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### October 5, 2010: Sam Harris and Objective Morality

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Sam Harris and Objective Morality

10/5/2010—In a Newsweek debate a few years ago, Sam Harris, one of the New Atheists, debated Rick Warren, noted evangelical minister and author of *The Purpose Driven Life*. At one point in the debate, Warren challenged Harris on the ground of morality for atheists: “If life is just random chance, then nothing really does matter and there is no morality—it’s survival of the fittest. If survival of the fittest means me killing you to survive, so be it. For years, atheists have said there is no God, but they want to live like God exists. They want to live like their lives have meaning.” Warren was challenging atheism on the ground that atheism is inherently nihilistic. Harris responded, “I’m not at all a moral relativist. I think it’s quite common among religious people to believe that atheism entails moral relativism. I think there is an absolute right and wrong. I think honor killing, for example, is unambiguously wrong—you can use the word evil.”

[\(exchange\)](#)

I thought at the time that Harris’ response was disingenuous. I thought that he must endorse moral relativism whether he liked it or not. After all, many atheist thinkers have acknowledged the moral incomprehensibility of the universe empty of God. But it turns out that Harris was quite serious and he has now written a book, *The Moral Landscape*, in which he argues that there is objective morality, that there are right answers to moral questions, that moral claims are either true or false and that science, particularly brain science, is the most reliable source for moral knowledge.

I haven’t read the book, which is published just today. I have read only the review in the New York Times by Kwame Anthony Appiah. [\(here\)](#). I have my doubts based on the review that science can live up to the claims Harris makes for it or even that morality can be specified in the ways Harris seems to claim.

But my interest is the role of religion for Harris. Harris is very clear, apparently, that moral knowledge does not reside in religion. Yet, in claiming that morality is objective, Harris joins a fundamental religious tradition. As I say in everything I write, C.S. Lewis called that position, the Tao, because it is the assertion that the universe is a certain kind of moral thing and that we are also. For Lewis, the Tao was the essence and starting point for all religion.

What does Lewis think religion is, after all? Just supernatural fairy tales? If the universe produces beings like us who seek objective morality, objectively right ways to live, and if the universe then produces the very structures in the brain that allow us to see that this is possible, then it is likely that there is something moral in and behind the universe, a kind of blueprint. Plato called this the idea. Some religious believers call it God. What difference does it make what we call it? Why does Harris think there is so much distance between himself and the religious believer?