

Toward a Science of Morality

How far can basic logic and philosophy take us in constraining a future science of morality? Is it reasonable to hope that such a science will raise our species morally and encourage human flourishing?

A critique by Andy Ross

The Moral Landscape
How Science Can Determine Human Values

By Sam Harris
Free Press, 320 pages

Human beings like to be free. Whatever the truth that confronts them, they value the choice to accept it or not. Celebration of that freedom and repudiation of coercion lie behind refusal to endorse derivation of an “ought” from an “is”. Anyone in their right mind can see the facts and respond accordingly, but to be told the only moral course is to follow the party line is infantilizing.

Scientists are often mavericks toward truth. The accepted opinion is not always right, and a polity that deems immoral those who question or deny the truth of the day is anathema to the scientific enterprise. A science of morality will hesitate before the final “ought” and stick to description and analysis.

We can start by comparing morality to mathematics. If certain moral claims are accepted as axioms, then any valid deduction from them makes a claim whose assertion is morally right. True claims lead to right action, and right action grows from or is founded upon basic truths. We can maintain that a basic truth is either obvious or true by virtue of the meaning of its terms.

As in mathematics, the sphere of legitimate concern may be the experience of conscious creatures. But truths retain their status independently of our actual experience, so

long as such experience is possible in principle. Given our own status as conscious seers of basic truths and legislators of validity, we automatically meet the epistemological need to invoke consciousness.

Thus, in moral theory, the self-proclaimed well-being of a supreme moral legislator may be a formally sufficient ground for a moral ruling, given that the legislator is a conscious being within the sphere of legitimate moral concern. The balancing of the legislator’s well-being against the pleasure or pain of others can be interpreted as a political question for creatures within the moral sphere. If consciousness is a gift from God, to use an ancient monotheist idiom, then a foundation for morality can balance all on a single consciousness.

Consciousness is a concept of psychology, and we need to define it. A phenomenal state of inner transparency seems to approach an introspected limit of numinous cosmic clarity where everything comes together. As for its temporal dynamics, the flame of consciousness can either flicker on until it dies or blaze a trail to shared or universal glory.

A conscious mind has an owner: A subject or a self or a creature owns an ongoing and

changing state of consciousness. Logically, the owner is the original point or strange loop defining or implementing the synthetic unity of apperception. The owner can be a “higher” self, and one person can share a self with another. Generally, the causally active self of a hominid creature can be a political leader, a genetic imperative, or a psychic god achieving virtual reality through its believers. Ownership is fungible and not obvious to introspection.

A phenomenally rich state of consciousness may conceivably have a hierarchy of owners. In that (typically human) case, the values implemented in action lower down in the hierarchy may well find their lowest validation much higher in the stack. Top-down validation is analogous to how human body cells act out the “higher” self of a human organism as a whole. Thus moral behavior might aspire to validation at the highest possible level in the cosmic stack – careless of popular opinion but righteous from a godlike perspective.

Well-being is often exemplified in Homo sapiens and may be a morally admirable state of being. But in a hierarchy, well-being at the top may be ultimately all that counts, and defining well-being at the top in terms of well-being at lower rungs on the moral ladder may prove impossible (one can disagree over eating meat).

A field theory of morality constructed like a physical theory would seem to allow talk of a moral landscape in a phase space somehow codifying possible actions. But before we can measure out a moral landscape to validate moral reasoning, we need to define ownership over the nodes or spikes of consciousness in the field and to normalize the scales for their multilevel flourishing or misery.

If nodes of conscious agency can instantiate higher or inner states owned by agents with privileged moral status, the nodes can be assimilated under the privileged entities. In the totalitarian limit, a godlike legislator may claim all moral rights and reduce all other entities in the landscape to the status of transient resonances in the underlying field. In the opposite limit, every little node of sensory integration – every insect and robotic drone – has rights in the moral calculus.

A scientific morality will need a unified theory of consciousness. The theory could model human minds as layers in a stacked landscape in which consciousness is defined deeply, to generalize everyday human states of mind far enough to cover states reflecting the synthetic unity of apperception of beings ranging from lowly drones up to godlike minds in an asymptotic limit.

Until that theory exists, human beings can only make anthropocentric moral maxims to regulate their daily activities. Whether such pragmatic or heuristic maxims are deeply founded enough to be accorded universalized status is moot. They might be too provisional or parochial to become laws in a scientific morality. And just as biological evolution is neutral with reference to human pleasure or pain, a scientific morality will surely be neutral on human flourishing.

A theoretical challenge: Retreat into a monotheist mindset is the last refuge for people in peril. A godlike perspective comes naturally in a collision of moral will against cruel fate, and is a source of inner strength if a polity becomes coercive. However persuasive the truth of the day may be, God knows better. Morality is bounded by some such epistemological caveat.

Andy Ross is a writer and philosopher. He blogs at:

www.andyross.net