



# Book The Moral Landscape

## How Science Can Determine Human Values

Sam Harris  
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### Recommendation

Neuroscientist and best-selling author Sam Harris is controversial, argumentative, against religion, in favor of science, deeply moral and intensely rationalist. While he never uses one word if many more will do, Harris’s positions on science, morality, religion and brain function prove innovative, well researched, thought provoking, and, if you are of a religious bent, probably infuriating. Harris dissects the evolutionary and biological processes underlying reason, moral choices and faith. He poses scientific counterarguments for religious tenets and dreams of a world where science proves the worth of any moral choice. You may not agree with everything he has to say, but he expresses the point of view of rationalism with thorough conviction. Caught up in explaining philosophical complexities, he seems not to worry whether readers will totally understand all that he says. Even so, *BooksInShort* suggests this interesting, impassioned, philosophical explanation of the rationalist worldview to those who wonder how and why – and even if – people make certain choices, and what their choices mean.

### Take-Aways

- The rationalist worldview contends that knowledge and belief can and should be mutually nourishing. This philosophy also says that:
- Science – not religion – can objectively determine a morally superior way of life.
- Belief systems may ignore, but cannot change, scientific laws.
- Anything moral promotes “human well-being.” Ethics, principles and a better way of living derive from facts about the presence or absence of well-being.
- Human well-being changes with world events and “states of the human brain.”
- Nothing is more important than altering humanity’s “ethical commitments.”
- Society needs to close the gaps between “knowledge and values,” between science and religion, and between facts and morality.
- Moral questions have correct and incorrect answers.
- To solve moral questions that have several possible answers, select the option with the greatest validity and potential for positive benefit.
- Free will does not exist.

### Summary

#### Morality as Quantifiable Fact

Can scientific methods demonstrate a morally superior way of life? Rationalism answers “yes,” and states that questions about morals are always questions about values. Such queries address “the well-being of conscious creatures.” If “human well-being” can be quantified – and it can – then one way of life offers more well-being than another. Values that advocate people’s well-being are morally superior to values that degrade it, though some moral questions (such as, is it always bad to tell a lie?) may have ambiguous or multiple answers. To address moral questions with several possible answers, select the option with the greatest validity and potential for positive benefit. Answers that lower human well-being are less valid, and rational people should reject them in favor of those that raise well-being.

“Questions about values – about meaning, morality and life’s larger purpose – are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures. Values, therefore, translate into facts that can be scientifically understood.”

You believe in certain facts based on “rational inquiry,” but you also form beliefs about what is moral, what possesses ineffable worth, what your intentions are and why

you exist. Such questions lead to lots of practical and moral confusion. Rationalism offers a simpler way. It says you can reduce moral questions to two premises. First, people face better and worse ways to live. And second, the differences between better and worse lives emerge from “states of the human brain and states of the world.”

## The Power of Irrationality

Human well-being derives from interior and exterior events: that which goes on in the brain and that which goes on in the world. States of mind do not alter the state of the world. Your bad mood, for instance, will not change the cycles of the tides. But the world can alter people’s states of mind. In some cultures or religions, for example, people believe that boy babies are more precious than girl babies. What makes this belief “true” to those believers is that their cultural norms support it, and that influences their thoughts and emotions. Some argue that enduring beliefs must perform some adaptive evolutionary function, or they would not endure. This is not so. The fact that a belief or social norm lasts – even for centuries – is no proof that it promotes well-being or is even worthwhile. Physically punishing children to make them behave prolongs a host of negative psychological effects, yet it has been part of human existence for centuries.

“The goal of this book is to begin a conversation about how moral truth can be understood in the context of science.”

Belief systems may ignore, but cannot change, the universe’s physical nature or scientific laws, such as the speed of light. Algebra and physics have no nationality or religion; no religious belief can change the sum of two plus two. By the same token, morality itself does not belong to any particular religion or country. Rationalism thinks that morality is quantifiable according to a standard that holds true regardless of cultural or religious norms. It says that those who turn to religion for such standards must believe that rational discourse and reasoned decision making cannot address life’s most significant questions.

“How could we ever say, as a matter of scientific fact, that one way of life is better, or more moral, than another? Whose definition of ‘better’ or ‘moral’ would we use?”

Even though rationalism finds them unreasonable, the convictions of religion seem to be paralyzing the thoughtful, nourishing the confusion of “secular” democracy. For instance, consider the apprehension European nations have about Muslim fundamentalists among their populations, or America’s politicizing of some conservative Christians’ holdings about certain scientific issues. Such infiltration of religion into much of secular life has led to a specious divide. On one side is science, which many feel should limit itself to inquiries about the physical world. On the other side is religion, which is supposed to comprehend – or at least make as comprehensible as possible – the world of “meaning, values, morality and the good life.”

“Morality could be a lot like chess: There are surely principles that generally apply, but they might admit of important exceptions.”

But morality does not adhere to a religious code. What is moral is that which improves the quality of human life. Knowledge improves well-being. Unscientific beliefs, no matter how entrenched, do not. Society needs to close this gulf between “knowledge and values,” between science and religion, between facts and morality – but that is easier said than done. Dogmatic institutions often do not welcome open discussion and, conversely, many scientists protest that they are not in the values business but in the business of quantifiable knowledge. That is a moral abdication.

## Does “Moral Truth” Exist?

Oddly, the public’s increased knowledge of all aspects of the world and its cultures has led only to moral confusion. Amid this confusion, well-educated secular people seem to retreat into moral relativism and cling to the idea that moral truth cannot exist. Those who do not think a moral truth exists often condone hideous behaviors in other cultures on the grounds that such behavior is a “cultural norm” no one outside that society can judge. But a norm is just an entrenched majority opinion. If “truth has nothing...to do with consensus; one person can be right, and everyone else can be wrong,” then science and rational thought can – and ought to – guide people to what they “should do and should want,” for everyone’s greater good.

“Moral relativism...tends to be self-contradictory.”

If everyone in the world led as wretched a life as possible, clearly, that would be “bad.” If everyone could live as well as possible – as fed, sheltered, healthy, loved, protected and able to pursue his or her goals as could be – that would be “good.” A universe in which humans suffer is indisputably worse than one where they “experience well-being.” Those who accept the existence of these two ends of the continuum and who think that life on one end is superior to life on the other must accept that moral questions have correct and incorrect answers. If science or rational fact-finding demonstrate that certain behaviors increase well-being and other behaviors do not, then some behaviors on the part of people or institutions are wrong, and society should recognize them as wrong. A cognizant moral being should:

1. Try to understand why, under the banner of morality, people commit certain acts that undermine well-being.
2. Examine what comprises moral truth, and ponder what actions humans should follow.
3. Change the behavior of those who act immorally. The most critical task is finding ways to alter people’s erroneous or injurious “ethical commitments.”

## The Dobu

Anthropologist Ruth Benedict’s study of the Dobu islanders in New Guinea presents an almost perfectly backward moral world, a world of cultural norms where nothing anyone does fosters the well-being of others.

“A bias is not...a source of error, it is a reliable pattern of error.”

The Dobu never cooperate. Their main activity is casting spells on other Dobu. The goal of these spells is to kill people or make them ill in order to steal their crops. The Dobu believe some people are born with the power to cast those spells, and they conduct a thriving economy in the sale of hexes. They recognize some other people as uniquely able to infect victims with certain diseases or to cure those diseases, and they buy the services of these people as well.

“Our brains were not developed with a view to our ultimate fulfillment.”

The Dobu do not practice altruism in any form; in fact, “all existence appears...as a cutthroat struggle.” They attribute every event to a specific spell and the person who cast it. They guess who cast a spell by seeing which person benefits most from the victim’s ill fortune.

The Dobu believe that any member of their community who has a good yam-farming season stole that successful crop – by spell – from those who had bad harvests. The Dobu are rigorously paranoid and see secrecy as a cultural virtue. People deeply distrust their closest relatives and friends because they believe that spells work best on the people who are most intimate with the spell caster. Dobu blame the parents when a child is ill; a dead husband means a murderous wife.

“The mere endurance of a belief system or custom does not suggest that it is adaptive, much less wise.”

Apparently, the islanders live in thrall to a strict moral order, but everything in it suppresses well-being. They illustrate that all issues of well-being rest first on the ability to experience actual well-being. The consistent misery and disconnection of Dobu life make their societal choices clearly immoral, no matter how they are woven into the fabric of daily life. That’s the problem with dismissing harmful behavior as a cultural norm: Moral and immoral acts have consequences.

## What Is a Moral System?

A system that creates greater well-being for more people is more moral than a system that does not. Moral solutions should not depend solely on perspective, whether you are a Dobu or an anthropologist. Your preferences, no matter how strong they might be, do not constitute a moral view.

“Changes in wealth, health, age, marital status, etc., tend not to matter as much as we think they will.”

Rationalist thought comes to the conclusion that religion is rarely helpful in sorting out such moral issues. Most religions define the most moral life as the one which most closely adheres to that religion’s concept of the law of a supreme being or beings. Most religions say that reward comes to the believer in an afterlife, and they thereby downplay the importance of well-being “in this world.” True believers can find almost anything moral or immoral – “female genital excision, blood feuds, infanticide, the torture of animals, scarification, foot binding, cannibalism” – without considering whether their beliefs reduce anyone else’s well-being.

## Categories of Behavior

Neuroscientific research sorts all human behavior into four kinds of action:

1. “Self-serving” behavior that affects no one else.
2. Self-serving behavior that adversely affects someone else.
3. Behavior that benefits others and offers you a likelihood of reciprocity.
4. Behavior benefiting others from which you do not expect to gain.

“There may be nothing more important than human cooperation.”

Humans and all other social mammals practice the first three kinds of actions, but only humans perform the fourth. This list underscores the “positive and negative motivation” of moral or immoral behavior. You know what actions might increase your well-being and which might increase the good that others experience. At times you want to perform the former; at times, even against your own will or inclination, you perform the latter.

## Psychopathic Behavior

Psychopaths provide a useful negative example in a moral discussion. Lacking fear and empathy, they feel neither guilt nor remorse. They find pleasure in the pain and terror of others. Because psychopaths show reduced brain activity in response to “emotional stimuli” compared to those who aren’t psychopaths, they live without the mooring of “social and moral norms.” Psychopaths usually do not see themselves as flawed.

## Free Will?

People change their behavior and states of being as their brains take in multiple channels of information and respond to environmental changes. The inputting channels include data from the outside world, from the individual’s interior state and from the surrounding “spheres of meaning,” which could be the habits of culture, spoken language, rituals and even a person’s unconscious reading of how sane someone else might be.

“It seems immoral not to recognize just how much luck is involved with morality itself.”

You consciously perceive only a small percentage of what your brain absorbs every instant. You feel changes in your thinking, your actions, your frame of mind, your emotions and other aspects of yourself. But often you have no idea what “neural events” or brain activities drive a change in your interior state. Ironically, other people, by taking a quick look at your face or by hearing you speak one sentence, have greater insight into your “internal states and motivations” than you do. Your actions stem from physical processes that remain opaque to your consciousness. That strongly supports the idea that free will does not exist. For instance, brain activity in areas dealing with movement takes place 350 milliseconds before someone decides to move. Researchers using MRI technology found that they could foretell that a person would make certain decisions 10 seconds before the subject was aware of making any choice. This evidence strongly suggests that human will is not the “conscious source” of human actions.

“We can account for the ways culture defines us within the context of neuroscience and psychology.”

Even as you perceive your existence, you do not predict what action you might take until “a thought or intention arises.” Your thinking and what you see as willful actions are based in mental processes that are invisible to you. People’s belief that they have free will only shows how little they know about the neurological events that motivate them.

# About the Author

Neuroscientist **Sam Harris** wrote *The End of Faith, Lying, Free Will* and *Letters to a Christian Nation*.

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