



**SAM HARRIS**  
**CRITICAL RESPONSES**

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# [ 2 ]

## My Life Gives the Moral Landscape Its Relief

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The basic clue is that life says “yes” to itself. By clinging to itself it declares that it values itself. But one clings only to what can be taken away. From the organism, which has being strictly on loan, it can be taken and will be unless from moment to moment reclaimed. Continued metabolism is such a reclaiming, which ever reasserts the value of Being against its lapsing into nothingness. . . . Are we then, perhaps, allowed to say that mortality is the narrow gate through which alone *value*—the addressee of a “yes”—could enter the otherwise indifferent universe?

—HANS JONAS, *Mortality and Morality*, p. 91

Sam Harris was spurred to intellectual activism by the events of September 11th 2001. As Harris observes, people confronting religiously-motivated murder-suicide often “imagine that science cannot pose, much less answer, questions” about whether the values prompting such acts are “inferior to our own” (*The Moral Landscape*, p. 1). He disagrees.

In drastic cases like 9/11, a person might think that their indignation is based in some sort of timeless truth (about nonviolence, the right to live, or whatever). But Richard Rorty, Harris’s one-time professor, expressed a common sentiment when he wrote that “sentences like . . . ‘Truth is independent of the human mind’ are simply platitudes used to inculcate . . . the common sense of the West” (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 76–77). Harris wants a principled way of escaping this conclusion.

To distance himself from such cultural relativism, Harris converts “questions about values . . . meaning, morality, and life’s larger purpose” into “questions about the well-being of conscious creatures” (*The Moral Landscape*, p. 1). This conversion is pivotal, since it is only once we unpack the notions of good and bad as promotions or curtailments of conscious well-being that values can be translated “into facts that can be scientifically understood.” Such a scientific understanding is rendered possible because conscious states are caused by the brain, which can in turn be studied. Harris thus claims that “The more we understand ourselves at the level of the brain, the more we will see that there are right and wrong answers to questions of human values” (p. 2).

### **A Vantage from Which to Judge**

Naturally, on the neuroscience front, a lot of work remains to be done. Still, the mere fact that we can understand the brain—and thereby conscious states—and thereby well-being—is enough to restore objectivity in discussions of morality. As Harris rightly warns, “mistaking *no answers in practice* for *no answers in principle* is a great source of moral confusion” (p. 3). We may not have all the answers right now, but those answers are out there—or more precisely in here, inside our skulls.

Like all organs, brains serve a function. As Harris says in a 2016 TED talk: “Intelligence is a matter of information processing in physical systems.” My kidney may be a bit smaller or larger than yours, but as a kidney it performs the same function, namely to filter blood. Likewise, my brain may have been shaped by environmental stimuli that differ from yours, but both perform the same function, namely to process information. The senses provide inputs (a brick flying at me, say) which the brain converts into behavioral outputs (dodging the brick, say). Evolution and experience beat such input-output relations into shape. Since morality is simply in the business of maximizing a particular brain state—well-being—morality should be understandable.

Cross-cultural complexity and an overdone sense of respect can often make it seem as if “cultures are too different to compare” (Shah, “Cross-Cultural View of Rape,” p. 92).

Membership in a shared species, however, ensures that law-like generalizations can nevertheless be made. Clearly, deriving happiness from a Hollywood movie is no different than deriving happiness from a Bollywood movie. The fact that there can be different ways to flourish makes ample room for cultural variation. Yet, just as a biological phenomenon like “Cancer in the highlands of New Guinea is still cancer” (*The Moral Landscape*, p. 2), a social phenomenon like rape is wrong, irrespective of whether it happens in India or the United States. It is *not* imperialistic to say so.

To make this vision of ethical objectivity tangible and memorable, Harris ties it together with a metaphor: moral assessments yield a landscape, where the “peaks correspond to the heights of potential well-being and whose valleys represent the deepest possible suffering” (p. 7). In a real landscape, there needn’t be only one mountaintop. Likewise, we needn’t assume “that we will necessarily discover one right answer to every moral question or a single best way for human beings to live.” We must therefore be prepared to accept that “Some questions may admit of many answers, each more or less equivalent.” This pluralism, however, does not leave us unable to judge abhorrent practices. As Harris explains, “the existence of multiple peaks on the moral landscape does not make them any less real,” since there is a “difference between being on a peak and being stuck deep in a valley” (p. 7). This difference is felt by experiencing subjects, so persons undergoing “female genital excision, blood feuds, infanticide, the torture of animals, scarification, foot binding, cannibalism, ceremonial rape, human sacrifice, dangerous male initiations, restricting the diet of pregnant and lactating mothers, slavery, potlatch, the killing of the elderly, sati, irrational dietary and agricultural taboos attended by chronic hunger and malnourishment, the use of heavy metals to treat illness” (p. 20) are *not* experiencing the best that life has to offer.

This is the vision developed in Harris’s book, *The Moral Landscape: How Science can Determine Human Values*. I am ambivalent about that work. On the one hand, I regard Harris as an ally. In fact, on September 11th 2010—exactly nine years after the events that triggered Harris’s career (and mine)—I presented kindred ideas before the British Psycho-

logical Society (“Axiomatizing Umwelt Normativity”). My pivot, however, is life itself, not the conscious experience of well-being, so there are interesting differences worth fleshing out. Harris takes our ability to compare degrees of well-being as his starting point, but I think that the analysis can be pushed further. There is a (non-religious) reason *why* well-being is desirable, namely the finite life of an individual organism. It is because death is a constant possibility that things can be assessed as “for” or “against” someone. Such an account lets us objectively adjudicate moral questions, as Harris desires. However, by anchoring itself in the mortal body as a whole and pivoting on an affirmation of life, such an account dampens the claim that neuroscience would have all the answers. The trade-off is nevertheless worthwhile.

### **Knowledge of the Means, Desire for the End**

Harris’s first book, *The End of Faith* (2004), told us where values do *not* come from, namely faith. The sequel, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006), essentially did the same, albeit in a more focused way. Obeying the pottery barn rule that says when you break something you have to replace it, *The Moral Landscape* (2010) complements these critiques of faith and religion with a positive account of the origins of values.

Harris’s starting premise, which he regards as “very simple” and beyond controversy, is that “human well-being entirely depends on events in the world and on states of the human brain” (*The Moral Landscape*, p. 2). Events and brain states are both needed, I take it, because an event that is not cognized cannot be evaluated and a brain state with no basis in fact cannot have any practical utility. What happens in the world naturally affects what happens in the mind. We can thus use the promotion or curtailment of conscious well-being to handle questions of right and wrong. The disagreement about science that I am about to develop should not eclipse the large areas of agreement, namely that moral objectivity *is* possible and that religion is *not* the way to get it. However, the inference “Not religion, therefore science” does not follow.

Like many, Harris takes science to be the paradigm of what solid knowledge looks like. Harris may dismiss the

work done by professional ethicists (p. 197), but one thing gained by engaging in philosophy is a realization that something can be “objective” without being “scientific.” Mathematical knowledge is one such example. Morality is another. Harris writes that “no one wants utter, interminable misery,” so “if someone *claims* to want to be truly miserable, we are free to treat them like someone who claims to believe that  $2 + 2 = 5$ ” (p. 205). Yet, Harris does not seem to realize that, if claims like “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” and “I want to be happy” cannot be shown wrong, then they are ejected from the realm of science. Rational deliberations about well-being are definitely tethered to something, but not to natural science (as it is typically understood).

Harris wants to say that discussions of ethics can be objective. But, by accident or design, he conveys this message by saying that discussions of ethics can be scientific. This slide burdens Harris with adopting a stronger stance than he should. The non-scientific status of life-striving does not mean, however, that anything goes or that moral truths rest only on mystical insight. Anchoring morality to well-being may sound revolutionary to those acquainted only with religious accounts, but secular thinkers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill said essentially this, with Aristotle and Epicurus saying it better several centuries before them. Harris, however, gives the insight about well-being a newfangled twist: neuroscience should ultimately be our guide. This turn to neuroscience is admittedly trendy (Legrenzi and Umiltà, *Neuromania*). Yet, how much science is needed to seek happiness and steer clear of whatever impedes it? Empirical discoveries might enlarge the list of what counts as poison, but such discoveries will never revolutionize the idea that poison is to be avoided. The ‘poison’ part is chemistry, the ‘avoidance’ part is ethics.

Increases in knowledge fine-tune the means, not the end. To see this, consider the case of radon. We have advances in science (and technology) to thank for letting us know when and where to avoid this colorless and odorless radioactive gas. Hence, in contrast with a prehistoric caveman, my knowledge about naturally-occurring radon (and access to contemporary detection instruments) can tell me to regard a particular cave as a bad choice of dwelling. But, why should

I or the caveman *care* about the adverse effects of radon? As labeling on cigarette packages reveals, no number of facts will force one to live well. There is a tunnel in Germany where people willingly expose themselves to radon, so science should certainly be consulted to settle whether low doses of this radioactive gas indeed have any health benefits, as some claim. If, however, someone were to openly grant radon's danger yet walk through the radioactive caves with a clear suicidal intent, it is hard to see what science could say.

Why should a description of the universe worry that a particular patch of matter is on the verge of becoming inanimate, when it is bound to become inanimate anyway? The scientific method cultivates a "view from nowhere" (Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*). However, if Harris is right that "anything of value must be valuable *to* someone (whether actually or potentially)" (*The Moral Landscape*, p. 180), then the living subject is vital to valuing. Values may not be subjective but they are subject-involving (Smith, "The Importance of the Subject"), just as "parenthood involves a subject" in no way leads to "parenthood is subjective." In other words, values involve you but are not up to you. We can thus say, objectively, that radon is worth avoiding, but such a predicate is incomplete. Worth avoiding? *For whom?*

The precarity of my embodied life entails that I cannot do whatever I want. This moral objectivity, however, does not mean that values exist out there like regular things. A precipice on the early surface of this planet wasn't 'dangerous' prior to the advent of creatures liable to fall off the edge. It is not just that a brain must be brought into relation with a precipice to deem it worth avoiding. Rather, the relation must involve a living thing, perhaps with a brain, that wants to keep on living. Only by appealing to this standard can we explain the otherwise bizarre fact that the predicate "is dangerous" attaches to a fifty-foot deep trench but not a one-foot deep one. Our worldly landscape gets overlaid with a moral landscape only when it is appraised by a living entity concerned to remain so.

The universe is replete with differences (how many things currently differ from your cup of coffee?). So, to show up on our moral radar, a difference between fifty-foot and one-foot depths must make a difference to some organism

(Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, p. 453). Indeed, were I much taller or suicidal, the fifty-foot deep trench might not bother me or trigger my avoidance. Since whatever badness attaches to a fifty-foot deep trench is subject-involving, it cannot be confirmed solely with a measuring tape. While I agree with Harris that moral assessments are factual, the usual interpretation of what counts as a ‘fact’ tends to be quite crude, so care must be taken to properly characterize the relational complexity of moral assessments (“Axiomatizing Umwelt Normativity,” pp. 28–30). My crucial contribution to the transaction needs to be factored in.

## **Life and Death**

Inquiry into the foundation of ethics is difficult because it seeks to account for distinctions that normally seem obvious. It is a bit like asking what distinguishes the ground from the sky. We are all tempted to dismiss such a question as spurious and answer: Can’t you just *see*? Harris, for instance, juxtaposes the following cases (*The Moral Landscape*, pp. 15–16; descriptions and labels from Meacham’s review, p. 42):

**Life A:** Imagine that you are an illiterate and homeless . . . woman whose husband has disappeared. You have just seen your seven-year-old daughter raped and murdered at the hands of drug-crazed soldiers, and now you’re fearing for your life. Unfortunately, this is not an unusual predicament for you. From the moment you were born, your life has been marred by cruelty and violence.

**Life B:** Imagine that you are a respected professional in a wealthy country, married to a loving, intelligent and charismatic mate. Your employment is intellectually stimulating and pays you very well. For decades your wealth and social connections have allowed you immense personal satisfaction from meaningful work which makes a real difference in the world. You and your closest family will live long, prosperous lives, virtually untouched by crime, sudden bereavements, and other major misfortunes.

Harris holds that most of us would place life B “atop” life A. I sure would. The moral landscape thus seems to have its relief already there, waiting for us to notice. Yet, even if such ranking seems obvious (especially in stark contrasts involv-



ing few or dramatic options), it is a methodological mistake to equate 'psychologically intuitive' with 'philosophically primitive'. The fact that we evaluate and rank options so quickly may precisely hide, not reveal, the mechanisms or standards that we rely on.

So, what's going on? Here is one analogy. There is a light in my home controlled by a dimmer switch. I can turn that knob clockwise to increase the brightness level or counter-clockwise to diminish it. If I turn clockwise all the way, I max out to the brightest level possible (which can vary, based on the type of light bulb used). If, however, I keep turning the knob counter-clockwise, I eventually hear a sharp 'click' and the light goes out. Everything on the dimmer is on a continuous (analog) spectrum—except for the 'off' setting, which is marked by a sharp (digital) distinction. The existence of a living organism can be compared to such a dimmer switch, with degrees of well-being capped by the 'click' of death at one end.

As a precarious state that battles the decay and heat-loss characteristic of all material things (Schrödinger, *What Is Life?*, pp. 70–75), life places demands that we ignore at our own peril. There are many such demands, ranging from the obvious to the barely detectable. The effects of water deprivation will be felt fairly soon, whereas the effects of an unrewarding career will be felt through a host of seemingly-unrelated mood changes. Maximal well-being thus requires that many things fall into place, especially when the organism in question is social and capable of monitoring its own thoughts and actions. Because cruelty and violence are inimical to life, they turn life A in a deathward direction. Conversely, safety and a stimulating career take life B farther from the state of nonbeing that makes comparisons of brightness levels consequential.

Even in the best case, living organisms who keep entropy at bay are fated to lose the battle. In every painting, we ought to put the Grim Reaper somewhere in the background. Yet, until death comes, the constant alternative between life and non-life gives rise to values and forces one to make choices. Poison? Not good. Smoothie? Good. Only a living entity could make such value judgments—on the assumption, of course, that the living entity wants to continue being one.

## **Life-affirmation as Outside the Scope of Science**

The account of values that I am developing draws more heavily on biology than neuroscience. Yet, even if we switch the emphasis from neuroscience to biology, there are features of well-being that make the labels ‘science’ and ‘scientific’ inapplicable.

To see this, consider the following. I want to continue to be happy and to flourish, right now, even though by everyone’s admission no one yet has given a full account of how the brain works. My well-being—being healthy, well fed, in good company, busy with useful and challenging tasks, and so on—is its own reward. What could we learn about such a state of well-being? Lots of things: we could learn how blood sugar levels regulate moods, we could track correlations between personality types, careers, and recreational activities, we could catalog hereditary traits that predispose a person to stay calm under stressors, and so on. We could also learn which social, economic, and political arrangements best promote well-being. In fact, we are learning many of those things right now. Yet, no matter what discoveries await, it seems unlikely that science could ever show that happiness is something to be avoided. This is simply off the table. So, if a panel of experts showed up at my door with charts and data to convince me, on a scientific basis, to give up joy and embrace misery, I would doubt their findings, not my desire to live.

I can know this outcome before any demonstration or argument. This may not seem like a big deal, but it is disastrous for Harris’s account. Indeed, my non-negotiable desire to live—to be happy, flourish, and envelop a select group of people (like my family) in that sustained project—commits the cardinal sin of science, which is to put the conclusion before the premises. In other words, my desire to be happy is not falsifiable. Science, however, is distinguished from other intellectual pursuits by its readiness to be shown wrong (Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, pp. 43–78). A good scientist should actively try to disprove her theories, not prove them. Like a boxing champion routinely putting a title on the line against the best contenders, it is only when we try to genuinely defeat a claim and it wins that we can

be confident in it. Absent such exposure to the real possibility of defeat, a claim's alleged "truth" means nothing. Problematically though, the claim 'My life is worth living' can't be shown wrong. The bedrock of morality, then, cannot possibly be science.

Countering cultural relativists by appealing to science is thus overkill and actually backfires. I agree with Susan Haack that "we need to avoid *both* under-estimating the value of science, *and* over-estimating it" ("Six Signs of Scientism," p. 76). Harris is on the right track when he objects to moral relativism and points to well-being as the compass by which to adjudicate moral questions. However, he is led astray when he presents the resulting account as "scientific." Specific proposals on *how* to maximize the best state possible can definitely be falsified in light of new evidence. However, the desirability of that state itself is not falsifiable.

What are we to make of this? As a vocal critic of religious dogma, Harris knows that an account which enshrines a claim come-what-may cannot count as scientific. This results in a dilemma: either his proposal must leave open the possibility that scientists could one day discover that happiness is *not* to be sought (which is absurd), or his proposal cannot be "scientific" in the normal sense. I think we should champion the second horn of this dilemma.

### **Not 'Why Mountaineering?' but Rather 'Why Mountains?'**

Two closely-related issues must be distinguished. One is the issue of what motivates persons to strive for well-being as opposed to self-destruction. Wherever you find yourself on the moral landscape, you must act and those actions must head somewhere. Why do some people embrace mountaineering while others cannot muster the drive to seek a higher plane? As Harris correctly observes, "Many of us spend our lives marching with open eyes toward remorse, regret, guilt, and disappointment" (*Lying*, p. 1). Yet, Harris's observation that we often fail to seek the best life possible presupposes that the highs and lows of the moral landscape have already been differentiated. We must therefore distinguish the psychological question about motivation from

another, logically prior, philosophical question: what gives the moral landscape its relief? *Why* is ‘up’ up and ‘down’ down? This is the question that my appeal to mortal life seeks to answer.

The physical world that we perceive is indifferent to our plight. We take an interest in the world (for instance, tsunamis), but it does not take an interest in us (for instance, tsunamis). So, despite the rapid speed of our intuitive assessments, we cannot assume that the peaks and valleys of the moral landscape exist apart from our involvement. Indeed, puzzlement about human motivation to seek what is best (or better) only makes sense once some piece of behavior has been foregrounded as worth emulating. Why is the firefighter a good guy and the arsonist a bad guy? After all, from a purely physical standpoint, they are indistinguishable: both are chunks of matter acting in accordance with natural laws. Such material bodies (and the events they generate) must therefore be given a valence to be placed in a hierarchy, with the firefighter ‘above’ the arsonist. The same goes for lives A and B above.

Alas, Harris never does any ‘moral geology’: the highs and lows of the moral landscape are just there, somehow. This is insufficient, because well-being is the expression of something more fundamental, namely the finitude of life. Moreover, to the extent that values are rooted in the phenomenon of life, there’s no pressing reason to think that the brain is the organ that matters most. Indeed, “Much ordinary thinking about plants . . . reflects implicit recognition of life as the source of value judgments. When we assess certain events as beneficial or harmful for plants . . . What allows these evaluations is not the fact that one experiences varying feelings in reaction to such events. Rather, it is the fact that the organisms stand to gain from them; their lives can be strengthened or set back” (Smith, *Viable Values*, p. 87). Well-being must therefore be indexed to the species in question.

Surely, for a typical plant, some spot near a well-lit window is more desirable than some dark corner behind a door. To point out that plants are sessile and thus can do very little to reach more preferable locations would be to change the topic from the end (life) to the means (anatomy). Naturally, plants have no nervous system. It doesn’t matter: they want

to live. Hence, on my account, even a greenhouse with no humans houses a moral landscape. It may be too much to claim that “If plants or amoebas are not conscious, yet can still be subject to things of value to them, then Harris’s . . . argument fails” (Meacham’s review, p. 43). But, it seems fair to say that even a completed neuroscience thousands of years from now would not have all the answers.

The word “flourishing” comes from the Latin “*florere*” which means “to bloom” or “to flower.” This state is the ultimate accomplishment of a living thing, something that happens when all of its needs are met and surpassed. When organs like kidneys and brains co-operate, they add up to an organism, whose ‘function’ or aim is to live. This aim can be achieved with varying degrees of success, with emotions (in humans) acting as a report card on how well we are living. Now, our grammar and lexicon can often trick us into making needless philosophical commitments, so it may be helpful to recall that the concatenated word ‘well-being’ simply means ‘being well’. Nothing more, nothing less. Once we keep that simplicity in mind, the idea that all living beings face a moral landscape becomes less contentious. We won’t find a ‘neural correlate’ of flourishing, any more than a well-functioning car has a precise spot where its ‘well-function’ happens.

If the foundation of morality is mortality and the momentous life-or-death alternative it constantly poses, then the answers to moral questions stem from our perishable body, not just what is inside our skull. A full belly, for instance, is valuable—quite apart from a brain registering that fullness. If anyone doubts this, we could doctor cortical stimulations that fool their brain into feeling satiated while depriving their stomach wall of actual hydration and nutrients. The consequences for such a person would objectively suck, in the same way that exposure to radiation sucks even when you are unaware of it. We feed on food, not knowledge of food.

### **Beings with Skin in the Game**

The revised picture that emerges from the foregoing is as follows. Harris correctly notes that “the difference between a healthy person and a dead one is about as clear and conse-

quential a distinction as we ever make in science” and that “The differences between the heights of human fulfillment and the depths of human misery are no less clear” (*The Moral Landscape*, p. 12). I wholeheartedly agree. These stark contrasts lead Harris to oppose relativists who “imagine that science cannot pose, much less answer, questions” about which “way of life is better, or more moral, than another” (p. 1). I have argued, however, that science can do so only by appealing to a criterion—well-being—whose desirability can be sought but not justified. Requests for explanation of well-being’s desirability thus bottom out in the premise “Because my life is worth living,” which is no explanation at all. This, however, is fine. Life is not an argument (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 117).

We can try to reduce the desire to live to facts about the brain, but by then we have moved the discussion to a place where the very notions of ‘life’, ‘feeling’, and ‘good’ vanish. You won’t see those under a microscope, no matter how sophisticated those instruments get. Consider the absurdity of looking at a brain scan, pointing to a patch of color, and saying to your spouse: ‘*That, there*, is my love for you’ (see Uttal, *The New Phrenology*). I am unsure what people hope to find in a skull. I thus agree with John McDowell that “Where mental life takes place need not be pinpointed any more precisely than saying that it takes place where our lives take place” (“Putnam on Mind and Meaning,” p. 40).

Despite this deflated role for neuroscience, we can marshal the “clear and consequential” distinction between life and death to make “very precise claims about which of our behaviors and uses of attention are morally good, which are neutral, and which are worth abandoning” (*The Moral Landscape*, p. 8). Happenings involving fleshy tissues mean nothing without an individual organism (me) who cares to live, so it is only in virtue of such caring that clipping your nails gets differentiated from amputating your arm.

Harris helps himself to a ready-made notion of well-being and assumes, without defense, that it is to be sought. I certainly seek it. But, if we ask *why* well-being is desirable, we are met with a bizarre answer: it is desirable for its own

sake, not for the sake of anything else. Moreover, an individual must willingly assent to this, in some strange sense of 'assent' where the alternative would be self-annihilation. This may not be drastic, especially if we accept that "Science and rationality generally are based on intuitions and concepts that cannot be reduced or justified" (*The Moral Landscape*, p. 204). So, who knows: maybe in time we will make individual acts of self-affirmation a part of a scientifically-respectable picture of the human condition. If we are open-minded enough, we might even rethink some traditional moral tenets.

I realize that there is a whole cottage industry of people delineating no-go zones for science. Harris deems it "inevitable . . . that science will gradually encompass life's deepest questions" and anticipates that this ever-increasing encroachment "is guaranteed to provoke a backlash" (p. 7). Although elements of my stance could presumably be used to grease a slippery slope to religion, I believe that "The concepts of value hierarchy and topmost value [that some ascribe to God] can be brought down to Earth and made compatible with our ability to err. All one needs to do is match the religious devotee's enthusiasm while acknowledging that one's yearning for a full life, no matter how ardent, cannot guide one about what to do next. That, like most things, requires fallible inquiry" ("Stone, Stone-Soup, and Soup," p. 111). You may not need—and indeed could never rely on—science to tell you *to* live; but you definitely want science to counsel you on *how* to best achieve that end.

Using a helpful terminology (proposed in "Stone, Stone-Soup, and Soup," p. 110), we might say that desiring the end is *non-rational* (unrelated to reason), determining the means-end fit is *rational* (justified by reasons), but nothing in the sum is *irrational* (against reason). Given that religion and mysticism have no foothold in such an account, I think a tenable account of right and wrong rooted in well-being should explicitly countenance an individual life-affirming assent, instead of hoping, as Harris does, that everyone will take predicates like 'is worth seeking' and 'is scientific'—and their troublesome conjunction—granted.

## **Moral Truths, Arranged in a Hierarchy, and Invested with Value from Without**

Harris and I agree that moral judgments can be objective. The people who went to work in the Twin Towers and the maniacs who flew planes into those buildings were not just having a cultural difference, akin to preferring falafels over hotdogs. Most people can see this. However, unlike Harris, I want my account of moral objectivity to rest on deeper foundations than intuitive responses. To that end, I have grounded morality in the phenomenon of life, more specifically in the individual decision to live and avoid death.

The fine-tuning that results from this approach may be illustrated as follows. Imagine that all possible ethical statements are written on small cards. Such statements would include “It is good to eat a balanced breakfast,” “It is wrong to pursue a career you dislike,” “It is wrong to beat your partner senseless with a crowbar,”—you name it. We could then separate the cards into two stacks of dos and don’ts. We can even order them within those groups, since some are more serious than others. This hierarchical sorting relies on pairs like ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ that don’t just describe the way the world *is* but rather prescribe the way the world *should* be. Although “science can . . . help us understand what we *should* do and *should* want” (*The Moral Landscape*, p. 28), this understanding is conditional on a prior desire to live the best life possible, which is an essential spark that science cannot supply. So, on my telling, all the cards need to be rewritten into conditional statements ‘*If you want to live / flourish, then it is good to eat a balanced breakfast*’, ‘*If you want to live / flourish, then it is wrong to pursue a career you dislike*’, ‘*If you want to live / flourish, then it is wrong to beat your partner senseless with a crowbar*’,—and so on.

Now, as any first-year student of logic knows, conditional statements can be true or false (for example, it can be true that ‘If someone smashes the vase, then it will break’, even when no one smashes it). Hence, keeping in mind the peculiarities of our anatomies and environments, I see no reason why science could not determine the truth or falsity of the conditional statements listed on the cards. Still, having fully



determined such truths, nothing would compel one to act as the cards recommend. For such statements to be morally binding, one needs to affirm the first part of their if-then statements, thereby turning the conditional structure into what is called a *modus ponens*:

If you want to live/flourish, then it is good to do x, y, and z.

I want to live/flourish.

Therefore,

It is good to do x, y, and z.

There are different ways for propositions to be true. So, if the proposition ‘I want to live/flourish’ has any truth-conditions, then its truth-maker is my *want*. I make it true. This explains why, when it comes to seeking happiness, the cave-man and I are on equal footing. It is my mortality, not my two PhDs, which compels me to regard radon—and the Taliban—as worth avoiding.

In most contexts, we can omit life-affirmation of the second premise for the sake of brevity. Harris (*The Moral Landscape*, pp. 15–16) certainly omits it when he juxtaposes his desirable and undesirable lives. Here is essentially what he says:

x, y, and z are good.

Therefore,

It is good to do x, y, and z.

The most tangible sign that Harris takes the most basic ethical polarities for granted is that, in his original text, he labels the lives A and B “the bad life” and “the good life” respectively (p. 15)—thus employing the very terms that stand in need of justification. Similarly, Harris banks on our recoil from a scenario involving “The Worst Possible Misery for Everyone” (p. 38). Yet, a choice to favor life over death must be operative for such scenarios to have any moral significance and inform our conduct (see the telling anecdote in *The Moral Landscape*, p. 182). This desire should be made explicit, as in the *modus ponens* just pro-

posed. I thus see my account as making room for the more relationally complex fact that “anything of value must be valuable *to someone*” (p. 180).

According to this augmented picture, we can line up all the cards like dominoes, with life-promoting behaviors at one end, death-promoting behaviors at the other end, and a slew in between. Science can and should be tasked with assisting this ordering. Why, for example, is lying not conducive to a good life? It is not obvious, so we need an explanation (of the sort offered by Harris in *Lying*). Yet, as home-buyers know, no amount of argument or data-gathering will amount to a decision. Hence, even if the cards are organized like dominoes, something outside the cards needs to topple the first in the series.

When, like a marriage vow, I express my love of life by affirming (not necessarily verbally) that *I do* want to live/flourish, the second parts of the if-then statements sequentially get unlocked and all the cards fall like dominoes (the organization is actually a lattice, see my “Axiomatizing Umwelt Normativity,” p. 30). The set of now-binding prescriptions, taken as a corporate body, constitute a morality—a principled blueprint on how I should act. I may then evaluate any object, person, or event that I cross paths with. The arsonist and 9/11 attacker objectively become bad guys, whereas the firefighter and office worker objectively become good guys.

You have to live and wish to extend that precious gift for morality to get into gear. Nature (your parents) gave you life, but you must do as professional actors say and *own it*. Since an affirmation of the second premise’s “I want to live/flourish” can only come from the individual, it would seem that “we have a prerogative which some would attribute only to God: each of us, when we act, is a prime mover unmoved” (Chisholm, *Human Freedom and the Self*, p. 12). Indeed, despite my antipathy toward religious dogma, I find it interesting that, in the Biblical creation myth, God says after each stepwise ingredient that “it was good.” Such valuation only seems ‘god-like’ because we haven’t (yet) invented a better vocabulary for the purpose.

Harris could perhaps invoke his critique of free will (*Free Will*) to insist that, under normal circumstances, an organism is compelled to turn the conditional of the first premise

into a *modus ponens*. Clinging to life is indeed the default (which explains the relative rarity and difficulty of suicide). But, one of the things we need, in my estimate, is an account of how living organisms, as real wholes, possess genuine agency. Yet, even if we assume that it was ordained from the moment of the Big Bang that determinists like Harris would serve as the mouthpieces of the universe itself, we should still favor an account that factors in an organism's regard for its life.

### **Cherishing My Life in the Aftermath of God's Death**

A lifeward (or death-avoiding) orientation distinguishes the people in the Twin Towers from their attackers. As befits a murder-suicide, both died. But, one wanted to live while the other didn't. This wanting makes all the difference. Indeed, unlike Harris, my account is not susceptible of being upturned by the presence of "rapists, liars, and thieves" who "would experience the same depth of happiness as the saints" (*The Moral Landscape*, p. 189), since those folks would hinder *my* life (see my "What About Suicide Bombers?" for a fuller discussion of this crucial nuance).

It is thus important to underscore that the moral standard here is not some disembodied concept of "Life" with a capital L, but one's *individual* life, flesh and all. I have argued elsewhere that Harris's "wilful disregard of professional work in ethics leads him to reinvent utilitarianism (the greatest happiness for the greatest number)—in a version completely unresponsive to the criticisms that this view underwent in actual debates" (*Myth, Meaning, and Antifragile Individualism*, p. 181). Indeed, "It is not at all clear why, starting from a 'moral' desire to enhance our own well-being, we should move to a concern for the well-being of conscious creatures generally. A crucial premise is missing" (Meacham's review, p. 44). Life, in general, may endure, but only particular beings die and only particular beings (strive to) experience well-being. The account I am proposing is thus self-centered, in the strict non-pejorative sense of the term:

Suppose that eventually a living system arose from the primordial soup—or wherever it was. Then we will have to ask: Who was the

subject to whom the differences worked on by such a system should make a difference? If one admits at all, that living systems are information processing entities, then the only possible answer to this question is: *the system itself is the subject. Therefore a living system must 'exist' for itself*, and in this sense it is more than an imaginary invention of ours: . . . Self-reference is the fundament on which life evolves, the most basal requirement. (Hoffmeyer, "Code Duality Revisited," pp. 101–02; emphasis added)

This is why *my* life gives the moral landscape its relief.

To gloss this as "autism rebranded" ("How to Lose Readers [Without Even Trying]") would not only be to confess cynicism about the human ability to weigh larger contexts (in a manner reminiscent of game theory), but also to confess that one is still in the grip of religious admonitions. Harris may be an atheist, but Nietzsche warned that even though "God is dead; . . . there may still for millennia be caves in which [people] show his shadow" (*The Gay Science*, p. 109). In his debate with Harris, the Christian apologist William Lane Craig expressed confidence that both men would agree on practically all ethical issues. Yet, to say, for example, that lies overburden one's mental accounting (*Lying*, p. 33) and needlessly complicate one's life (p. 41) is to say something very different from what most religions say. Providing reasons instead of commandments is already a game-changer, but the truly revolutionary suggestion is that lying is not in one's long-term best interest (compare Harris's case for honesty with Smith, *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics*, pp. 75–105, who doesn't airbrush her appeal to self-interest).

In his work on lying and elsewhere, Harris contends that "I should do the right thing," but he denies that "I" even exist (since there is supposedly no self) or that I could "do" anything anyway (since there is supposedly no free will). Maybe I need to meditate more or take "pharmacological shortcuts" (*Waking Up*, p. 93), but it seems to me that Harris undermines his own moral project. Even those promulgating a dialogue between cognitive science and meditation think that Harris's stance is "nonsensical" (Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, p. 45). In any event, until I plumb the depths of such mysteries, I prefer to bite down hard on all the concepts that "I should do the right thing" presupposes (see my "Can 'I' Prevent You from Entering My Mind?" for a defense of the

“I,” “Axiomatizing Umwelt Normativity” for a defense of the “should,” and “Just Do It” for a defense of the “do”).

What *is* the right thing to do? If we stop waving our hands and start looking at applied cases, it quickly becomes a complicated question, with plenty of room for reasonable disagreement. One thing is for sure, there is no way to switch the anchor from God’s will to my life and emerge with an identical list of dos and don’ts. Jesus, for example, viewed pride as a vice. Aristotle, the founder of biology, viewed pride as the crown of all the virtues. There is substantial disagreement here. It should be clear where I side. “Self” is not a four-letter word (see Salmieri, “Aristotle on Selfishness?”). Some will undoubtedly try to make appeals to well-being square with traditional religious tenets, but reshaping someone else’s intuitions is a fool’s errand, so I will not endeavor to “defeat God’s shadow as well” (*The Gay Science*, p. 109). Time will do that for me.

Harris notes that “one of the greatest challenges facing civilization in the twenty-first century is for human beings to learn to speak about their deepest personal concerns . . . about ethics . . . in ways that are not flagrantly irrational” (*Letter to a Christian Nation*, p. 87). I agree. One of the most valuable things we humans have at our disposal is rationality, since that mutation allows us to critically scrutinize what our elders taught us, to determine which values are truly worth pursuing. Rationality also allows us to go beyond here-and-now gratification to ascertain what is really in our best interest. Since the written statements in my thought-experiment exhaustively covered every conceivable moral truth, there must be a card in the mix that reads: “If you want to live/flourish, then it is good to learn more about the nature of your wanting.” The individual desire to live at the heart of such a rational ethic may not be “scientific” in the strict sense of being falsifiable. But, hopefully, this chapter has shed light on the fundamental life-or-death alternative that gives the moral landscape its relief.

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