helpful for ethics because it suggests to us that we should not focus primarily on "good acts," but rather on "good people," and "good lives." Indeed, this might help explain why Aristotle affirms Solon's pronouncement that we should "count no man happy until he is dead," preferring instead to consider flourishing and well-being across a lifetime (i.e., to relate goodness to

[20] Indeed, the prepared tuna, being dead, is *not healthy* as respects the health of the tuna.
[21] Aristotle. *Metaphysics.* (Book IV, Ch. II)

the *whole*).[22] Likewise, Harris's cursory denial of free will, which has follow on effects for moral responsibility, errs by focusing primarily on "free acts" as opposed to "free people."

D. **Unifying Aims**

Now, if we step back and try to consider Aristotle's original question: if being is "many" or "one," it seems to me that the most readily apparent example of the multiplicity of beings and their unity is the human mind itself. We have *our own* thoughts, experiences, memories, and desires, not other people's. The multiplicity of other things, particularly other people, and the unity of our own phenomenal awareness is something that is *given*.[xv,xvi]

Here, it may be helpful to look back to Aristotle's teacher, Plato. In the *Republic*, Plato examines the way in which an individual can become more or less a self-determining whole. We all want what is truly good for us, not what merely *appears* to be good, or what is *said to be* good by others.[23] It never makes sense for us to intentionally choose what is truly worse over what is truly better. Those who claim to "prefer evil," prefer it because they see it as "better *for them*." Even Milton's Satan must say "evil, be thou my good."[24]It would not make sense to say "evil, be thou evil *for me*" and then to pursue evil.[xvii]

For Plato, it is the "rational part of the soul" that both seeks, and is able to determine, "what is truly good."[xviii] Hence, it is also the rational part of a person that is capable of ranking and ordering the passions and appetites, and only it is suited to determining the means through which they might be satisfied. A person's thirst tells her nothing about how to pursue her anger. Her sorrow cannot tell her whether or not she should give in to her desire for sleep. Only reason has the calculating power to judge between desires and to determine which is most worthy of satisfaction.

Thus, the rational part of a person must reach downwards and shape the lower parts. For Plato, as for Aristotle and St. Thomas, we always desire things that are in *some way good*. We do not consciously wish evil on ourselves. The appetites and passions, however, seek only relative goods. If we are led by them, we shall stumble into evil through seeking a fractured part of the Good, its appearances, rather than the whole/absolute.[25]

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22 Aristotle. *Nichomachean Ethics.* (Book I, Ch. 8) Interestingly, this notion also shows up in the Bible (Sirach 11:28)
23 Plato. *Republic.* (505d)
24 John Milton. *Paradise Lost*. (II. 108-110)
25 That is, appearances are still *part* of the Good, but just a mere part. Goodness always relates to the whole.

Pace Nietzsche, this is not meant to be "the tyranny of the reason," and the abrogation of the passions. As Plato makes clear in the *Phaedrus*, it is the rule of reason that will allow the passions and appetites to be *most* fulfilled, allowing them to get to what is truly best for them. Whereas, if the parts of the soul are in conflict, the person will bounce randomly between different objects of desire, like a chariot whose rider is not in control of its horses, never getting to what *any* part of the soul would truly benefit from most. We might consider here the sex addict, who—through the tyranny of their appetites—does not enjoy even the object of their addiction as much as they would if they were properly oriented towards it.

Hence, there is no conflict between the "well-being of having what reason knows as truly best" and the "well-being of fulfilling the passions and appetites most fully." Such a multiplicity of goods is a contradiction in terms for Plato (and for Aristotle and St. Thomas as well). Indeed, Plato, and others following in his footsteps, such as St. Augustine, often describe the Good they pursue in highly sensuous terms. Consider St. Augustine's prayer to God in Book X of the *Confessions*[26]:

> *"You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours."*

It is this desire of reason to have what is "truly best" that allows us to transcend what we already are. Reason is *transcendent* in this way. When we strive to discover something that we do not already know, or when we try to figure out if "what appears good to us" is "truly good," we are moving beyond our current limitations, transcending current beliefs and desires. Hence, the "rule of reason" is also what allows us to become self-determining. When the rational part of the soul fails to unify a person in this way they become less a true whole, more a heap of warring appetites and passions. There is a "civil war in the soul."[27]

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[26] Translated by J.G. Pilkington, 1887. Augustine and other Church Fathers are comfortable talking about God in such sensuous terms precisely because they see God as the source of all finite and apparent good.

[27] Plato. *Republic.* (440e)

This is why Socrates's parting request to the Athenians after they have sentenced him to die in the *Apology* is that they should properly chastise and punish his sons if they do wrong. Socrates wants the Athenians to encourage his sons to live justly, so that they will not "think they are something when they are nothing."[28] To slip into vice—to be ruled over by mere parts of oneself—is to cease to function as a true whole, to become more a mere bundle of external causes, and so to slide towards non-being.

Non-living things cannot be guided by aims and so they cannot be unified in this way. This is why they are not true wholes or proper beings. Plants and animals *are* motivated by aims, their behavior is "goal-oriented," proceeding according to their *nature*. Yet they lack the rationality that allows us to properly distinguish between apparent goods and what is truly best. By contrast, man can *always* turn from his current state to ask about what might be "truly better" than what he already has, or already is, and this is why he can *transcend* what he currently is.[xix]

What Aristotle and St. Thomas build on is the way in which goodness, and its role in self-determination, relates to the ability of wholes *to be wholes*.[xx] Organisms are proper wholes, functioning as a unity, and it is their being oriented towards some aim that allows them to accomplish this feat. Activity in the body does not cease at death. In plants, it might continue long after an organism has ceased to exist as a whole. However, at death this activity ceases to be properly organized through unifying ends. Hence, it is the pursuit of goodness that allows for unity.[xxi]

E. Virtue and Self-Determination

This essential relationship between goodness and unity is what will allow us to explain why it is that—while health is an important aspect of well-being—well-being is not *reducibl*e to health. Organisms are in a constant battle against entropy to maintain their form, to remain what they are instead of dissolving into a divided heap of parts that are no longer functioning as a whole. In general, being alive and healthy are prerequisites for accomplishing our goals. This is true both as respects attaining any good we desire (i.e., what appears good to us) and—we might think—any goal that is truly choice-worthy. For example, suppose that we

[28] Plato. *Apology*. (41e)

think the highest good we can accomplish is to teach philosophy to the younger generation, combat global warming, or abolish atomic weapons. Clearly, being dead will likely prevent us from achieving these ends.

However, maintaining its individual form is not *always* the highest priority of an organism. Bees, for instance, generally die when they sting. The defense of the hive is a higher good to which bees are oriented (an orientation towards the whole). Likewise, human beings can have aims that they hold to be of greater importance than their own lives. Socrates preferred execution to betraying his principles and fleeing Athens.[xxii] Martyrs who die in the pursuit of a worthy cause are often held up as paragons of moral virtue. To make sense of this intuition, any ethics must explain *why* it is "better for us" to transcend egoism, or else label such people foolhardy.[29]

Aristotle and St. Thomas expand on Plato by observing how it is the virtues that allow us to thrive in this way, *regardless of our fortune*. That is, the virtues make us more *self-determining*—more *free* (i.e., free to discover what is truly good, free to learn *how* to accomplish that good, and free to actualize that good). Someone who is in a state of vice, who is undisciplined, rash, lustful, etc., may still preserve their well-being through luck. Yet, if they run into bad fortune—e.g., if they lose their wealth, status, and romantic partners—they are likely to be in dire straits. Thus, the virtues lead to a more *stable* form of well-being precisely because they lead to a self-determining well-being. This insight is helpful for Harris, who lacks any particularly strong answer for *why* we should preference others' well-being when it is not obvious that it will benefit our own.

It is the virtuous person who is least dependent on external goods that can be easily lost.[xxiii] It is also this person who both wants others to flourish and who is most able to weather bad fortune. The person who is wrathful and hateful loses some share of their well-being if fortune dictates that those they hate should find success. The person with the virtues of love and charity flourishes when others flourish, and so is less likely to be forced into zero-sum competition with others.[30]

For instance, Socrates's flourishing is not dependent on his avoiding punishment, and this is what allows him to be *free* to stand up to his accusers in the *Apology,* and to stand by his principles in the *Crito*. Likewise, St. Francis or Laozi could both flourish while retiring into the wilderness with nothing, while St. Paul and Boethius

[29] This is no easy task. While we might get people to affirm the goodness of self-sacrifice, can we convince them that it is truly "better *for them*?" Like Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, we might have no problem affirming that "all men are mortal" and yet balk at the realization that this applies to *us*.

[30] No doubt, those who possess such virtues also suffer when other suffer. However, if such individuals also possess the virtue of prudence, then they shall also be able to recognize when they can alleviate such suffering and when they must try to peacefully accept it as out of their control

were not robbed of their serenity by imprisonment. By contrast, any well-being attained by the infamous billionaire Jeffery Epstein evaporated as soon as his crimes were exposed and he was deprived of his freedom and his status. Epstein was quickly driven to despair and suicide in prison, while Boethius found the peace to pen one of the enduring masterpieces of ethical and philosophical thought from his cell.[31]

To make the point clear: suppose we think that it is *truly better "for us"* to be Socrates, Martin Luther King, Boethius, or any of the many other people who have been martyred, tortured, imprisoned, or stripped of their property for "doing the right thing." Suppose we do not believe it would be better to be cowardly versions of these same people, people who default on their beliefs when threatened. If we believe that the former are truly "better off," then our understanding of well-being and the pursuit of goodness must be able to capture this.

At the end of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, Sydney Carton sacrifices himself, taking the place of Charles Darnay, who has been sentenced to an unjust execution. As the book closes, Sydney Carton reflects on the good that still manages to flourish in the shadow of the French Reign of Terror. His famous closing lines: "*It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest I go to than I have ever known*," must be explained by any ethics. Is what Darnay does "better *for him*" or is it "better" in an equivocal sense? Does this depend on Darnay receiving some sort of postmortem extrinsic reward in Heaven? Would it be better *for him* to have not made this sacrifice? Would it be better *for him* to be the *type of person* who would not countenance such an act of sacrifice?

Essentially, we want to be able to explain why it is "good *for us* to be good." The difficulty here is to avoid another "slide into multiplicity." We do not want to have "moral good" become a sui generis sort of good that is not related to our well-being or "what is good for us." The relationship between goodness and unity helps us here. *Goodness relates to the whole*. It is what makes anything a true whole at all. This is why well-being cannot be atomized, and why Harris runs into "moral paradoxes" when trying to justify "population ethics" in terms of summing or averaging well-being.[32] To sum or average well-being is to have already divided goodness, to have made it into a *multitude* instead of a proper whole.[xxiv]

Since our freedom, and our ability to flourish are dependent on our environment (e.g. we are not "free to become a doctor" if we are not taught how to read), it will also be true that it is better for us to live in flourishing

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31 *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which was the most copied book outside the Bible in medieval Western Europe.

32 Sam Harris. *The Moral Landscape.* (2011). pg. 42-47

societies. As Aristotle notes, man is not just the "rational animal," but also "the political animal."[33] What is "best for us" involves being party to a "common good."

St. Thomas puts it this way: while our actions relate to particulars, what is "truly best" will relate to a unifying final aim.[34] As with organisms, it is the pursuit of aims which allow societies to become more unified and more fully "one." Hence, our alignment towards what is "truly best" for us includes being aligned towards what is best for the wholes of which we are a part.

For instance, a man or woman benefits from being part of a "good marriage" in a way that is not reducible to the sum of all the benefits that their spouse or marital status provides them with. To fail to be oriented towards the needs of this whole is to fail to fully benefit from being a part of this whole. Someone who sees all their relationships as purely transactional is *missing out* on an important aspect of human flourishing.[xxv]

Likewise, the society in which citizens do not identify as proper parts of the state are less likely to flourish. Conversely, citizens in states that fail to flourish will also tend to flourish less. Genuine patriotism can be good for both the patriot and the state if properly realized. Patriotism is instructive because it often becomes dangerous precisely when it is not oriented towards unity—when it is instead oriented towards denying some part of its own society.[xxvi]

Thus, "what is good *for us*,"—being unified and being able to pursue what is truly best for us—aligns with "just behavior" that is oriented towards the wholes of which we are a part. By contrast, if someone is ruled over by their appetites and passions, instead of pursuing what is truly good, then in an important sense they are "not free" to do what they think is best or to be a good member of a whole. These are the problems related to states of incontinence (i.e. an inability to make oneself do what one knows to be best) and vice (i.e. an inability to recognize what is truly best).[35]

If "doing the right thing" is to most fully increase our well-being, then we need to be in the state Aristotle defines as "virtue," having a habit of doing the right thing *and enjoying it*. Additionally, as I have discussed in a prior paper, the "rule of reason" appears to be a crucial *epistemic virtue*, since it is a prerequisite

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33 Aristotle. *Politics.* (Book I, Ch. II)
34 See Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae.* (I-II, Q.90, a.2 ad.2)
35 See Aristotle. *Nichomachean Ethics.* (Book VII)

for carrying out good inquiry and "being a good scientist or philosopher."[36] Hence, to even discover what is choice-worthy, or to discover how to accomplish choice-worthy ends, will require the very "rule of reason" by which we will be inclined to develop the virtues. This is in line with St. Thomas's identification of science as an intellectual virtue.

Here, before returning to Harris, it seems worthwhile point out that we have only had time to skim the surface of Aristotle and St. Thomas's thought. The core concepts we have discussed can certainly be demonstrated with greater depth. At the same time, even if the skeptic is not yet prepared to whole-heartily embrace their positions, I hope that he or she might still allow that both get at least *something* right, and that these ideas can still helpfully correct deficits in Harris's project.

Returning to Harris's Problems - What is "Science?"

Having finished our very cursory introduction to Aristotle, we now return to Harris. What exactly does Harris mean by "science" when he appeals to it as a means of grounding morality? One criticism of his thesis that Harris responds to is that premises such as "it is good to improve well-being" might not be considered properly "scientific." On a narrow view of science, for instance, those that see science primarily in terms of a logical system or mathematical models, it seems difficult to support such a thesis.[xxvii]

However, Harris argues for a wide view of what constitutes "science," claiming that it "simply represents our best effort to understand what is going on in this universe, and the boundary between it and the rest of rational thought cannot always be drawn."[37] Such a view is perfectly in line with Aristotle and St. Thomas, who see mathematics and metaphysics as proper "sciences."[38] Further, he recognizes—as do Aristotle and St. Thomas—that science *presupposes* values, such as "the desire to understand the universe," and a respect for good reasoning.[39]

Yet it seems that Harris might be in danger of equivocating on this broad usage "science." Harris is an aggressive critic of religion, and is eager to bar all religious thought from the purview of science. Indeed, he

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[36] See: T.K. Brown. *Plato as Metaethics: Being Ruled by the Rational Part of the Soul as a "Meta Virtue"* - https://philpapers.org/rec/BROPAM-13

[37] Sam Harris. *The Moral Landscape.* (2011) pg. 19

[38] See Thomas Aquinas. *Commentary Boethius's De Trinitate.*. Questions V and VI.

[39] Sam Harris. *Response to Critics of The Moral Landscape*. (2011) Available at https://www.samharris.org/blog/response-to-critics-of-the-moral-landscape (Note: this is in his response to Russell Blackford.)

likens the inability to get agreement from scientists on the proposition that "religion is in conflict with science," to "mountainers [being] unable to agree about whether their sport ever entails walking uphill."[40] However, the line between philosophy and theology can often seem as blurry as the line between philosophy and science. Would Harris be willing to allow natural theology to be a part of the same "philosophy" that is continuous with science?

This point is important because Harris rejects any transcendent notion of goodness as being irrelevant to the experiences of conscious entities.[41] As we shall see, the notion of "transcendence" Harris employs in making this judgment is deeply flawed. However, the issue I would like to focus on here is that, if Harris is committed to this broader definition of philosophy and science, then properly philosophical notions, such as Plato's view of the Good, cannot be excluded on the grounds that they are "unscientific." This is a good thing for Harris, since, as we shall see, Plato's understanding of the Good can serve to extend and strengthen Harris's view of ethics.

Unfortunately, this broader view of what constitutes "science" is not accompanied by any explanation of how the various sciences interact or become part of a *unified* framework. This is a problem, since it appears that "goodness" must be an extremely general principle given that many different things—things which will be the proper subjects of different arts and sciences—are said to be "good" in different ways. Nor can we simply ascribe these various uses of the term "good" to a total equivocity between their disparate usages, since the "good" of "good cars," "good nurses," or "good reasoning" all seem to relate to well-being. As anyone who has owned a car that frequently breaks down can tell you, there is an obvious connection between a "good car" and our own well-being.

Further, different sciences have different measures that align closely to "goodness." In medicine, we have the concept of health, which we want to promote because it is "good to be healthy," (i.e. it promotes well-being). In economics we have the concept of "utility"—roughly our "satisfaction with our lives" or our "satisfaction vis-à-vis some particular economic activity we engage in." What people are willing to spend on a good or service is often taken to be a good proxy for the utility they derive from it. Yet doctors often point out that people spend large amounts of money on things that are "bad for their health." Nor is it clear that any one science's measure will be a better measure of "well-being." While it might be true that "never eating desserts

[40] Sam Harris. *The Moral Landscape.* (2011) pg. 12
[41] Ibid. (2011) pg. 19-20, see also footnote #4.

again" would be "better for our health," it is unclear that this would be better for our well-being or result in our living a "better life." This becomes obvious in extreme cases. For instance, one of the most reliable means of extending the lifespan of an organism is extreme calorie restriction.

Thus, what we are faced with here is another "slide towards multiplicity," an inability to say what is truly "better" due to a disparate multitude of incommensurate measures. Harris commits much of *The Moral Landscape* to attacking the more extreme forms of moral relativism, but it is far from clear that his position can avoid a pernicious multiplicity emerging from within "science" itself.[xxviii] A proper understanding of how the sciences are united by analogous principles resolves this issue.

Defending Science:

Another critique Harris responds to is the notion that science is too blinded by its own biases to produce a reliable account of the world. Here, he cites the philosopher Sandra Harding, who claims that prejudices "have driven science into an epistemological cul-de-sac," the solution to which is to give 'feminist' and 'multicultural' epistemologies their due.[42]

Harris allows that it is indeed important to attempt to identify and correct biases in the sciences, yet he is rightly incredulous at the idea of multiple "types of epistemology." However, incredulity is about all he is able to muster, providing no explanation of why this "balkanization of science" is inappropriate.[43]

Here, Aristotle and St. Thomas can provide assistance. In the *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle points out that, since there can be an infinite number of accidents related to some entity or set of entities, and science cannot consider an infinite number of things or an infinite number of predications, science must focus on what is *essential* to things.[44,xxix]

Science and Analogous Predication:

The problems we have discussed will be unavoidable if our only options are univocal and equivocal predication. As Peter Redpath notes in his lecture series on the teachings of St. Thomas—for St. Thomas—

[42] Ibid. pg. 30
[43] Ibid. pg. 30
[44] That is, science must be organized according to *per se* predication as opposed to *per accidens.* See Aristotle. *Posterior Analytics.* Book I, Ch. VI and St. Thomas's commentary, lessons 10 & 13.

science centers on *analogical* predication.[45] Science looks at the way generating principles are unequally realized within a multitude of complex particulars. For instance, the way health is realized, signified, and promoted in different species.

Lacking any notion of analogical predication, science is reduced to logic or mathematics (as it is explicitly in many contemporary theories in the philosophy of science.) The consequence for something like Harris's "scientific ethics" is that we will end up being forced to conceive of any "goodness" informed by science in univocal terms. This is what leads Harris to encounter "moral paradoxes" as he considers whether we should "maximize total well-being or average well-being."[46] Here, he reaches an impasse, but comments that such problems need not bother us too much, since we can still pragmatically seek to promote well-being without resolving these issues. However, it seems helpful to have an explanation for *why* "well-being" and "goodness" cannot be usefully reduced down to numbers.

Defining Well-Being:

An understanding of analogous predication can help Harris in another way. Harris allows that "well-being" is a difficult concept to pin down. Yet he rightly observes that this is true of many important concepts: truth, beauty, health, life, etc. For example, there is no single, widely accepted definition of life employed by biologists. Indeed, many undergraduates' first exposure to the "philosophy of biology" often involves being asked to consider if viruses or prions are "alive." Yet this does not make biology impossible. Likewise, there is no universally accepted notion of "health." Yet this does not force us to conclude that medical science cannot tell us if smoking is truly unhealthy.

Harris is certainly correct on this point, but it would benefit his argument if he could explain *why* it is a fool's errand to see a single, univocal definition of "well-being" that will apply to all conscious beings. This is because the principles of the sciences involve analogous predication. For instance, "human health" is the principle of medicine, and yet health can be predicated in many ways. The "health" of a healthy liver is not the "health" of a healthy eye, nor is the "health" of a woman the same as the "health" of a flower. Harris is right not

[45] Peter Redpath. *Understanding St. Thomas's teaching about predication, univocity, and analogy in light of his teaching about the difference between a logical and philosophical, scientific, genus.* (2014) - https://youtu.be/jku9pPp-3e8?si=0B9gUaUCs_P99waq

[46] Sam Harris. *The Moral Landscape.* (2011) pg. 42-47

to let vagueness halt his project, yet it seems foolish to propose that scientific progress may some day furnish us with univocal, mathematical definitions of things like "health," or "life," let alone "goodness."

The Limits of the "Sciences:"

In many respects, Harris's core thesis is a reasonable one. Few would want to deny that it is "good" to be healthy, or that medicine can tell us things about how to promote both individual and public health. Yet we might wonder how well the sciences can inform our decisions on all sorts of more complex issues. What was the moral choice vis-à-vis the US decision to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2021?[xxx] Is it good for educators to tutor children in Aristotelian virtue ethics, or would that time be better spent on some other subject? We might find wide agreement on the fact that it is good for children to learn how to read, but then what is it better for them to read at higher grade levels? Boethius or Sartre? C.S. Lewis or Kundera? There will not be time for everything. [47]

Further, the vicissitudes of fortune often end up playing an outsized role in how decisions affect our well-being, and the sciences will often offer scant guidance on any particular choice is likely to affect us or others in the long run. This is because the individual sciences' role is to investigate narrow ranges of phenomena and concrete particulars, united by some principle. Yet the good sought by ethics is an extremely general principle—on Aristotle and St. Thomas's view, the *most* general.

St. Thomas's extension of Aristotle can offer us a useful solution here. Recall that for St. Thomas, science is an *intellectual virtue*. It is a habit of mind, a way of approaching the world. The more scientific our intellect has become, the more we begin to recognize the unity at work in things, their principles and causes. Thus, having a *scientific intellect*—an intellect habituated to conducting these sorts of judgments and investigations—will help us even when the relevant research findings related to a particular issue are scant.[xxxi]

Such a way of looking at science seems plausible when we consider why it is that truly great scientists are often able to contribute to a diverse range of fields. This is due to their ability to identify the general principles at work in things. For example, we might consider the physicist Erwin Schrodinger's major contributions to biology and the discovery of DNA, or Benoit Mandelbrot's ability to contribute to fields as diverse as fluid dynamics, chaos theory, and economics.

[47] Harris acknowledges this deficit, but we might still think he is far too optimistic vis-à-vis many ethical issues.

Justifying "Deeper Flourishing:"

Is Harris's view open to many of the critiques leveled at simplistic versions of utilitarianism? If we focus on "well-being" alone, won't we lose sight of other values, such as justice, fairness, and beauty? Harris's response is that the highest levels of well-being clearly include things like justice or beauty. Human flourishing is not reducible to short term pleasure. Indeed, as Harris points out, many rewarding experience that are part of a "good life" might be temporarily unpleasant. Learning how to ride a bike or read, starting an exercise routine, and the many responsibilities that come with becoming a parent are all often unpleasant at times. Yet clearly these *can* contribute to more robust well-being—to "living a better life."

The problem for Harris is that he can not offer much more than an appeal to common sense in justifying the superiority of these deeper forms of flourishing.[48] For instance, he largely tries to justify our commitment to fairness in terms of egoistic self interest, and by pointing out that "fairness drives reward-related activity in the brain, while accepting unfair proposals requires the regulation of negative emotion."[49] Indeed, Harris seems to think that fairness must ultimately be justified by neuroimaging, stating that: "While there may be some surprises in store for us... there is every reason to expect that kindness, compassion, fairness, and other classically "good" traits will be vindicated neuroscientifically—which is to say that we will only discover further reasons to believe that they are good for us, in that they generally enhance our lives."

Yet, if neuroscience were to suggest to us that kindness, compassion, and fairness are *not* "correlated with brain states associated with well-being," would that be good reason to abandon them?[50] Further, while Harris is an expert in neuroscience, he seems to have forgotten *how* neuroscience comes to associate given brain activities with "well-being." This is overwhelmingly done by exposing people to stimuli which we *already know* to be "positive," (e.g. an act of kindness or compassion) and then observing how the activity in the brain that occurs in response to these positive stimuli varies from neutral or negative stimuli. To be sure, Harris seems to sometimes be supposing that the methods of neuroscience will make vast breakthroughs in the future, yet it nonetheless seems hard to imagine how it could be possible for neuroscience decide this issue.

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48 Sam Harris. The Moral Landscape. (2011) pg. 48-50

49 Ibid. pg. 49

50 One might consider that these principles also seem essential to doing good science.

The larger problem here is that Harris often slips towards reductionism, which is itself a sort of "slide towards multiplicity." Harris himself decries attempts to reduce morality to evolutionary biology, but frequently falls into attempting to define goodness and well-being primarily in terms of neurons.[51] This is akin to claiming that we are best able to understand flight (the principles of lift, etc.), by looking at the individual cells making up the wings of all the animals that fly (i.e. focusing on the "many," not the unifying "one.")

Yet this is demonstrably *not* the best way to understand flight or lift. We did not learn to build flying machines through an intensive study of the chemistry at work in insect or bird wings. Indeed, there is much we still do not know about how those cells work. Rather, we mastered the more general, generating principles at work across all instances of heavier than air flight in nature. The fact that "the cells in insects' wings are necessary for flight" need not compel us to conclude that flight is best understood through a study of these cells, just as the fact that we need our brains to "know goodness" need not suggest that the goodness is itself something that can be best known through studying neurons.[xxxii]

Harris' mistake is instructive in another way as well. It is clear that we will be prone to make such errors if we do not understand science as a "habit of mind," an *intellectual virtue,* by which we locate the unity at work in things.

Free and Good *People*:

As we have seen, Aristotle and St. Thomas show us why it is "better *for us*" to be "good people," (i.e. people who have developed the virtues and who are thus habituated to acting justly). This is in part because this makes us more self-determining, more free.

Harris argues against any notion of "free will." We will not spend much time on these arguments because they are extremely cursory, largely amounting to the claim that if individual human actions are not "causally undetermined" then they cannot be free.[52] However, we might wonder here how an "uncaused" action would be free either. Is arbitrary or random action freedom? Would a truly "uncaused" muscle spasm the height of human freedom?

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51 Ibid. pg. 30
52 Ibid. pg 63-69

Generally, when we claim that our acts have been "freely chosen," what we mean is that *we* have primarily determined our actions. For instance, I like to think that I married my wife, at least in part, because she is "a good person." Yet in this case, it was her "being a good person" that determined my actions. Does this make my act of proposing unfree? If you become a veterinarian because you "love animals," has the desirability of dogs and cats robbed you of your freedom?

Harris also seems to think that freedom is impossible, in part, because our actions are the result of our neurons, hormones, etc.[xxxiii] Yet these are parts *of us*, parts that are unified by being directed towards the aims of a *whole* person. It is unclear how something being influenced by parts of itself should preclude any semblance of self-determination.

To be sure, we are not *totally* self-determining. We do not create ourselves out of the aether.[53] Infants are certainly not self-determining in any strong, personal sense. Self-determination must, to a large extent be fostered. Environments, particularly those of our childhood, can be more or less conducive to developing the virtues, (indeed, the two are deeply related) and there are strong arguments that freedom has a social element.[xxxiv] One of the crucial ways in which science can inform ethics is that it can tell us *how* to best foster this sort of reflexive freedom.

Like Harris, modern philosophy has often defined freedom primarily as the "ability to do otherwise." On such a view, goodness seems to become a limit on freedom.[xxxv] We become, "less free" if we are constrained by being able to do only what is good. Such a view represents the elevation of *potency* (the ability to choose *anything*) over *act* (the self-determining capacity to actualize the good).

We have good reason to dismiss a "freedom" defined primarily in terms of potency in this way. If our choices can be "truly better" and "truly worse," which both Harris and Aristotle give us good reasons to believe, then it *never* "makes sense" to choose the worse over the better. One only chooses the worse over the better out of ignorance about what is truly better, external constraints, or weakness of will. Here, we might consider St. Augustine's argument for why the perfected soul in Heaven is incapable of sin *because* its freedom has been perfected. The inability to sin (to choose what is worse) is not a limit on freedom for the same reason that an inability to fall is not a limit on our freedom to walk.

[53] Nor do we spring from the aether uncaused. And yet, even if we did, it is unclear how this should make us more free.

It is important to note that such a view need not wash away the particularity of the individual. Goodness, being a principle, might be more or less fully realized in different ways by different people, in different contexts.[54] Authenticity can still remain a core element of human flourishing on such a view. However, what it does is a certain sort of moral realism, one that mirrors the epistemic conviction that, although there might be "many ways to be correct," there are always "very many more ways to be wrong." Such a judgment is in line with Leo Tolstoy's famous observation at the opening of Anna Karenina that: "*Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.*"[55]

Aside from retrieving a coherent notion of freedom, Aristotle and St. Thomas can also help our analysis of both freedom and ethics by reminding us the being *is primarily said of things*. That is, we should primarily speak in terms of "good/free people" and not "good/free acts." A person's capacity for self-determination is situated in the context of their entire life. Attempting to decompose the freedom of the whole person is how one ends up with notions like the idea that the activity of our neurons (part of us) are somehow a barrier to our freedom.

To focus on isolated acts and events to the exclusion of the whole in which they are situated is itself to begin a "slide into multiplicity." How does one analyze the goodness of an individual act? We can well imagine cases where being unjustly punished might positively impact someones life, such that they remark that it is "the best thing that ever happened to them.[xxxvi]" Likewise, we can consider cases where something we might suppose is normally good, like getting sent to a high end private school or getting married, "ruins someone's life."[xxxvii]

This focus on people helps put events like Socrates' execution in better perspective. It was good *for Socrates* to be the sort of person he was (i.e. virtuous). This *includes* how his possession of virtue affected the acts surrounding his execution. It was bad for his accusers, and the Athenian jury, to be the sort of people who would execute Socrates.

This does not force us into saying that "it was good *for Socrates* to be executed." We might agree, however, that acting as he did (i.e., not fleeing) was "the best option he had available." That is, it was better *for him* to stand by his convictions (and to be virtuous enough to be free to do so).

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[54] Just as Aristotle, St. Thomas, and many others allow that the "contemplative life" does not suit the temperaments and aptitudes of all.

[55] Leo Tolstoy. *Anna Karenina*. Trans. Constance Garnett. (1901)

The consequentialist who focuses on isolated acts is always at risk of being overwhelmed by the *multiplicity* represented by contingency. For instance, suppose that we know that, if Socrates obsequiously begs for mercy at his trial or flees afterwards, he will get ill shortly later and suffer a prolonged and particularly excruciating death. Given the counterfactual, it seems that the consequentialist will likely have to affirm that "being executed was good *for Socrates*."

If we say "but surely it is better to *both* avoid execution *and* not be subject a painful death by disease," then why not simply say: "it is always better to have what is truly best?" Yet what is truly best for an individual is going to involve what is truly best for the whole world, since it is better to live in a better world. Thus, the focus on isolated acts will break down here anyhow.

Deontological reasoning is not immune to this same slide into multiplicity either. One of the challenges of crafting good ethical rules is that it seems that clever people can always develop perverse counterexamples (e.g. turning Jews over to the SS because it is not permitted to deceive people.)

Does this mean that we can never usefully analyze "free" or "good" acts? Of course not, it just means that isolated events should not be our primary focus. Goodness relates to the whole, to the unity of a life and a society. Hence, when we analyze the goodness of acts, the particulars that are "best known to us," what we should be trying to do is to identify the general principles that are at work in them, which can allow us to "know what to do" in a broad number of cases.

Being "Like God:"

Harris rejects any "transcendent source of value," as being irrelevant to well-being, since it must "bear [no] relationship to the actual or potential experiences of conscious beings."[56] Likewise, he describes "the Platonic Form of the Good" as existing "independent of the experiences of conscious beings."[57] Further, he argues that Christians cannot truly dedicate themselves to the pursuit of God "for its own sake," since—ultimately—people are only following God because they desire the extrinsic rewards of God's favor, or fear the extrinsic punishments of God's wrath.[58]

[56] Ibid. pg. 20
[57] Ibid. pg. 19
[58] Ibid. pg. 20

Clearly, Harris has not understood Plato, and his characterization of "Christianity" throughout *The Moral Landscape* bears little resemblance to the philosophies of St. Thomas, the Church Fathers, or many other influential Christian thinkers. Indeed, the very idea that "God's good" could be *arbitrarily* related to what is "good for us," only makes sense within the context of a very particular sort of voluntarist theology.

Much more could be said here, but it is sufficient to point out that Plato's Good and the God of St. Thomas are *not* "independent" of the good experienced by creatures. Nor are they independent even of what merely *appears* to be good to creatures. For Plato, when we choose what merely appears good, as opposed to what is truly better, we are still choosing "that which appears good" *in virtue of* its participation in the Good. The Good is not absent from "good appearances." This is brought out even more strongly in St. Thomas, who elevates "the Beautiful"—alongside "the One," "the True," and "the Good"—as a transcendental property of being itself. Likewise, for Aristotle, God is the "First Cause" precisely because God is the *end* to which all things are oriented and striving.[xxxviii] By definition, this excludes God's being wholly independent from the desires and well-being of creatures.

What appears to be deficient here is Harris's understanding of the concepts of transcendence and the absolute. The transcendent is not *absent from what it transcends*. An infinite Good—one that is truly *without limit*s—is not bracketed off by the finite and missing from it. Likewise, the absolute cannot be "reality as separated from all appearances or subjectivity." The absolute—to be properly absolute—must include all of reality *and* appearances. Appearances are part of reality in that they *really are* appearances.[xxxix] Harris seems to be conflating something like the notion of "objectivity" (as in, "being as seen from 'the view from nowhere'") with the idea of a transcendent and absolute Good. Hence, he uses good reasons for dismissing the idea of an "objective good" (at least under this flawed definition of "objectivity") as a way to dismiss any notion of transcendent good.

For St. Thomas, God is *goodness itself.* All other goods are related to God's goodness *analogically*.[59] The good of all finite things involves a *participation* in this divine Good.[60] Indeed, this is why St. Augustine, like many of the Church Fathers, is comfortable speaking of God in sensuous terms. God is the source of all such sensuous, finite goods, which are signs pointing back to their ultimate cause. For St. Thomas, concupiscence is

[59] See *Summa Theologiae*, Part I, Question 6, all articles.
[60] Ibid. Q6; A4, Response

born of our postlapsarian inability to discern between lower goods, and what is truly best. Yet, it is this desire for what is "truly best," aided by grace, that guides man's natural aim to "have the best possible for ourselves"—God.

Earlier, we discussed the way in which our ability to reach out for what is "truly good" is what allows us to transcend current opinion and current desire—i.e., the *given* of what *we already are*. For St. Thomas, to have what is "truly best" is to "be like God."[61] Harris, with his strong commitment to atheism, might balk at such notions transcendence. However, as Robert M. Wallace has shown in his works on Plato and Hegel, this concept, sometimes in deflated forms, undergirds the ethics of many thinkers, from Kant to Kierkegard.[xl] Given Harris's commitment to a broad notion of science as continuous with philosophy, it seems he cannot reject such a notion out of hand.

Setting aside revealed religion, it seems that reasoning about what is "truly best" and "being like God" can inform us about a transcendent goal of perfection, even if we can never attain it and can only approach it asymptotically. For instance, Wallace, in his review of Plato's corpus is able to show why—at the limit—perfection and total unity entails an attitude of beneficence for all.[62] God fears nothing and lacks nothing, and so God cannot be jealous in the ways we so often are.[xli]

To be negatively directed towards something else—to be angry, covetous, hateful, etc.— is to be defined by *what one is not*, and so to be less than fully transcendent and "without limit." To be fully transcendent, God cannot be "just one powerful entity among many," an "infinite being" sitting on a Porphyrian tree alongside the "finite beings" of the world.[63] Hence, God cannot even be merely indifferent to creatures, since this would still entail God's being governed by God's relations to others. Rather, "being like God" entails a positive identification with all that is other, an attitude of love and beneficence. A perfect being, or "perfect state of being," does not involve getting annoyed, angry, resentful, scared, etc., nor does it seem that it should involve a total absence of love.[64]

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61 "The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods" (St. Thomas. *Opuscula.* 57:1-4)

62 Robert M. Wallace. *Philosophical Mysticism in Plato, Hegel, and the Present.* "Chapter 8: Plato on "Becoming Like God" (2019)

63 The latter would be Hegel's "bad infinite" an infinite defined in terms of, and limited by, the finite, as opposed to "that which is truly without limit.

64 We can consider here Aristotle's supposition in Book XII of the *Metaphysics,* that God must have all that is best in our own lives. Or, Plotinus stresses in the Enneads, the One cannot lack goods that are present in lower levels of reality.

Embracing such a notion does not require that we affirm the necessity of an Unmoved Mover or an Uncased Caused (although, obviously, rational justifications for these that many find convincing exist). Rather, this notion can also be taken, in a deflated sense, as representing the "limit case" for personal development and satisfaction with the world—the "highest state of well-being." Perhaps something like this is what the committed atheist takes to be meant by notions of *ataraxia*, *henosis*, *hesychasm*, or *enlightenment*, all of which have sometimes found a home in more atheistic thought.

Thus, even if the atheist rejects religious interpretations of these states, it is unclear that they should reject their existence, nor their desirability. Hence, while Harris rejects any notion of a "transcendent good," it nonetheless seems that this concept may still be fruitfully employed to help define a state of maximal well-being and unity. We may, of course, think that this deflation represents a grave loss, and yet still allow that it is better than the total absence of such a maximally unifying end.

Conclusion:

As we have seen, a transcendent notion of Goodness can still be usefully employed vis-à-vis a project that focuses on how the natural sciences can inform morality. Such a notion gives us an ultimate unifying aim that we, not just as individuals, but as a race are striving for. Science is a virtue for individuals, yet it is also a virtue for organizations and societies. In his famous image from the *Republic*, Plato leaves most people in the cave of ignorance, in part, because most people in his era had to most of their time toiling to provide the bare necessities of life.

Scientific progress has freed us from this constraint. It has given us a world where it is seems possible that *everyone* should receive an education. At the same time, it has placed all of the world's great philosophical and scientific works, as well as an ocean of secondary sources, at our fingertips. Often, these are only a few clicks or swipes away.

Science is often key to discovering *which ends we should seek* and *how we can accomplish them*. While the study of goodness as a principle might be proper to metaphysics, the special sciences have much to say about how to identify good policy, worthy goals, or profitable solutions vis-à-vis *particular* problems. How should we

set tax policy? What foods should we eat? How should we exercise? How can we curb ocean acidification without tanking economic growth? Such questions are the purview of individual special sciences.

What the thought of Aristotle and St. Thomas gives us is a way to see how these scientific efforts are unified and organized by a single aim and goal. Their conception of the sciences allows us to avoid a "slide into multiplicity," the specter of multiple "competing goods" with no means of choosing between them. Likewise, their well-developed notion of analogy allows us to avoid the drive to deflate both the sciences and morality into rigid logical systems Further, their philosophy sets our sights on the highest good, the destination that is "truly best." In this it informs, unifies, and drives on our efforts to "be good people," "live good lives," and make our world a better place.*

[i] Harris's use of "creatures" throughout the work is interesting, since he denies the existence of any creator.

[ii] In this paper, I do not spend much time assessing Harris's claim to have bridged Hume's "is-ought" gap. From the perspective of much earlier philosophy, and common sense, I believe that "Hume's Guillotine" is incoherent. To make it coherent seems to require *already assuming* that there is a chasm of equivocity separating what is "good for us"and a sui generis sort of "moral goodness." That is, Hume is guilty of subtly begging the question. I will not try to justify this position in this paper though because it is largely irrelevant to what St. Thomas and Aristotle have to offer vis-à-vis Harris's project.

[iii] To be sure, we might concern ourselves with providing better or worse justifications against such radical skepticism, but in the end fears like: "what if no one else *really* exists?" or "what if drinking arsenic *is* good for me?" are not the sort of things we should base our ethical lives around. Hume himself makes this exact point vis-à-vis how we conduct our lives in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (§xii, 128).

[iv] Fragment 49a is perhaps most instructive on this problem. Heraclitus pronounces that: "In the same rivers we step and we do not step; we are and we are not." That is, something is the same in each instance, and yet something is always changing. Aristotle's challenge is to give a rigorous explanation of how this is so.

[v] I have discussed how these epistemic issues related to the "Problem of the One and the Many" might be overcome in my paper *Can We Say True Things About Things? An Investigation of the Metaphysical Underpinnings of Robert Sokolowski's The Phenomenology of the Human Person* (accessible here: https://tkbrownunpublished.tiiny.site/). Notably, Robert Sokolowski, whose work I draw on heavily in this paper, himself uses Aristotle and St. Thomas as key sources for developing his philosophy of perception, phenomenology, and knowledge.

[vi] Michael Sugrue's lecture on the *Parmenides*, part of the 2013 Great Courses series *Plato, Socrates, and the Dialogues*, provides an excellent introduction to the ways in which the "Problem of the One and the Many," (i.e., the tension between the silence forced on us by Parmenides and the collapse into inchoate noise represented by Heraclitus) informs Plato's "Theory of Forms."

A useful analogy can be drawn from information theory here. Parmenides' unchanging being might be represented by a bit string of nothing repeating "1"s. There is no variance in this message, and so no "difference that can make a difference." It is like white text on an all white background.

By contrast, Heraclitus's vision of being might be likened to that of a completely random bit string. No matter how much of the message we observe, it can never tell us *anything* about what to expect in the future (except to expect this very randomness). However, Heraclitus's invocation of the *Logos* seems to offer a way out, in that the Logos could represent something that "stays the same," even as the rest of the world changes. Yet, in what remains of Heraclitus' work that has come down to us, this *Logos* remains shrouded in mystery. The difficulty that Plato and Aristotle face is how to say something more.

[vii] This desire to reconcile the apparent plurality and unity of being is partially what underlies Aristotle's hylomorphic metaphysics. Here, Aristotle distinguishes between form (act) and matter (potency). Matter is what "stays the same" when things change; form is "what changes." Prime matter, matter without form (which cannot exist on its own), is sheer, indeterminate potency. Form, *eidos*, is what makes any thing *anything at all*. As with Plato, a thing's form is the source of its intelligible whatness (its *quiddity*), although unlike Plato, Aristotle locates from in the concrete particulars that exist in the world around us.

Certainly, the form/matter distinction could help inform Harris's project, however this thread is not as critical as the others we shall follow up.

[viii] This idea is discussed at: *Posterior Analytics* 71b32; *Prior Analytics* 68b35–7; *Physics* A.1, 184a16–20; *Metaphysics* Z.4; *Topics* Z.4, 141b2–142a12.

[ix] For an example of this idea's later development in scholasticism, see: St. Bonaventure. *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*. (Ch. II, line xii)

[x] The point here can be rendered as a syllogism:
P1: For there to be discursive knowledge, general principles must exist.

P2: We do possess discursive knowledge.
C: Therefore, general principles exist.

[xi] I am of the opinion that the heavy preference for reductionist explanations in the life sciences, and particularly in neuroscience, comes from the dearth of good "top down" explanations of phenomena. We lack a unifying theory of consciousness, so of course the field looks to what is better understood (i.e., parts) to explain things.
By contrast, a strong commitment to reductionism appears far less popular in the physical sciences. This makes sense given that these fields tend to have many good "top-down," explanations, and because unifications—the explanation of disparate phenomena in terms of more general principles—have been far more common over the last century than reductions.

Arguably, this tendency can be seen in the overarching goals sought by most practitioners in these respective fields. In physics, the goal is "grand unification," whereas in neuroscience the goal is generally seen as involving some sort explanation of consciousness in terms of the disparate activities of “parts of the brain.” This perhaps explains why Sam Harris, a neuroscientist, has a tendency to slide into reductive explanations of broad notions, such as well-being, goodness, freedom, etc. despite the fact that he seems aware of the perils of unwarranted reductionism.

[xii] Critics might object to this, claiming that: “*telos* is a slippery notion that has dropped out of use.”

Has it though? Notions of aims are used across economics, polical science, and other social sciences (e.g. the notion of "utility"). Some notion of aims and “goal-directedness” is widely employed in biology in the form of "teleonomy" and "function." Likewise, the idea of ends is use everywhere in medicine and public health. Indeed, even more reductionist-leaning biologists, such as Richard Dawkins feel the need to rely on the idea (e.g. his "archeo vs. neo *purpose*).

As the biologist J. B. S. Haldane observed: "Teleology is like a mistress to a biologist: he cannot live without her but he's unwilling to be seen with her in public."

I think Étienne Gilson’s explanation in *From Aristotle to Darwin and Back Again: A Journey in Final Causality, Species and Evolution* explains this well. “Teleology" is to "astrology" as "teleonomy" (and related terms, such as “function”) are to "astronomy." In both cases, both sets of terms developed out of the same history. Because of this, they were saddled with a lot of baggage (particularly because of the way in which the medieval and renaissance literary traditions tended to blend together with the philosophical/scientific traditions of those eras). The new terms (astronomy and teleonomy) serve to try to separate that baggage (with more disagreement over what counts as “useless baggage” in the latter case).

[xiii] To be sure, in our imagination we might be able to blur these substantial forms. We can imagine something that is mid-way between man and fish for instance, the “merman.” However, this is not a contradictory opposition, but rather a fusion of attributes associated with two distinct essences. The mereman is not “all the way man,” but neither is it a fusion of “man” and “not-man.”

Husserl’s thought experiments regarding the *noema* (the object of phenomenal awareness) is instructive here. In our imaginings, we can change a thing in accidental ways and it remains the same *sort of thing.* However, certain changes will make it become something entirely different, a different *sort of thing*. The triangle *vanishes* when we add another side for instance (but note that this does not occur if we change our triangle’s color, size, spacial relation to other imagined objects, etc.). This “disappearance” marks a contradictory opposition

[xiv] What then can we say about the ways in which non-living things can be more or less unified? Here, the research on complexity and self-organizing, dissipative systems might be helpful. Consider very large objects such as, stars, nebulae, planets, and galaxies as an example. These are so large that the relatively weak force of gravity allows them to possess a sort of unity. Even if a planet is hit by another planet (our best hypothesis for how our own moon formed), it will reform due to the attractive power of gravity. Likewise, stars, galaxies, etc. have definable “life-cycles,” and represent a sort of “self-organizing system,” even though they are far less self-organizing than organisms. By contrast, a rock has a sort of arbitrary unity (although it does not lack all unity! We can clearly distinguish discrete rocks in a non-arbitrary fashion).

While we might agree that stars, galaxies, and hurricanes can have “life-cycles” and might even be said to “die” in an analogous sense, it does not seem that they should have “ends.” Indeed, it is far from clear how it could be “bad” for a star to die in the way that it *is* generally bad for an organism to. It is an organism’s possession of *aims* (i.e., an

orientation towards some *good*) that makes death bad for it. Yet, despite this difference, we might still think that the principle of unity at work in both organic and inorganic "life-cycles" is at least analogously related.

This is indeed an area where more research is needed. Terrance Deacon's *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* is one interesting look at this area of research (and one that draws significantly on Aristotle, as well as C.S. Peirce's theory of semiotics, which is itself a descendant of the Scholastic *doctrina signorum* introduced by St. Augustine and developed by St. Thomas).

[xv] Eric Perl's *Thinking Being: Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition* provides an excellent analysis explaining how the concepts of *intentionality* and *giveness*, employed throughout contemporary phenomenology to adress this same point, are also represented in Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas.

[xvi] Hume, Nietzche, and many Buddhist thinkers have challenged the notion of a unified self. I don't think we have to entirely disagree with their intuitions here. Following Plato, we might acknowledge that a person can be more or less unified. We can agree with Nietzsche's description of himself—that when peering into his inner self he might indeed find a "congress of souls," each vying for power, trying to dominate the others. But, on Plato's view, (and many others) this would simply be emblematic of a sort of spiritual *sickness*. This is precisely how the soul is when it is *not* flourishing, i.e. the "civil war within the soul" of Plato's Republic, or being "dead in sin" (i.e. a death of autonomy and an inability to do what one truly thinks is best) as described in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (Romans 7).

[xvii] This example is borrowed from David Bentley Hart's *That All Shall Be Saved* ("Fourth Meditation: What is Freedom?" pg. 175). Those committed to a conception of freedom as "the ability to *choose anything*," might balk at this assertion. However, if one choose what is clearly and truly worse over what is better, it seems to me that such an action *must* be completely irrational and arbitrary, done for "no reason at all," since reason would dictate against it. Yet arbitrariness and randomness are *not* what we generally mean by freedom, nor what we aspire to when we seek to be free.

[xviii] Whereas the appetites target what "appears to be good," and the passions, or "spirited part of the soul," targets "what others say is good."

[xix] Note that capability of the Good to unify us and to make us more self-determining and more truly *one*, underscored in many places throughout the Platonic corpus, (e.g. the *Republic*, the chariot image of the *Phaedrus*, in the "golden thread" of the *Laws*, and in Socrates's arguments against Anaxagoras in the *Phaedo*) is not undermined by the more skeptical attitudes expressed by Socrates. To the contrary, our ability to refuse to take things at face value, to not be content with mere appearances, is a key part of what allows the "rule of reason" to make us more free, better people, and more truly one.

[xx] See end note xiv for more detail on how this applies to non-living things.

[xxi] By St. Thomas's epoch, the relationship between Goodness and Unity (as well as Truth, and, in St. Thomas, Beauty) had matured into the *Doctrine of Transcedentals*. This doctrine, and the *Analgoia Entis—i.e.,* the notion that the "being of the creation" relates analogously to "the being of God, the source and ground of all being—might rightly be considered the "beating heart" of much medieval thought. Certainly, many inferences that can be drawn from these doctrines might be applicable to Harris's general project of explaining how the empirical sciences relate to ethics, and this might be true even in a frame that excludes revealed religion. However, this is also one of the more difficult areas of medieval philosophy, and of St. Thomas's thought in particular. Hence, we have only touched on the essentials of the relationship between Goodness and Unity.

[xxii] Plato lays out Socrates's case for this course of action in the *Crito*.

[xxiii] We might consider here St. Augustine's argument in *On the Free Choice of the Will* for why we should prioritize those things that it is hardest for us to lose.

[xxiv] Readers might be concerned here that this "preference for the whole," is what allows for totalitarianism. We could consider here Karl Popper's criticism of Plato and Hegel, or Stanley Rosen's reading of the *Republic* as a warning against the tyranny of ideas.

This is a valid concern, yet we do not have space to address it here. It will suffice to say that the unity and discreteness of our own lives, the fact that we have our *own* feelings, dreams, aspirations, and sensations, should lead us to see the

person as a special sort of unity. States, marriages, churches, clubs, etc. are all a very important *parts* of ethical life, but they do no have feelings, they do not suffer, etc. For St. Thomas, man is created in the *imago dei*, not the state. Hence, the individual will still loom large. We might also add that a true focus on the whole excludes any ideology that would seek to tyrannize one group for the benefit of another. What is "truly best" is the world where all flourish.

[xxv] We can also consider here the reason why Aristotle thinks we get more out of our friendships when they are based around mutual respect, admiration, and genuine beneficence, rather than mere pleasure or utility (discussed in Books VIII and IX of the *Nichomachean Ethics*)

[xxvi] The political works of G.W.F. Hegel, particularly *The Philosophy of Right*, usefully expand on this notion. Institutions can serve to "objectify morality" for a people, through people's *identification* with the institutions of which they are a part. For instance, Hegel's notion of "corporations," a cross between modern labor unions, professional associations, and medieval guilds, help people to take pride in their work even as they ensure good working conditions and attempt to improve their industry. On this last point, the International City/County Management Association is a particularly good example, due to its focus on promoting good governance in the municipalities in which its members work.

[xxvii] We might consider here the "received view" of scientific theories or its many descendants.

[xxviii] Indeed, many philosophers do argue that there are multiple, sui generis "goods," and that "moral good" is just one sort of good. On this view, what is "good for you" or what makes something a "good car" or "good food" are unrelated. Thus, we might have very many "goods" that relate to well-being and perhaps many different sorts of well-being.

[xxix] Further, this implies that the sciences must be divided according to finite, limited principles. So, while considerations of time and place are crucial for the sciences, we cannot divide the sciences based on these categories, since we would be left with an infinite number of potential divisions. Indeed, a key element of the usefulness of the natural sciences is that, if findings are properly developed, they should hold true across a variety of times and places, and regardless of external relations. Hence, we do not study "gravitation in the 1930s," "fluid dynamics in East Africa," or "the biology of cats owned by the wealthy" except accidentally. We are instead interested in what is essential and derivable through proximate causes and general principles.

[xxx] To be sure, it might be possible, in some ideal world, to run experiments or collect data that could inform *some* of our answers to such questions. Yet it seems certain that they would nonetheless be surrounded by a great deal of uncertainty. Most of our ethical considerations involve incredibly complex systems, systems full of non-linear relationships (e.g. more of x may correlate with more of y, but only at low levels of x-perhaps the relationship inverts at higher level), tipping points, context-dependent relationships, etc. In these cases, it is not clear that the sciences will necessarily give us particularly reliable information about what we should choose any time in the future. Harris, to his credit, allows this.

[xxxi] To be sure, even someone with a very scientific intellect can make hugely consequential mistakes when they have little data to go on. But what is the alternative? To try to stretch research findings in inappropriate ways to justify our actions? To simply "wing it?" Prudence (a virtue) seems like the proper course here.

[xxxii] See end note xi for more comments on reductionism.

[xxxiii] It is worth pointing out that, despite the idea that our thoughts and beliefs never have any effect on our behavior being prima facie implausible, it also hardly seems like a position that could be defended using the psychology literature either. Our beliefs and subjective experiences certainly seem to relate to our actions. Epiphenomenalism must trade on the fact that others' subjectivity, their "first-person experience" is not directly observable to us. Hence, it can claim that "while belief, emotion, and reasoning affect behavior, none of the subjective elements of these ever do."

This position at least has the benefit of seeming to be unfalsiable (at least until the Hard Problem of Consciousness is decisively resolved perhaps), and yet is there any reason to believe it? Such a position makes consciousness a bizarrely unique sort of thing, the only phenomena in the universe where causality seems to flow in just one direction.

Indeed, such a position would seemingly undermine the epistemic warrant of the empirical sciences, making it self-refuting. If our conscious thoughts and experiences *never* affect behavior, then they cannot *ever* affect survival or reproduction. In turn, the contents of consciousness, the "way the world seems to us," could never be selected for by natural selection. Hence, it seems that contents of conscious awareness might drift arbitrarily far away from "the way the world is." It would make no difference if our bodies really had six legs and a tail for instance. What we experience

doesn't affect what we do; causality only runs in one direction.

Yet if "the way the world seems to us" has an arbitrary relationship to "how it actually is," then there is no reason to trust our senses, our reasoning, or the sciences. The epiphenomenalist needs a "just-so" story whereby the way the world "seems to us" just happens to go along enough with reality to justify their position. Yet does any plausible explanation of psycho-social harmony of this sort exist? Why would consciousness appear to be shaped as a sort of "user interface" (as the cognitive scientist Donald Hoffman puts it), if "user inputs" never have relevance? To be sure, Harris does not directly endorse epiphenomenalism, but his reductive account of behavior certainly seems to suggest *something like it*.

[xxxiv] I have developed the "social aspect of freedom," more in the paper: *The Perfection of Freedom: A Typology of Freedom in the Political Philosophy of G.W.F Hegel.*

[xxxv] This causes all sorts of issues for theology, since now it appears that goodness holds sovereignty over God. It is this concern that renewed concerns over Plato's "Euthyphro Dilemma" and led Reformation thinkers towards extreme volunterist theologies. For example, "divine command" theories where "what is good" is determined by a completely inscrutable divine will.

Such problems are, in part, the result of the removal of analogical predication from the toolkit of philosophers and theologians. Given the "univocity of being," God must, in some sense, be simply "one being among many", just more powerful than all the rest. If this is the case, then it would seem that any agency on the part of creatures must come at the expense of divine sovereignty.

Hence, the removal of analogy as an option often led to a chasm of equivocity opening up between "God's good" and "what we experience as good." For instance, Luther in his correspondence with Erasmus, writes that: "*If it is difficult to believe in God's mercy and goodness when He damns those who do not deserve it, we must recall that if God's justice could be recognized as just by human comprehension, it would not be divine.*" (From William Durant's *The Reformation* ("Chapter XIX: Luther and Erasmus." pg. 435)

Harris would no doubt claim that this history is irrelevant to his secular theory of morality. Yet Harris's commitment to secularism does not remove him from the influence of history. In his *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor points out the dangers of "subtraction narratives" of secularism, whereby secularism is just "what reason provides when superstition and tradition are removed." Rather, Taylor argues, the modern version of secularism was something that was positively constructed. Further, it was constructed in an age where theology was still extremely relevant to philosophical thought and the ways in which freedom was defined.

[xxxvi] We can suppose a story about a poor Persian street child, who has been neglected and is driven around by their appetites and passions, surviving on the streets of Persepolis. They get caught stealing a loaf of bread and have the offending hand lopped off.

Having one's hand cut off is generally bad for one. Yet we could well imagine a case where this causes some benefactor to take pity on the child, to take them in and raise them, and this results in the child living a fulfilling and successful life, becoming a virtuous person, etc.

[xxxvii] For example, consider this scenario: there is a relatively unvirtuous Frenchman, a young guy who is a boaster, a drunk, and an adulterer. He is lazy, gets into fights, and is a bad father. But, due to a pang of conscience, he hides a Jewish neighbor from the Nazis. He does the right thing here. As a result, he gets caught and sent to a concentration camp. He has a terrible time and develops bad PTSD. His wife, thinking him dead, leaves him and marries another man. He becomes a full time drunk, lives a miserable life, and dies in a Marseilles gutter at 45.

Now suppose that this man was young during the war and had a rough childhood. But, had he not hidden his neighbor, he would have grown out of some of his bad habits. Maybe he even would have found God and reformed in a major way, becoming deeply spiritual. He would have become virtuous, had a life of contemplation, better fortune, etc., all as a consequence of doing the wrong thing. Well clearly, it cannot always be good for us to do the right thing!

Of course, we could just as well craft an equally plausible story where it the just act that is what helps turn our Frenchman's life around. Further, if we were to shift our view towards the whole, towards what is best for France, or best for humanity, our analysis might look very different. Perhaps the man saved by the Frenchman goes on to increase

the well-being of a tremendous number of people? This is the problem of focusing on acts and the vast multiplicty unknowable contingencies.

[xxxviii] The notion of causation at play here is "final cause" or *telos*, not efficient (mechanistic) causation. In being the First Cause, God is also the final cause of all things. This is a notion that would be developed through Neoplatonism and by the Patristics, into the concept of "*exitus and reditus*," which finds a home in St. Thomas's thought.

[xxxix] This has become less obvious in the context of contemporary thought because appearances have become, in many philosophies, more or less *arbitrarily* related to reality.

[xl] See Robert M. Wallace's *Philosophical Mysticism in Plato, Hegel, and the Present* (2019) and *Hegel's Philosophy of Reality, Freedom, and God* (2011).

[xli] No doubt, Harris, a fierce critic of Judaism and Christianity, would like to point to Exodus 20:5 here, where God proclaims "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God" (NIV). It will suffice to say that, while an analysis of Scripture is outside the purview of this paper, many theologians would claim that God is not passible, and that Plato and Wallace's notions are either partly or wholly consistent with revealed religion in this regard.

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