



Sam Harris: Science can answer moral questions

"It seems to me patently obvious that we can no more respect and tolerate vast differences in notions of human well-being than we can respect or tolerate vast differences in the notions about how disease spreads, or in the safety standards of buildings and airplanes."

Questions of good and evil, right and wrong are commonly thought unanswerable by science. But Sam Harris argues that science can -- and should -- be an authority on moral issues, shaping human values and setting out what constitutes a good life.

Adored by secularists, feared by the pious, Sam Harris' best-selling books argue that religion is ruinous and, worse, stupid -- and that questioning religious faith might just save civilization.

<u>Level</u>	<u>Goals</u>	<u>Themes</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High Advanced• Proficiency• Fluent	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mixed conditionals• Modal verbs of obligation• Academic debate• Vocab	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cultural differences• Morals and ethics• Religion• Philosophy

NB:

- Possibly controversial talk depending on the nature of your class.
- Extremely intellectually involved.

Intro Discussion Discuss how you think that moral decisions should be made:

- How do you make your own moral decisions? Does religion help you? Do you feel like you make them independently?
- Is morality objective? Do you think this causes problems? If it isn't, then how should we decide what is right and wrong?
- Do you think that this kind of discussion is useless? Is it more useful to just live without over-analyzing our ethics?

Comprehension True or False?

1. Harris says that values are a certain kind of fact. They are facts about the conscious wellbeing of living things.
2. He argues that all systems of ethics can be reduced to a concern about conscious experience and suffering.
3. He believes that religion is the best source for our morality, and we should base our decisions on its teachings.
4. Harris claims that every society exists on a moral continuum between bad and good, and that they can move and change.
5. Part of his argument is that our brains are the least important factor in shaping our personalities and experiences.
6. Harris states that science will be able to answer every conceivable moral question.
7. He says there are right and wrong answers to the question of how humans flourish, and therefore about how we should talk about morality.
8. According to Harris, changes in the “moral landscape” do not imply that morality is subjective (see food, health & chess analogies).
9. He says human values should be considered universal and objective.
10. He says that you can be right or wrong about morality in much the same way as you can be right or wrong about science, because what we’re talking about are facts. Some facts must be excluded from our system.
11. He believes in moral expertise, talent and genius.

Vocab

Match vocab to definitions/synonyms.

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| 1. Ought to | A. Based on or influence by personal/cultural beliefs or opinions. |
| 2. Illusion | B. Empty or without value, showing a lack of thought or intelligence. |
| 3. To misconstrue | C. A political or religious leader who draws authority from popular opinions/desires instead of reason. |
| 4. Vacuous | D. Not influenced by personal/cultural beliefs or opinions. |
| 5. Demagogue | E. Something perceived incorrectly, a false idea or belief. (In context) |
| 6. Objective | F. Set of reasons or logic for a particular belief or opinion. |
| 7. Subjective | G. Should. |
| 8. "Moral landscape" | H. Somebody who wants to impose their culture on others. |
| 9. Rationale | I. To interpret or understand incorrectly. |
| 10. Cultural Imperialist | J. The complete scope of moral goodness and evil of a particular person or society. (In context) |

Other useful vocab:

- **To Flourish:** For a society or person to grow and develop in a healthy way.
- **Notion:** An idea, conception or belief about something.
- **Secular:** Separate from religion, having no religious or spiritual basis.
- **Resonate** (In context: "The idea doesn't resonate with me"): For an idea to meet with our agreement. For us to feel compelled to agree with something.

Structures:

Conditionals

- Unless
- As long as
- If
- As soon as
- Provided that

Modal verbs of obligation

- Should / Shouldn't
- Have to / Has to
- Be allowed to
- Must / mustn't
- Need to

In mixed conditional sentences the time in the 'if' clause is not the same as the time in the main clause. There can be various combinations.

Examples:

- **Unless** you have always believed in God, you won't be allowed to make decisions about morality.

Present, future

- **As long as** religion exists, science will never be able to inform ethics as Harris suggests it **should**.

Present, future

- **If** it weren't so complicated, this issue would have already been resolved.

Present, past unreal conditional

- **Provided that** Harris's talk was accurate, our current understanding of ethics is probably wrong and **must** change.

Past, present

Discussion

- Do you think that morality is objective or subjective? Why? Has your opinion changed after listening to Harris?
- Do you think it is possible for one culture to be *better* than another in a moral sense? Why / Why not?
- How do you think your own moral outlook has been shaped?
- Are comparisons between cultures useful when talking about morality? (E.g. Harris's comparison between the burka and modern, western magazines).
- What kind of role do you think religion plays in morality? Should it be involved in the moral choices of our culture? In our lawmaking?
- Do you think that values are facts? Can we talk about right and wrong values in an objective way, some being better or worse for "human flourishing?"
- What are the most morally difficult decisions we have to make on a regular basis? Does this kind of thinking apply to them?
- Is secular morality better or worse than religious? Why/Why not?
- Do you think Harris is right in saying that our brain is the centre of our wellbeing? That we can evaluate morality based on the way our consciousness experiences things?

Debate

- Harris proposes that science can answer questions of morality yet fails to provide any evidence. His talk is just a repetition of arguments against religious extremism and its negative impact on society - a matter about which we are already all agreed.
- The idea that there could be some type of "moral genius" implies that elite thinkers should be making moral decisions and that everybody else should obey them. This is obviously wrong, and represents a dangerous kind of moral dictatorship.
- Morality is not objective – causing suffering is neither good nor bad unless we choose. We decide what is moral or immoral, and Science can never in any way answer questions regarding good and evil, right and wrong or moral and immoral.