

Critiques of Sam Harris's *The Moral Landscape*: each culture is a different moral universe and why navigating the moral landscape is wrong intuition

Ho Manh Tung

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University

Beppu, Oita, Japan

August 25, 2020

Sam Harris¹ argues science will eventually answer all of our moral questions, all of our knowledge domains, economics, neurosciences, psychologies, etc. will eventually play a part in telling us what is right and what is wrong.

He argues for moral realism on the ground that people use the same brain regions to judge both statements about facts (such as one plus one is two) and statements about values (such as killing is wrong). He argues that the divide between ought and is is a mistake, born of the lack of information about the human mind and how it interacts with the environment. The more science of the mind progresses, the more facts we will know, and the more capable we could make a judgment of increased well-being of a mind. This is a version of utilitarianism.

Sam Harris proposes a conceptual framework of the moral landscape, where the peaks correspond to the heights of moral flourishing, and the valleys correspond to the lows of moral depravity. The framework suggests a few things:

- 1) the problem of making moral progress is a navigation problem,
- 2) all cultures, no matter how starkly different, seem to obey the same underlying laws, and,
- 3) thus, it is possible to physically move from one set of values to another.

I suspect such intuition about how people change or adapt their value systems might not be correct. What if each culture is a different parallel universe, in terms of morality and well-being. Similar to the way physicists envision a multiverse, where each universe has its own set of laws and parameters, I think different cultures have different values, and each value has a different parameter. And it seems to me to adopt a new value or to remove a value from one's culture is an equivalent of traveling to a different moral plane, where the world operates starkly different.

Here I do not deny the possibility of cultural assimilation or acculturation^{2,3,4}. What I am suggesting is Sam's intuition about the moral landscape, and especially how scientific facts enable people to move in this landscape, might be wrong. I think for a person, who attempts cultural assimilation, it would feel like traveling to another universe, where the laws could inflict on him or her a tremendous amount of pain. It is evident in that defending one's sacred values and denying others' is the source of tremendous violence, pain, and suffering throughout human history, as shown in Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod's research in 2008³ and other studies⁴

However, even here, it might be that the navigation intuition is entirely wrong. A better intuition might be "running new computer codes," thus, there is not "traveling" or "navigating," it is like a "switch" or a "teleportation." However, it is one thing to teleport to Mars. It is another to be teleported to another parallel universe.

This analogy suggests the possibility of simulation; a person can articulate a set of values from a different culture, and simulate them in his mind. It also suggests there are sets of codes that destroy other codes, like an anti-virus program. Looking at it this way, it seems to me there are cultures where scientific facts will enable people to make better moral choices and improve their value system. Still, there are also cultures where scientific facts are treated like a virus and systematically sought and stemmed out.

References

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