

## ***The Moral Landscape* (Free Press, 2010) by Sam Harris and *Flourish* (Free Press, 2011) by Martin Seligman: A Comparative Review**

**Reviewed by Tom Lombardo**

Sam Harris's new book *The Moral Landscape* is a book I would highly recommend. Harris's central thesis is simple: Morals (or values in general) can be determined by the facts. Contrary to the philosopher David Hume, Harris argues that one can derive an "ought" from an "is." Harris believes that what is good is what leads to human well-being and what is bad (evil) is what leads to human misery and unhappiness. And we can determine scientifically what constitutes well-being; well-being is a constellation of empirically determined facts. Hence, what is morally good is grounded in the factual conditions of well-being.

Harris does acknowledge that different factual conditions may be involved in what constitutes well-being for different people—but only to a point—and still he would argue though that whatever those varied factual conditions are supporting well-being for different people (the "moral landscape") those factual conditions can still be determined. And further, some factual conditions are probably no good for anyone; that is, such conditions do not support well-being under any conditions for anyone.

In his book, Harris is highly critical of both liberalism and religion as approaches to values and ethics. Religious morals, though authoritarian in tone, are often not grounded in facts (based as they are, according to Harris, on superstition and the pronouncements of sacred texts) and frequently lead to misery and unhappiness. Liberalism, unwilling to take a moral stand, "tolerates" different moral views (especially religious views) that clearly lead to human misery and unhappiness. Liberals believe (quite mistakenly, according to Harris) that one can't determine in any logical or empirical fashion which, among different moral views, is better or more correct. Harris believes that you can compare moral views (and cultures) and determine, based upon facts, which view (and way of life) is better.

For Harris, the scientific grounding for a theory of morals is to be found in the psychological and biological study of humans and what makes for a healthy, happy, and flourishing personality and mind.

One important place where one can question Harris' theory of ethics is that it appears to be human-centered. If actions lead to the destruction of other living forms, thus clearly impacting their well-being, shouldn't such actions be considered immoral? As it stands, Harris totally grounds his theory of the good in the well-being of humans. Hence, Harris needs to expand his "circle of concern."

In his new book *Flourish*, Martin Seligman presents a theory of psychological well-being, grounded in psychological research (that is in scientific fact). Seligman sees the concepts of "flourishing" and "well-being" as roughly synonymous, including but not limited to "happiness." Thus Seligman delivers the very type of theory—a factually grounded theory of psychological (at least) well-being—that for Harris would serve as a foundation for determining what is the good.

Seligman's theory is fairly simple and straightforward. Well-being (or flourishing) consists of five major factors: Positive emotional states, engagement, positive social relationships, meaning in life, and accomplishment—PERMA for short. Each of these five factors can be measured and empirically assessed, and most noteworthy, can be enhanced within people. It is significant that at least two of these factors—meaning in life and accomplishment—have a future quality or focus to them, and that the general term "flourish" which literally means "to grow well or luxuriantly, to do well, to prosper, to thrive, to be highly productive," also implies a positive directionality in time or toward the future. "Engagement," for Seligman, literally means "flow," a concept based on the work of Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, that is also an important element in future consciousness.

Hence, if we pull together Harris and Seligman, and embed their ideas within the context of of a theory of **future consciousness** (link to [http://www.centerforfutureconsciousness.com/key\\_prin\\_phil.htm#futcons](http://www.centerforfutureconsciousness.com/key_prin_phil.htm#futcons)), we see that a theory of ethics based on psychological well-being can be grounded in a set of fundamental psychological qualities (subsumed under the general concept of "to

flourish”) and that this theory of well-being is strongly anchored to features of heightened future consciousness.

In reading Seligman’s new book I found a wealth of interesting ideas and information, along with a variety of psychological self-assessments the reader can take and score. There is a great discussion of “Grit,” a concept developed by one of his former students, Angela Duckworth, which captures the psychological dimension of tenacity and perseverance, another key concept in heightened future consciousness.

The question, though, that first emerged in my mind when I read Harris, is what exactly is involved in determining what goes into psychological well-being. Which facts of human psychology—which psychological capacities or realities—get selected as essential dimensions of well-being? Seligman provides a great example within his book of unpacking the concept and empirically grounding it, but I kept thinking: Is his set of facts sufficient? Does it capture all the important elements? What might be missing? And how would I decide on this? My intuition tells me that it might not be so straightforward to determine well-being simply based on facts, since well-being (and consequently flourishing) probably contains value judgments regarding what facts are important and which are not.