

Reference

Browne, Alister. (2011). **Sam Harris on Ethics**. *Unpublished*.

Summary

In this Featured Article, Alister Browne responds to Sam Harris' TED Talk, *Science Can Answer Moral Questions*, filmed in February 2010. (We encourage you to view the presentation at <http://bit.ly/harristedtalk> before reading further!).

In his presentation, Harris argues that science can, and should, be an authority on moral issues, shaping human values and setting out what constitutes a good life. Specifically, Browne summarizes Harris' argument as:

- 1) The rightness or wrongness of actions depends on whether they promote human flourishing,
- 2) What promotes human flourishing is a scientific question to which there are right and wrong answers, and therefore
- 3) Moral judgements are scientific judgements which can be assessed as true or false.

Browne argues that Harris' conclusion is flawed because there are no empirical tests we could use that would show that actions that promote human flourishing are right while actions that retard it are wrong. He suspects that Harris might respond "OK, I agree you can't prove *everything* - nevertheless, most reasonable people would agree that what promotes human flourishing is right". Browne admits this may be the case, but reminds us that wide agreement does not in itself make scientific fact - remember when everyone thought the world was flat?

A couple of other concerns with Harris' argument, Browne notes, are that: it focuses on *human* flourishing possibly to the exclusion of non-human flourishing, and second, it does not give us clear guidance on the extent of our duty to promote human flourishing.

Despite his disagreement with Harris, Browne ends on a reassuring note. He suggests that most apparently-moral disagreements actually stem from disagreements over the non-moral facts of a case. If this is correct, Browne notes, Harris' argument might be helpful in addressing ethical issues by helping us to order and think more clearly about the non-moral facts we use in the process of arriving at moral conclusions.

*The views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by,
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