

# Introduction to Teaching Ethical Theory

## Lesson plan

### Can science provide ethical guidance?

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#### Sam Harris: Science can answer moral questions, TED 2010

(The numbers below relate to the timings given in the transcript which can be clicked on when watching and listening to the video.)

#### 00:00

Harris begins by outlining the context of the argument, the relationship between science and ethics. He then points out the position he will be challenging, that science has no ‘opinion’ when it comes to ethical questions.

#### 00:38

Harris very clearly outlines his main thesis. This is good practice for writing persuasive essays. He goes on to say that ‘Values are a certain kind of fact. They are facts about the wellbeing of conscious creates.’ This, then is the fulcrum of his argument: that ‘values’ are a kind of fact about a human being’s ‘wellbeing’.

#### 01:20

Harris is suggesting here that the reason we feel ethical obligation towards other primates (unlike rocks) is because we know that they can have better or worse mental experiences in other words they can suffer.

#### 01:55

All value, Harris says, can be ‘reduced’ to this concern with conscious experience. **NB:** Some might disagree with Harris here – this reduction of ethical value to ‘concern over conscious experience’ is not *obviously* true. If this link between conscious experience and ‘value’ is not accepted, then his whole argument fails.

#### 02:35

Here, Harris is introducing the notion of a continuum of ‘better’ or ‘worse’ or ‘tends towards flourishing’ or ‘tends away from flourishing’. This continuum allows him to avoid pinning down any specific claims about some action being *definitely* right or wrong – but allows him to suggest that they contribute (or don’t) towards a ‘flourishing’ life.

**03:08**

Harris introduces the notion of *objectivity* here. Repetition of ‘we know’ is used to underscore that it is *certain* that ‘adding cholera to the water’ will create suffering or lower the ability to flourish: ‘... morality relates to these truths’ (which, in this case, can be known through science).

His use of a superstition here (‘evil eye’) foreshadows his claim that a culture’s *having certain beliefs* also will limit the ability to flourish for some.

**03:42--04:06**

Harris is more specifically identifying just how we can measure the wellbeing of conscious experience: through sciences like neuroscience (study of the brain and its relationship to mental experience) and psychology (the study of human behaviour and its relation to mental experience).

**04:41**

Harris introduces the metaphor of a ‘moral landscape’, a type of map which suggests that there are a number of ways in which people can flourish and suffer. Harris is a vocal supporter of meditation (‘... some of these states can be appropriately called mystical or spiritual’) – which provides the framework for his own wellbeing. The suggestion is that through the continued use of meditation, new forms of mental flourishing (positive mental experiences) can be had.

**05:27**

Harris suggests shifting the discussion away from right and wrong, towards objective descriptions of ‘how humans flourish’ will provide a new framework for the discussion of morality. What is ‘right’, then, is something that provides an opportunity for an individual to have a positive conscious experience, or to flourish. What is ‘wrong’ is something that limits or prevents flourishing or leads to suffering.

**06:42**

Harris’ statement that the ‘rationale for this behaviour [corporeal punishment] is explicitly religious’ is an early hint that religious belief will be a target. His comment about subjecting ‘children to pain, violence and public humiliation as a way of encouraging healthy emotional development’ is an early test case. The question of, ‘Is it right to physically punish children?’ becomes a question about whether physical punishment promotes the flourishing of that individual.

**07:23–08:08**

Harris asks ‘how therefore can there be an objective notion of wellbeing?’. He is considering an objection to his position. This is good practice. He is using the objection and his response to it, to further develop his own position. Rather than simply rebutting an objection, the discussion brings out further complexity in his own position.

The concept of *health* is used as an analogy for human flourishing. We have a reasonably well-defined sense of what ‘healthy’ means even though this might be a range or continuum where different behaviours are more/less healthy than others. The point is that, given the science, we know how to manage discussions of, ‘Is this healthy or not?’

### 08:38

Harris provides another test case with his discussion of food: there are many sorts of ‘healthy foods’ which are healthy in different ways. The relativity of ‘healthy food’ does not suggest that the concept is ill-defined or useless. This is because what makes the food healthy is determined by a set of objective facts about how the human body works (biology/human nutrition). ‘Healthy food’ is food which promotes a healthy biological organism.

### 09:21

Harris suggests that we often think that for a moral truth to be ‘true’ it means that there cannot be any exceptions to that rule. But we should not we assume that we need any exceptionless rules when making moral judgments. We are perfectly able to manage *general* rules in other arenas, like chess, even when we know there are exceptions. So we should be able to manage general rules regarding ethical behaviour without being committed to claiming that there can be no exceptions.

#### **This is a good place to stop and discuss the argument so far.**

The material that Harris moves towards now can easily derail the discussion of the argument he makes in this first half.

#### **Argument so far:**

- Facts about ethical value (what is right and wrong) can be grounded in facts about human wellbeing/human flourishing.
- Facts about human flourishing or wellbeing are often *relative* (the desires of the individual, to the culture) but this does not necessarily mean that we cannot objectively identify things that *tend* towards an individual’s wellbeing. The concepts of health and ‘healthy food’ were used as examples here.
- We should not be looking for exception-less rules either – in many cases we accept that there are general rules to follow, but also recognize that sometimes, in some instances, it makes sense to break those rules.
- This is what might be called a ‘moral landscape’: a ‘space’ in which we can move and make objective decisions about what sorts of things are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ (grounding these decisions in questions about human flourishing), all the while accepting that there might be many different versions of ‘right’ (or human flourishing) but also accepting that there are clearly things which are ‘wrong’ (things which definitely do *not* promote human flourishing).

**09:59**

Harris now is applying the argument from earlier to the worry that in a broadly liberal world, we are taught to tolerate people's differences, or that we shouldn't speak out against cultural differences, just because our culture doesn't do things the same way. This is the argument that students find uncomfortable to challenge. Calling out behaviours from other cultures feels taboo.

**10:46**

Harris says, because we *know* that certain kinds of things lead to flourishing and others lead away, then we can (and should) call others out when they are acting in ways that make it impossible for another human being to flourish.

He argues that this is not about culture; it is about objective facts about what promotes human flourishing. Unhealthy food in another culture is still unhealthy. Cultural practices which limit a human being's ability to flourish still limit that human being's ability to flourish. There is a clear distinction between cultural norms and ethical knowledge here.

**11:47**

Harris asks, 'Is this the perfect expression of psychological balance with respect to variables like youth and beauty and women's bodies?' Harris here does what a lot of TOK students are reluctant to do (or just do not think to do). He uses his own principles to reflect on his own practice, or his own cultural practice.

Whether you agree with the notion of 'who are we to say' that we should say that other cultural practices are 'wrong', he is being fair here by offering the same challenge closer to home.

This point about the way women are represented in the West could be a powerful point to discuss in class. How do the ways women are represented impact our understanding of how women *should* be, how they *should* look or how they *should* behave. Could this be extended to the way men are represented?

**13:07**

Harris says '... the endurance of religion as a lens through which most people view moral questions has separated most moral talk from real questions of human and animal suffering.' Harris is a well-known and vocal opponent to religious belief, which comes out here.

This is part of his drive to push notions of ethical value away from some theoretical framework (perhaps using concepts like 'God') back into an objective framework built on science and facts about the world.

He goes on to say '... the demagogues are right about one thing: we need a universal conception of human values. And the sciences (which are objective) can form the basis of this, he is suggesting. This is a perfect example of a TOK claim.

**13:52**

Again, Harris is dissecting this belief that ethical value judgments are or *ought* to be relative in some way.

He says, ‘When talking about morality we value differences of opinion in a way that we don’t in any other area of our lives.’ The discussion that follows is about *expertise* in AOKs and is a great way to develop a comparative approach – why is ethical knowledge often expected to play by fundamentally different rules? Why cannot the concept of *expertise* apply in the realm of moral claims as it does in other AOKs?

**15:01**

Harris suggests that his views regarding string theory would mean nothing because he is not a physicist, and this point is an excellent way to explore ‘expertise’ in various contexts. This idea about what would happen if one were to disagree with a teacher is a good conversation starter to explore the role of the individual in a community of knowers.

On one hand, disagreement needs to be reasonable (and here, Harris is saying that his disagreement is unreasonable, because he is not an expert, so his disagreement should not be listened to). This might be discussed in terms of methods and tools.

On the other hand, different AOKs manage disagreement differently. Were you to disagree with your maths teacher about the solution to an equation, they might just sit you down and try to teach it to you again (ie, there is little room for disagreement). Were you to disagree with your literature teacher about the interpretation of some poem, they might sit you down and listen, asking for evidence (ie, there is a bit more room for disagreement). This might be discussed in terms of scope.

Harris does not deny that there is room for disagreement about what is right or wrong, but that disagreement needs to be explored in the context of objective facts about human flourishing.

**16:44**

Harris states, ‘It is possible for individuals, and even for whole cultures, to care about the wrong things, which is to say that it’s possible for them to have beliefs and desires that reliably lead to needless human suffering’. This claim, that people can be mistaken in their ethical beliefs, is a direct challenge to our thoughts about how ethical discussions should go. We are not really meant to say that others are mistaken, because it feels as if we are saying that we are ‘objectively’ right. It seems arrogant.

But, again, why should ethics be held to this presumed standard, when maths or physics are not? Even in ‘less objective’ disciplines like English, arts or history, we agree to certain standards that allow us to recognize better and worse positions to hold in those disciplines, and better and worse methods to establish them.

The images of women on front page glossy magazines here is instructive: *we fully recognize that these images can contribute to an individual’s poor body image and promote suffering and limit wellbeing*. In other words, we already judge these images harshly, not on some ethical grounds, but because we *know*, objectively, what their effect on wellbeing is.

This is the shift Harris advocates. These images are ‘wrong’ because of those ill effects, but this is only to say that ‘these images limit the mental wellbeing of young women in our culture’, which is something we already agree with and which can be applied across cultures.

This is the outcome of the shift from some hard-to-identify ‘ethical values’ or ‘good’ or ‘bad’, towards a science of morality based on objective facts about what makes a human being flourish.