Eidos volume 8 no. 2 (2024)

A JOURNAL FOR PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2024.0009

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The Saving Order of Science: New Atheist Sam Harris's Scientism is not Fundamentalism but Affective Attachment to a Salvific Epistemology

Abstract:

The New Atheist movement has been called "fundamentalist" in its allegiance to science. While true that New Atheism is remarkable among the various historical formations of atheism for its championing of the sciences, it is not fundamentalist. Where it does share a resemblance to Christian fundamentalism is in their respective attachments to a salvific epistemology either of science or of faith. For New Atheists, science "saves" as it provides order against chaos. This paper focuses on the writings of the New Atheist Sam Harris, drawing attention not just to the ordering function of science generally but also the ways in which Harris deploys science to engulf 1) morality, 2) the Buddhist belief that the self is an illusion, and 3) Buddhist practices of meditation. This study illuminates some affective potencies of science (or other potential epistemologies) as an ordering, and therefore "salvific," way of navigating the world.

Keywords:

new atheism, Sam Harris, scientism, theory of religion, affect theory, religion and science, implicit religion

> *What yesterday was still religion, is no longer such today; and what today is atheism, tomorrow will be religion.*
>
> Ludwig Feuerbach, "The Essence of Christianity", 43.

In 2004 Sam Harris published a polemical book against religion called *The End of Faith.*[1] In the following years best-selling books propounding what has come to be termed "New Atheism" flooded the market. Four bestselling authors of the movement – Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion,* 2006), Christopher Hitchens (*God is Not Great,* 2007*)*, Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell,* 2006), and Harris (*The End of Faith,* 2004 and *Letter to a Christian Nation,* 2007) – have dubbed themselves the "four horsemen"[2] because of their unapologetic and vigorous passion for bringing about the demise of religion. Sam Harris has for example spoken of religions as "intellectually defunct and politically ruinous"[3] and as "perpetuating man's inhumanity to man" (EoF, 15). While many scholars have been quick to point out that the philosophical content of this brand of atheism is not new[4] more than a few have remarked that the fervor and dogmatic, even crude, vitriol with which they attack religion as a group is unprecedented.[5]

This is somewhat ironic because scholars have been quick to note a panoply of qualities that the New Atheist movement shares with religion.[6] One of the most common tropes within this body of literature is the idea that New Atheists are classifiably religious[7] or take on some form of secular religion[8] because they are funda-

1) Hereafter cited parenthetically as EoF.

2) The debut of this name was in the form of an interview series that took place in Richard Dawkins's Oxford office among the four horsemen. See Timonen, "Discussions with Richard Dawkins."

3) Harris, *End of Faith*, 221.

4) See for example Robbins and Rodkey, "Beating 'God' to Death."

5) For examples of which see Amarasingam, *Religion and the New Atheism,* 3; and Borer, "Secularization Thesis," 135.

6) Schulzke, "The Politics of New Atheism"; LeDrew, "Evolution of Atheism"; Borer, "Secularization Thesis"; and Bullivant, "New Atheism and Sociology."

7) Ruse, "Is New Atheism a Religion?"

8) Wolf, "Church of the Non-Believers."

mentalist. What scholars usually allude to in order to justify this comparison is either 1) a certain stridency in the tone,[9] or 2) a shared experience of what they call "faith."[10] I opened this chapter with a quote by Feuerbach that states that "what today is atheism, tomorrow will be religion."[11] I would not go so far as to call New Atheism a religion, or even fundamentalism. But I do join these thinkers in discerning a particular resemblance between New Atheism and its Christian fundamentalist foil. What New Atheists do exhibit – and which manifests as a resemblance to fundamentalism – is attachment to a salvific epistemology.

This is an important re-framing because there is no – or least there should not be – a black-or-white, on-or-off switch between fundamentalist or not. Fundamentalism requires definition, and this is extremely tricky (see below); any attempt to do so and to define it beyond its use in historical context necessarily shapes identities and when used outside the original context typically in a negative way, operating on the level of accusation. This is dangerous and a part of how divides between atheists and theists, religious people and non-religious people, fundamentalist religion and fundamentalist scientism become live to us in the first place. It is crucial to analyze functional similarities between these groups and to get to the heart of what is operating in secularism and atheism without creating or using old labels that do more harm than good.

I here use the word "salvific" loosely. I mobilized the concept for my doctoral work, as I constructed a naturalistic concept of salvation for the sake of lending phenomenological depth to all experience, classifiably religious or not. I defined religion as any experience of the remediation of the limitations of embodied existence, that is, as an affective improvement, from negative to neutral or positive affect, regarding the negative affects attendant to the limitations of embodied existence, such as finitude, frailty, or susceptibility to the forces of chaos. Salvation is possible in love, in hedonism, in nature, in literature, in poetry, in dance, in worship, in prayer, or in unhealthy attachments or addictions; no experience of salvation need necessarily be conducive to flourishing (in a forthcoming paper I analyze the salvations of Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Siena, both of whom follow the affective

9) For example, McAnulla "Secular Fundamentalists," 12; Wolf, "Church of the Non-Believers."

10) For example, Hedges, "I Don't Believe in Atheists," 8.

11) Wolf, "Church of the Non-Believers," 43.

potencies of salvation to their graves). The terminology of "salvific epistemology" denotes a way of knowing that facilitates the affective experience of salvation.[12] This is as far as I will go with defining the concept of "salvation" – only a general sense here is necessary for our purposes.

I focus here on the thought of just one of the four horsemen, Sam Harris. Harris is an appropriate candidate for this analysis for several reasons. For one, he has written three distinct books that deal extensively with the concept of science as it triumphs over religion, and in different categories: politics,[13] morality,[14] and spirituality.[15] For another, he appears to be the most scientistic – that is, allocating science the greatest epistemological and axiological authority – of the four horsemen, a phenomenon I discuss at length below. Finally, he advocates for a "spiritual" relationship with science in an explicit sense that none of the other New Atheists do. Harris's science engulfs and orders his cosmos, providing a profound experience of salvation.

I proceed by first analyzing the charge of fundamentalism often levelled against New Atheists. I reframe the resemblance as attachment to a salvific epistemology – namely, science. Second, I explore the epistemological assurances of science for Harris's experiences of existential anxiety in an uncertain and postmodern world. Finally, I explore three examples of ways in which Harris deploys science to engulf ambiguous phenomena and thus render the world orderly and safe: in morality, in belief, and in spiritual practice. Notably, the latter two examples of belief and practice entail the engulfing of Buddhism into scientific order. Harris may hate religion, but if he is able to legitimize it with science, then he can (and does) appropriate it to his orderly purpose. Even the most complex of phenomena can be sorted in Harris's scientific landscapes.

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12) Notably and of utmost importance for this essay, this use of the language of salvific epistemology (and of salvation in general) is entirely apart from more traditional uses of the language of salvation such as that found among Christian fundamentalists, and to which New Atheism is here compared. I do not discount the validity of these more traditional conceptions of salvation; these traditional Christian forms *do* function within the parameters of my concept of salvation, as they act as affective engines of existential remediation.

13) Harris, *End of Faith*. Hereafter cited parenthetically as EoF.

14) Harris, *Moral Landscape*. Hereafter cited parenthetically as ML.

15) Harris, *Waking Up*. Hereafter cited parenthetically as WU.

The Charge of Fundamentalism

It is a common trope both in popular opinion magazines[16] and in scholarly publications[17] to call New Atheists fundamentalist. One reason people have often done so is because of its strident tone. Gary Wolf for example reports that he tires of having conversations with atheists at dinner parties because they are always aggressively pushing their agenda. He writes: "they are fundamentalist. I hear this protest dozens of times. It comes up in every conversation. Even those who might side with the New Atheists are repelled by their strident tone."[18] Wolf finds the aggression laced throughout the language and dialogues of New Atheism aversive.

To identify New Atheism as fundamentalist because of its tone however is an intellectually unsophisticated way of characterizing the resemblance between New Atheism and Christian fundamentalists. Plenty of groups and individuals in the world have strident tones but are not considered fundamentalist. There are also far too many variables within each group to generalize glibly, and there are far too many differences between the two to call them the same. Michael Sherlock makes the relevant point that to call New Atheists fundamentalists in this vein is to make the mistake of drawing a weak analogy. Weak analogy is a technical term from the study of logic: if two phenomena have shared attributes *a*, *b*, and *c*, there is no logical conclusion that they also share *d*, *e*, and *f*.[19]

In this case, just because New Atheists and Christian fundamentalists share a strident tone or particularly unrelenting quality of discourse does not mean that they necessarily share the rest of each other's qualities, or even enough qualities to achieve a Wittgensteinian family resemblance.[20] Drawing this analogy however is precisely what the critics do. They see a certain phenomenon occurring among Christian fundamentalists, and then when they see this phenomenon also occurring among New Atheists, they label the whole of each group the same. This is something Michael Ruse does when he describes the "bitterness" of Christian fundamentalists

16) See for example Bruenig, "Is the New Atheism Dead?"

17) See Amarasingam, *Religion and the New Atheism*.

18) Wolf, "Church of Non-Believers."

19) Sherlock, "Religious, or Faith-Based?" See also Hurley, *Concise Introduction to Logic*, 147–49.

20) Sherlock, "Religious, or Faith-Based?"

whenever they encounter opposing ideas. The same is true of New Atheists; therefore, for Ruse, New Atheists are fundamentalist.[21]

Another way in which New Atheists have been charged with fundamentalism is via their epistemology, in the sense that science is said to be a belief or loyalty, followed blindly. Former war-correspondent and journalist Chris Hedges for instance argues that the New Atheist form of "secular fundamentalism" is "a new version of an old and dangerous faith."[22] What they are allied to may not be a Biblical text, but it is still faith, says Hedges, insofar as it refuses to correct itself. Hedges believes that the New Atheists are so loyal to their specific views that they "[dismiss] all alternative viewpoints as inferior and unworthy of consideration." New Atheism is, in this sense, "anti-thought"[23] and against "intellectual investigations."[24] Hedges even compares New Atheist "faith"[25] to the kind of dogmatic loyalty to a utopian vision apparent in National Socialism.[26] According to Hedges, New Atheism is a faith in the pejorative sense. It is faith insofar as it is narrow-mindedly focused on a specific set of tenets, so much so that it has the potential to develop into violence.

The best usage of "fundamentalism" I suggest is historical and self-determining. The term "fundamentalism" derives from a moment in history in the late nineteenth century in which a group of Protestant Christians in America decided to be loyal to a set of fundamentals of scripture.[27] Continuing in this tradition today, fundamental beliefs must be embraced given that they are the word of God. These are treated by and large as non-negotiable both for belonging to the group

21) Ruse, "Is New Atheism a Religion?"

22) Hedges, *I Don't Believe in Atheists*, 8.

23) Ibid., 63.

24) Ibid., 71.

25) This is his use of the word faith – Hedges means it as a refusal to revise one's views – this is not my view of faith, which is fallibilistic, hypothetical, and makes plenty of room to doubt and to revise.

26) Ibid., 8.

27) Wood and Watt, "Introduction," 2–3. Importantly, the definition of fundamentalism is by no means agreed upon, and, indeed, it has often been used in contexts "unanchored" from American Protestant contexts (Clarke, "Fundamentalism and Shiism"; see also Wood and Watt, 3). Nevertheless, I consider it important that if we are going to draw parallels between fundamentalism and any other movement or phenomenon, that they be cognizant of the history and connotations of the term, mostly especially its embeddedness in the American Protestant tradition.

and identifying as a fundamentalist,[28] as well as for rightness in relationship with God.[29] In this sense there is a particular closed quality to the religiously fundamentalist identity, and it does resist empirical evidence, as it is outside the kinds of revealed knowledge and Biblically inerrant Word deemed acceptable by fundamentalist principles.

New Atheist scientism does refuse to consider dimensions of reality beyond the physical or justifications "without evidence" (EoF, 225), but this is not "fundamentalism." Harris, for example, when asked which scientific concept ought to be better known, responds with "intellectual honesty." This he means in the simple sense of being willing to be wrong. Intellectual honesty is a principle he writes that "rests on the understanding that *wanting* something to be true" – something he takes to be characteristic of fundamentalist faith – "isn't a reason to believe that it *is* true."[30] Elsewhere, defending himself against charges of secular fundamentalism, Harris says that "there is nothing you have to accept as dogma; there is nothing to have to accept on insignificant evidence."[31] This is the difference to which Sherlock refers (using his definition of "faith") when he writes that New Atheists "have a religious-like faith in a self-critiquing scientific method that makes it impossible to have a religious-like faith."[32] In short, New Atheist loyalty to empirical evidence and a willingness to be wrong – at least, within this specific framework – is not equivalent to unshakeable opt-in to specific tenets of the word of God.

As such, the best way to describe the resonance here is not in the nature of the epistemology, nor is it in the strident tone with which it is defended. Rather, it is in the respective groups' salvific attachment to it. For Christian fundamentalism, generally speaking, fundamentalist faith is central to the proper and desirable way of being in the world. It permeates all experiences and actions and is the core around which existential anxieties and their abounding salvations revolve. For New Atheism, science is the central ordering phenomenon that gives rise to their ability to make sense of

28) Though intolerance, it is noted, is not inevitable within fundamentalism (Almond, Appleby, And Sivan, *Strong Religion,* 17).

29) McAnulla, "Secular Fundamentalists," 33.

30) Harris, "Edge Question." Emphasis his.

31) Harris, "On Secular Fundamentalism."

32) Sherlock, "Religious, or Faith-Based."

and continue to live in the world. This is especially true for Harris, for whom science does not just reveal the truth of the natural world, but according to whom science is the only way to reveal facts, a process of which he says "nothing is more sacred" (EoF, 225). Science saves Harris because it disambiguates the world and promises to provide clear answers to every deeply concerning problem and uncertainty humanity has. I begin with Harris's rage and anxiety in the face of postmodern ambiguity, and then describe three instances in which he deploys science to make the world orderly: in morality, in Buddhist belief, and in Buddhist practice.

The Affective, Blessed Rage for Order

Harris claims that all people are "terrified of our creaturely insignificance" and that "much of what we do with our lives is a rather transparent attempt to keep this fear at bay" (EoF, 37). Sociologist Anthony Giddens has argued that people seek something he calls "ontological security." Ontological security is basically the need to feel some kind of surety about who you are and how you fit into the order of the world. According to Giddens, ontological insecurity is especially rampant in today's world, as the need for ontological security can arise or become exasperated when the world is unsteady or experienced as ambiguous.[33] Giddens sees much of the modern psyche as being characterized by a quest for ontological security; this is exactly what Harris manufactures with science.

William Stahl diagnoses anxiety about uncertainty as central to New Atheist motivation. Stahl draws attention to the deep discomfort Harris and other New Atheists appear to experience whenever they encounter threats to their order and stability. According to Stahl, Harris is so deeply attached to science because it performs world ordering functions in response to the ambiguity of "late modernity's crisis of meaning."[34] New Atheists deploy science as a defense against the "crisis of authority… that mirrors the larger crisis of meaning in late modern society."[35] In Stahl's perspective, the New Atheists are so attached to science because they attempt to use science

33) Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity,* 35, 37–42.

34) Stahl, "One-Dimensional Rage," 97, 101.

35) Ibid., 101.

to lay firm foundations to knowledge, which helps them capture a sense of purpose and normative control over their environments, or, to put it in Giddens' terms, to grasp at ontological security.

This taste for having a definitive purpose and meaning – so in a sense, control – of New Atheists may be in part related to the affective compulsions attendant to rationality. The vision for which Harris and other New Atheists fight is, in a sense, a modernist one. It is fully scientized, ordered, and unambiguous. Not all societies are founded upon these kinds of principles and aims, of course, but it makes sense that this scientific, sorted, ordered quality of modernism has its own kind of appeal. Donovan Schaefer writes at great length about the affective ways in which we can be compelled by reason and order, characterizing reason as a "chessboard" that draws us into the fascinating logic of its matrix. "Cognition itself," even just the act of thinking, exploring, and organizing one's thoughts, "is an affective magnet, pulling us into its waves."[36] There is in this sense something deep within our animality that can enjoy or can be in some sense satisfied (or never satisfied, but forever tantalized) by rationality. "We can become fascinated," Schaefer writes, "even addicted, to a vision of a rationally ordered world."[37] Schaefer indeed has an excellent chapter on supposed New Atheist rationality defining itself against a supposed religious irrationality (calling New Atheism a "secular conspiracy theory") in his recent book *Wild Experiment: Feeling Science and Secularism since Darwin*.[38] Reason is not affectively anemic, as a culture we sometimes like to delude ourselves into believing. It can be compelling – sometimes perhaps electrifying and sometimes perhaps soothing – and even, when threaded with existential anxieties, salvific.

An affinity for order is grounded as such in potentialities of the human animal. This potential appears to take on extreme forms in the case of New Atheism, which makes sense considering a cultural context that entails the collapse of modernism and of all its attendant justifications for knowledge and a scientifically ordered world. Adam Possamai suggests that, since the shift towards postmodernity, "human knowledge and beliefs are … lacking foundations and might create uncertainty

36) Schaefer, "Beautiful Facts," 85.

37) Ibid.

38) Schaefer, *Wild Experiment,* 200.

and a desire for stability, certainty, and predictability."[39] This is an idea that Alan Nixon takes up in his article "Contemporary Atheism as Hyper-Real Irreligion: The Enchantment of Science and Atheism in This Cosmos." In this article, Nixon explores the potential for New Atheism to be a source of ontological security to modern- or science-minded consumers. Atheist materials and culture, Nixon argues, "support the individual ontological security of contemporary Atheists via an enchanted public image of science and progress… providing inspiration for the creation of meaning and identity."[40] With a firm sense of security, New Atheists such as Sam Harris jettison the ambiguity and insecurity of uncertainty that can be experienced in the postmodern era.

That New Atheists and Harris in particular are put-off by postmodernism is no secret.[41] Harris has argued at great length about the dangers of what he characterizes as its relativism, which is "nonsensical… and dangerously so" (EoF, 178). Harris in fact views postmodernism as so dangerous that he equates it with religion: "I had previously imagined," he writes, "that the front lines in our culture wars were to be found at the entrance to a megachurch. I now realize that we have considerable work to do in a nearer trench" (ML, 39). This trench is in the academy. It is specifically in the humanities,[42] where moral complexity and ambiguity are common. Harris decries the denial of scholars that there may be definitive answers to truth, and specifically within the realm of morality. He says, "it is always amusing when these people… hesitate to condemn specific instances of patently abominable behavior" (ML, 144). He sardonically writes that "I don't think one has fully enjoyed the life of the mind until one has seen a celebrated scholar defend the 'contextual' legitimacy of the burqa, or of female genital mutilation, a mere thirty seconds after announcing that moral relativism does nothing to diminish a person's commitment to making the world a better place" (ML, 43–44).

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39) Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 80.

40) Nixon, "Hyper-Real Irreligion," 375.

41) In this paragraph I focus on Harris, but other New Atheists have similar views. Richard Dawkins has said for example of postmodernism that "there's this thing called being so open-minded your brains drop out" Dawkins, "Postmodernism."

42) Though it is also in the sciences (ML, 138–40). Harris writes, for example, "the deference and condescension of most scientists on these subjects is part of a larger problem in public discourse" (ML, 141).

For all the New Atheist distaste of disorder, however, they do not express it explicitly, and certainly not as any kind of underlying anxiety. Harris for example does not profess to feeling any sort of anxiety about the order of the world in his works, at least as far I have been able to discern, and I have read each of his books closely. Stahl however suggests that a deep need for certainty for New Atheists is apparent in the rage that burns inside of them and which they direct towards anyone who questions the epistemological authority of science. The evidence of Harris's existential anxiety related to order is his rage; George Levine calls it a "blessed rage for order".[43] Stahl writes that New Atheists are "very, very angry"[44] and that the very essence of New Atheism is a "[scream] of rage against those that do not conform."[45] Anyone who disagrees with the view that science is the only valid epistemological model is a target of this rage precisely because they are a threat to world order. As such, religious fundamentalists and anyone who apologizes for them, including moderate religious people or non-religious people who defend faith (EoF, 32–32, 110–11, 150–52), are a menace to society.

In Stahl's perspective, the New Atheists both detest and fear chaos: "behind their rage is a fear of losing control."[46] To account for this link between anxiety and rage, Stahl borrows a concept from Richard Bernstein called "Cartesian anxiety" that is linked to the decline of modernism's firm foundations to knowledge. According to Bernstein, Cartesian anxiety entails the notion that "*either* there is some fixed foundation for our knowledge *or* we will be engulfed by intellectual and moral chaos."[47] The potential to experience Cartesian Anxiety, says Stahl, is so great in the postmodern era because society still remembers, and is often attached to, visions of a neatly ordered and sorted world. In an "attempt to recreate authority in the face of crises of meaning in late modernity," the Christian fundamentalists, conclude Stahl, turn to their faith; the New Atheists, he says, turn to science. They both "claim to find certainty through their beliefs."[48] This certainty for Stahl is a façade; it is weak and ultimately untenable. The New

43) Levine, *Darwin Loves You*, 25.

44) Stahl, "One-Dimensional Rage," 97.

45) Ibid., 108.

46) Ibid., 107.

47) Ibid., 99, emphasis his; see also Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism,* 18.

48) Stahl, "One-Dimensional Rage," 97, 101.

Atheists, longing for the certainty of a modern past and the moral authority that comes from a foundational epistemological model,[49] express a rage that masks a deep anxiety over the uncertain existential and political conditions of the postmodern world.

Science, as such, is possibly the key to salvation for New Atheists in general, and it is certainly the key to salvation for Harris. It is the locus of order, the locus of rationality, and the locus of clear, unambiguous answers to life's most pressing questions in front of the ominous ambiguity that lurks around every postmodern corner.

Scientizing Morality

Morality, says Harris,[50] "should be considered an undeveloped branch of science"(ML, 4). According to Harris, we can learn with precision which behaviors and conditions are conducive to the "good" since anything that is "good" is "that which supports well-being," and well-being can be studied scientifically (ML, 25). We have this ability because we have empirical data and we have neuroscience; we can study events in the world and how they impact human beings precisely, down to the level of specific neurochemical events. Human well-being, Harris writes,

> entirely depends on events in the world and on states of the human brain. Consequently, there must be scientific truths to be known about it. A more detailed understanding of these truths will force us to draw clear distinctions between different ways of living in society with one another, judging some to be better or worse, more or less true to the facts, and more or less ethical. (ML, 13)

49) Ibid., 106.

50) Harris is arguably the most scientistic of the horsemen, as the other three horsemen have expressed reticence about the relationship between science and morality. Dawkins explicitly avoids conflating science and morality: "we can all agree," he writes, "that science's entitlement to advise us on moral values is problematic, to say the least" (Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 80). Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett take similar stances; Hitchens argues against a normative framing of atheism in the name of science: "we do not rely solely upon science and reason," he writes, "because these are necessary rather than sufficient factors" (Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 6). Daniel Dennett views science as a tool for studying religion, not something that should attempt to "do what religion does" (Kaden and Schmidt-Lux, "Scientism and Atheism," 87; see Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 38).

If we can map an event like the loss of a loved one to a quantitative assessment of the various brain regions involved in the experience, so we may be able to precisely determine conditions and actions that can improve upon these experiences. Science, Harris is certain, "will gradually encompass all of life's deepest questions." A science of "human flourishing" may, he says, "seem a long way off." But to achieve it, he writes, "we must first acknowledge that the intellectual terrain actually exists" (ML, 7). Morality is actually a branch of science; the first step towards greater well-being is accepting this.

What Harris means here by science is a crucial point. For Harris, science is not so much the deployment of a specific methodology practiced in a peer-reviewed community. It is instead a certain "attitude" that permeates all of one's inquiries, interests, and actions (WU). This distinction between science and the scientific attitude is crucial for understanding Harris. What Harris considers to be science and what is traditionally considered to be science are not the same thing. In Harris's perspective, science entails much more than just hypotheses, experiments, and data; it entails "pretty much anything that deals with 'facts.'"[51] Notably, in the second footnote to the introduction of *The Moral Landscape*, Harris says that he does "not intend to make a hard distinction between 'science' and other intellectual contexts in which we discuss 'facts'" (ML, 249). [52] Logic, empiricism, data, rationality – these all fall under the umbrella of science. Science engulfs.

So, science is in, for Harris, and everything else is out. Stuart McAnulla calls Harris a Moral Manicheist, meaning that he is "prone to view the world in 'black' and 'white' terms."[53] It is basically metaphysical and moral dualism.[54] Here, we can hypothesize that since, in Karen Armstrong's words, the New Atheists view their religious and religiously apologetic enemies as "the epitome of evil,"[55] faith is Harris's villain. His story needs a foil, an oppositional force, a hero. He needs a dualistic oppo-

51) Pigliucci, "New Atheism and Scientism," 151.

52) See also Pigliucci, "New Atheism and Scientism," 151; he discusses this at length.

53) McAnulla, "Secular Fundamentalists?" 13.

54) McAnulla writes that "new atheist discourse does tend to establish sharp 'either/or' boundaries" (ibid., 13).

55) Armstrong, *The Case for God*, 293.

nent that can fight or "defeat" faith "point by point in zones of conflict."[56] The most obvious epistemological and sociological force is science. Even while throughout the Enlightenment and into the modern area a wide variety of thinkers, such as Isaac Newton[57] and Charles Darwin,[58] saw no tension between the two phenomena, science has increasingly been associated with atheism and conceived of as a foil to religion, with the New Atheists at the far end of this historical trajectory.[59] For this reason, Harris sees life on Earth today as a sort of dualistic battle – rational science on one side and irrational non-science on the other.

The irrationality of non-science is most obviously championed and exemplified by faith, but it also includes postmodern relativism, as briefly discussed in the previous section. Secular liberals can be as much of a threat to world order as their more conservative foes. According to Harris, liberals doubt science because they doubt knowledge itself, and specifically how it could ever relate to values. "Not knowing what is right – or that anything can ever be *truly* right," says Harris, "often leads secular liberals to surrender their intellectual standards and political freedoms with both hands"[60] (ML, 17). Because of this, liberals (including scientists, who are "predominantly secular and liberal") have made "breathtaking concessions" to "religious dogmatism" (ML, 17). For nearly a century, the "moral relativism of science has given faith-based religion – that great engine of ignorance and bigotry – a nearly uncontested claim to being the only universal frame for moral wisdom" (ML, 243). This has fueled the persistence of problems such as nuclear proliferation, genocide, energy security, climate change, poverty, and failing schools (ML, 243). For Harris, the world has become permeated with moral chaos because people have refused to see that science is "the light" (WU, 205).

The Moral Landscape is as such Harris's ode to science as the holy grail of rational order. It is the ultimate solution that can save us from ethical relativism, or what he describes as "confusion." Secular liberals and scientists tend to think that "notions of

56) Wilson, *On Human Nature,* 192.

57) Manuel, *Religion of Isaac Newton.*

58) Pleins, *The Evolving God.*

59) Fuller, "What Has Atheism Ever Done For Science?," 57–59.

60) Emphasis his.

'good' and 'evil' must be the products of evolutionary pressures and cultural invention." This is a belief that is "merely to give voice to one's apish urges, cultural biases, and philosophical confusion" (ML, 12). In the *Moral Landscape,* Harris rescues himself and the rest of us from this confusion with the clarity (ML, 233), simplicity (ML, 13), and rationality (ML, 108, 179, 261), of science. This is the only way to know what is truly good and to create a society that is sustainable and peaceful. Science provides a secure path out of this darkness, even if it will take a long time to figure out precisely how to go about it (ML, 18). Asserts Harris: "only a rational understanding of human well-being will allow billions of us to coexist peacefully, converging on the same social, political, economic, and environmental goals" (ML, 18). Answers will come. Moral order will come. The solution is only to ally ourselves with the facts and to assent to the superior rationality of science.

Scientizing a Buddhist Tenet

An especially salvific thing about science, for Harris, is that it does not just sort one kind of chaos, such as that which we experience as a crisis of morality living in a post-modern and rapidly globalizing world. It sorts all kinds of ambiguity, including those imbued in ultimate questions. This is important because Harris is well aware of the material conditions of human life that give rise to existential anxieties. "We live in a world where all things, good and bad, are finally destroyed," he writes. "The world sustains us, it would seem, only to devour us at its leisure" (EoF, 36). Death devours. In this devouring there is also destruction. "When the stopper on this life is pulled by an unseen hand, there will have been, in the final reckoning, no acquisition of anything at all" (EoF, 37). Life will have proven itself meaningless, in the end. This terrifies all of us – including Harris – ineluctably. "We are terrified of our creaturely insignificance," he writes. "Much of what we do with our lives is a rather transparent attempt to keep this fear at bay" (EoF, 37). Life is terrifying, and it totters on absurd and empty meaninglessness.

Fortunately for Harris, the terrors of material finitude and creaturely insignificance can be sorted, just like morality. The only thing one must do is think about and respond to them scientifically. And of course, this is what Harris does. But the very interesting thing about this is that Harris does not simply fabricate solutions

out of scientific tenets. Instead, he turns to Buddhism. This may seem dissonant with Harris's distaste for religion. But according to Harris, certain thinkers and branches of Buddhism are "exceptionally empirical and exceptionally wise, and therefore merit the exceptionalism claimed by their adherents" (WU, 29). The teachings of Buddhism, Harris argues, are not best viewed as "dogmatic texts," but rather "as lab manuals and explorers' logs detailing the results of empirical research on the nature of human consciousness" (WU, 32). Buddhist teachings, says Harris, are scientific. This makes them palatable to Harris and therefore capable of providing materials for salvation with scientific legitimacy.

The one "Buddhist belief"[61] at the core of Harris's salvation from existential concerns such as death and meaninglessness is that the modern, Western idea of a coherent self is an illusion. Here is the salvific idea, in Harris's words:

> Everything we take ourselves to be at the level of our subjectivity – our memories and emotions, our capacity for language, the very thoughts and impulses that give rise to our behavior – depends upon distinct processes that are spread out over the whole of the brain. Many of these can be independently interrupted or extinguished. The sense, therefore, that we are unified subjects – the unchanging thinkers of thoughts and experiencers of experience – is an illusion. The conventional self is a transitory appearance among transitory appearances, and it vanishes when looked for. (WU, 206)

That is to say: we are not selves. We are not ghosts in the machine. We are not Cartesian souls, bound for the afterlife. What we are, for Harris, are organisms that have memories and experiences of psychological continuity – which give rise to an experience of selfhood, but which are ultimately mere fictions. We are merely experiencers of consciousness, which is "simply the light by which the contours of mind and body are known" (WU, 205). The Buddha's and others' ideas around the nature of the self in Buddhism have been interpreted differently by different people and schools throughout

61) For a discussion of the ways in which Buddhism has been appropriated and viewed as a set of cosmological propositions or beliefs in the West see Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*.

Buddhist history.[62] For Harris this is not relevant; he finds the kernels of Buddhism that fit with his ideas about what is scientific.

For Harris, taking the self to be an illusion is core to his salvation. This experience of salvation began when Harris first took MDMA in 1987 and experienced such a deep love for a friend that he "ceased to be concerned about [himself]" (WU, 3–4).[63] He describes the realization not so much as a change in his feelings, but rather as a "[glimpsing] of parallel lines" that made new sense of old data (WU, 5). He then "spent several years deeply preoccupied with reaching the goal of cessation" (WU) spending at least one whole year in silent retreat. During this time Harris also sought out and meditated at the feet of several Buddhist gurus in Tibet and elsewhere; one of whom, Poonja-ji, became significant for Harris's attempts to reach enlightenment (WU, 129–34). Decades later, Harris's book *Waking Up* describes the tenet of no-self and his explorations of it through the lens of Buddhism. Harris devotes several pages in the first chapter to mindfulness in terms of the Pali word *sati*; he describes practices of *vipassana* that can help one realize their own illusoriness (WU, 34–35); and he outlines the ways in which the idea of no-self is a useful response to the truth of *dukkha* (translated from Pali as "suffering") (WU, 38). Harris believes the self does not exist, and he teaches his readers about it in Buddhist terms.

But is it Buddhism Harris is teaching? Perhaps. That does not seem to particularly matter to Harris. What matters is that certain tenets of Buddhism seem scientifically legible to him, rendering the religion – or at least parts of it – palatable, even admirable. He writes: "there is a diamond there, and I have devoted a fair amount of my life to contemplating it, but getting it in hand *requires that we remain true to the deepest principles of scientific skepticism* and make no obeisance to tradition" (WU, 10).[64] Harris specifically denies the vast majority of metaphysical claims across Buddhist formations. He says, for example, that the idea that consciousness is identical with God is a metaphysical claim that "any serious student of science should find incredible" (WU, 22). He also says that the metaphysical claims of most contemplatives

62) Keown, *Buddhism*, 59.

63) Harris, *Waking Up*, 3–4.

64) My emphasis.

"can be dismissed as bad science… after merely thinking about them" (WU, 93).[65] It is not Buddhism Harris proselytizes, but his scientized version of it.

Scholar of Buddhism Donald Lopez Jr. has explored the phenomenon of scientizing Buddhism at great length, most notably in his works *Buddhism & Science: A Guide for the Perplexed* and *The Scientific Buddha*.[66] Lopez's scholarship demonstrates that Harris is not alone. Harris participates in a long history of "purifying" Buddhism so that it is scientifically legitimate.[67] According to Lopez, for more than 150 years, "the claims for the compatibility of Buddhism and Science have remained remarkably similar, both in their content and in their rhetorical form."[68] This relationship began when nineteenth century Buddhist elites claimed allegiance with science to defend it against Christianity. In the following Victorian era, the apparent coherence of Buddhism with science became trendy as science was in the process of solidifying its prominence and prestige in the academy and broader culture.[69] That trend continues today; it has remained for more than a hundred years a means for intellectuals to pursue spiritual ends in a "scientific" way.[70] If Harris can be slotted into any branch of Buddhism or particular "religious" tradition, it is this one.

The specific way in which Harris scientizes "no-self" is with evolutionary theory and cognitive science. First with evolutionary theory, Harris posits that human perception evolved in such a way that it is inherently flawed. This is contrary to how some of his critics interpret him. One of the more prominent moral and political theorists of New Atheism, Marcus Schulzke, mischaracterizes Harris's understanding of human nature in light of evolutionary theory. He basically ascribes to Harris the naturalistic

65) Harris makes various statements about the dubious quality of certain Buddhist metaphysical claims six times throughout *Waking Up*.

66) The scientized version of Buddhism is so dissonant with Buddhism throughout its long history in Asia according to Lopez that it is, in his words, "deafening" and should be "allowed to pass away" (*Scientific Buddha*, xi).

67) Ibid., 1–19.

68) Lopez, *Buddhism & Science*, xii.

69) Lopez, *Scientific Buddha*, 10–11. Lopez notes that one of the greatest proponents of the scientific quality of Buddhism today is none other than the Dalai Lama. Ibid., 12.

70) Ibid., 12–13, and 47–100.

fallacy, saying that "the most serious limitation of New Atheists' use of evolutionary ethics is that New Atheists often assume that descriptive explanations of how moral judgment emerged can also provide a prescriptive theory of how people should act."[71] Schulzke makes this claim on the basis that Harris has said that "our ethical intuitions must have their precursors in the natural world, for while nature is indeed red in tooth and claw, it is not merely so" (ML, 26).[72] Schulzke is here making an explicitly moral argument, but it is relevant to our purposes because in doing so he gravely misreads Harris's view of human evolution, insofar as he suggests that human instincts are for Harris in any way good or true.

When Harris says that our intuitions (moral or otherwise) must have their precursors in the natural world, he does not mean that they are correct. Indeed, one of the cornerstones of Harris's perspective is that they are almost never correct. We did not evolve to be happy, nor did we evolve to treat each other well, nor did we evolve in any sense to detect truth instinctively. Instead, we evolved to survive and to reproduce, and to treat each other however necessary in order to achieve those ends, regardless of what the actually "right" way to do things is or the actual way things are. These things are most certainly part of the red in tooth and claw part of his statement. "Nature," he says, "has not adapted us to do anything more than breed" (EoF 186). "Our brains," he later writes, "were not designed with a view to our ultimate fulfilment" (ML, 26).[73] Opposite to Schulzke's intuitionist read of Harris, Harris views humanity as a tangled mess of thoughts and feelings that fights for survival. For Harris, finding the truth does not come particularly easily to humans. It must be won through the championing of our rational – so, according to his categories, scientific – capacities over baser instincts.

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71) Schulzke, "New Atheism," 68. Interestingly, in a 2018 blog post on the public intellectual Jordan Peterson, Sam Harris critiques Peterson for the same intellectual flaw of which Schulzke here accuses him (Harris, "Speaking of 'Truth'").

72) Quoted from Schulzke, "New Atheism," 69, (in EoF, 172).

73) Here he goes on to explain the many ways in which evolution is insufficient to the conditions and problems of the modern world; we need, for example, to form stable democracies and save other species from extinction, challenges evolution could not have anticipated (ML, 26). He then proceeds to describe how we "have inherited a multitude of yearnings that probably helped our ancestors survive and reproduce in small bands of hunter-gatherers, much of our inner life is frankly incompatible with our finding happiness in today's world" (WU, 26).

One major flawed inclination with which evolution has gifted humanity is the tendency to believe that the self is real.[74] Insofar as we are deeply flawed bodies evolved solely for the purposes of survival and reproduction – and whose initial feelings are the source of our suffering and whose intuitions are almost always false – our sense of self cannot in any sense be considered an indicator of reality. From evolution, we inherited a feeling "that our experience of the world refers back to a self – not to our bodies precisely but to a center of consciousness that exists somehow interior to the body" (WU, 83). We also inherited a strong attachment to this idea of selfhood. And yet it is perfectly, patently false. Our sense of self is probably an epiphenomenal by-product of evolution derived from the theory of mind (WU, 111; EoF, 240). We have no reason to believe it evolved to be true; in fact, because of neuroscience, we have every reason to believe it is not true.

Neuroscience is what reveals the truth of our non-being. For example, if the corpus callosum – the bridge between the right and left hemispheres of the brain – is severed, consciousness splits into two separate streams. Neuroscientists can set up experiments in which they "talk" with one half of the brain at a time, and they will get completely disparate answers depending on which hemisphere with which they are communicating. The subjects of these experiments think that they are having seamless experiences of consciousness.[75] In the eventuality that "these tributaries [should] converge again," – that is, should the corpus callosum be repaired and the right and left brain properly connected – "the final current would inherit the 'memories' of each." Consciousness continues to appear seamless – to those of us experiencing it – but it is not. Harris concludes that "there would be no cause to ask where my 'self' had been while my brain was divided, because no 'I' exists apart from the stream" (WU, 93).

The illusion of selfhood, says Harris, is an "intellectually honest" belief. It might be hard for someone from the West to wrap their head around it, but it is true. And it is the only way possible – the only scientific way – to reconcile our experiences with all the various concerns of ultimate end and ephemerality that plague our completely

74) And the one that is actually to blame for all of our suffering, since our attachments to these experiences of negative affects are actually the source of our suffering.

75) The fact that a split brain splits consciousness without the "self" being aware of it has been documented at great length and with much nuance in the neuroscientific and psychological literature. For an overview of such phenomena see Tye 2003.

delusional society (WU, 44). This scientific belief is in fact the only bearable alternative to the traditional religious way of seeing death "as a doorway to another world" (WU, 44). We do not go on to heaven. This idea, says Harris, is loyal to "the facts," and in being so it has a real and sustainable chance of helping sooth our anxieties and make our present realities "better" (WU, 44). It might seem a bitter pill to swallow, at first, but accepting that one's selfhood is an illusion is ultimately liberating.

Selfhood, indeed, is the source of all our misery. "Taking oneself to be the thinker of one's thoughts," Harris writes, "that is, not recognizing the present thought to be a transitory appearance in consciousness – is a delusion that produces nearly every species of human conflict and unhappiness" (WU, 101). Whether it is a mundane flavor of suffering such as discontentedness when we look in the mirror, or "profound forms of human misery" such as learning one has terminal cancer on the eve of their wedding (WU, 41), we suffer, says Harris, because as cogitating, self-aware animals, we are attached to our experience of selfhood. This is precisely why, in the end, internalizing our un-reality and learning to detach ourselves from selfhood is, in Harris's perspective, the solution to suffering and all varieties of existential anxiety. When we can overcome this illusion, then we are set free from our experiences of all varieties of suffering, and most importantly those related directly to our attachment to selfhood.

According to Harris, people can, essentially, remediate their negative affects – including ones as entrenched and endemic to humanity as existential anxieties – and be saved on a regular basis, if only they – and here's the important part – really believe this supposedly scientific conclusion that the self does not exist. Of course, by believe, Harris does not mean have faith. But he does mean to apprehend the "facts." He means to follow the science to its ultimate conclusion. He means to base one's entire psychological wellbeing upon the singular fact that the experience of selfhood is an illusion.

The relevance of belief – or at least a certain kind of voluntarism with respect to what one thinks and feels – to Harris comes into sharp relief here. New Atheists are well known to be doggedly cognitivist in their approach to religion. For them, religion is characterized by the quality of its belief. This reflects what Talal Asad has identified as a peculiarly Euro-modern, Protestant orientation to religion as "a set of propositions to which believers gave assent, and which could therefore be judged and compared as

between different religions and as against natural science."[76] Schaefer writes that for New Atheists, "religion is a question of what a thinking subject *thinks* is or is not, a set of propositions to which the quality of 'true' or 'false' can be appended."[77] Dennett for example characterizes "brights" as "those who don't believe."[78] Harris writes that "belief is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life" (WU, 12). Harris and the other New Atheists take religion to be a disease of false belief, begotten by the irrational desire for these things to be true.[79]

Harris makes it clear that – because of science – we can jettison our automatic processes and replace them with deliberate, scientific practice and scientifically derived conclusions. Better thoughts can lead to better feelings. Harris provides a mundane example from his own life. When the pipes once burst in his house after just being replaced, "the moment I heard the first drops," he writes, "I was transformed into a hapless, uncomprehending, enraged man" (WU, 95). But then, he remembered that his immediate feelings were just that: feelings. If he could simply be more scientific about the situation and remember that his thoughts and attending frustrated feelings were the product of a fleeting illusion, he could arrive at a more peaceful state (WU, 95).

It is in this sense, then, that science slams into, mixes with, and ultimately engulfs the Buddhist tenet of no-self, conforming it to its contours, and confines. Harris openly promotes this belief as a Buddhist tenet and both acknowledges and deeply respects it as a significant component of the Buddhist tradition for thousands of years. He would not however embrace or proselytize it if it did not fall under evolutionary and neuroscientific umbrellas. In the end, for Harris, the illusion of selfhood is primarily a scientific fact. It is nice that it has a rich history of exploration in the Buddhist tradition, but the belief is acceptable only if it makes it through Harris's rigorous test of scientific skepticism. There is a poignant reversal here: the one thing against which Harris rages the most – religious belief – becomes joyously acceptable and indeed salvific once he constructs a means by which it can qualify as science.

76) Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 41.

77) Schaefer, "Beautiful Facts," 81; emphasis his.

78) Dennett, "The Bright Stuff."

79) Harris, "Edge Question."

This then is the core of the salvific function that science performs for Harris: it tidies up Buddhism and makes it rationally legitimate, which provides clear solutions to existential problems in his neatly ordered universe.

Scientizing a Buddhist Practice

In Harris's eyes, Buddhism is a uniquely scientific religion. Many historical and contemporary Buddhists, says Harris, develop their ideas about the self via a scientific investigation of the first-person experience of consciousness. Buddhism does not just have scientific facts. It has scientific practices. Of course, from the perspective of a scholar of religion, the whole of Buddhism is in no way generalizable to being empiricist. It is almost certainly anachronistic and culturally inappropriate to impute a widespread label of "empiricism" – or, even more daringly – "science" – onto Buddhist practitioners.[80] But Harris has no qualms in doing so. Indeed, he is absolutely eager to discern empiricism at the very foundations of ancient Buddhist history.

Harris is well aware that Buddhism is mostly folk in character. Buddhism, like other religions, he says, has "spawned many of the same pathologies we see elsewhere among the faithful: dogmatism, anti-intellectualism, tribalism, otherworldliness" (WU, 30). But, says Harris, and this is absolutely crucial for his relationship with Buddhism, "unlike the doctrines of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," the teachings of Buddhism are "not considered by their adherents to be the product of infallible revelation. They are, rather, empirical instructions" (WU, 30). Empiricism abounds. The heart of Buddhist practice, despite having been corrupted by "pathologies," is scientific.

Buddhism's empirical instructions are all about learning the shape of conscious experience and how to arrive at certain conclusions about it or states of enlightenment. They are empirical according to Harris because they say that "if you do X, you will experience Y." The goal of Buddhism as such is to "understand the nature of [one's]

80) Harris is not alone in making such a comparison. Alan Wallace published an entire book on the convergence of Buddhism and empiricism, specifically neuroscience, called *Contemplative Science* in 2007. But as is suggested by the work of Donald Lopez Jr., the claim of "Buddhism is scientific" has a long history through which both the image of Buddhism in the West and scientific concepts with which it is said to cohere have changed drastically (Lopez, *Scientific Buddha*, xii).

own mind" (WU, 30).[81] The path to doing so is to "[become] interested in one's own mind… and [pay] closer attention to one's own experience in every present moment" (WU, 32). Such attention is empirical because you are to observe with "evidence and logic" the phenomena that occur in your experience of consciousness. When you do this, you get to see for yourself the salvific truth that your "I" is an illusion.

Harris compares meditation to scientific experimentation and instrumentation, with one crucial difference: a meditator cannot use the tools built by others. One must make their own, but they can build their own telescope (to use Harris's metaphor) based on the instructions of others (WU, 93). "To see how the feeling of 'I' is a product of thought," writes Harris, "indeed, to even appreciate how distracted by thought you tend to be in the first place – you have to build your own contemplative tools" (WU, 93).[82] The difficulty of such experimentation is why Buddhism is useful for Harris. He may prioritize scientific discoveries and insights above all else, but it is in Buddhism that one can find instructions on the how.

Having an experience of the dissolution of the self while meditating is a potent moment; scientific practice within your mind reveals the neuroscientific truth that the self does not exist. Through science, you are able to experience – you are able to feel – what you believe. But Harris is clear that the path to true salvation does not stop at a singular moment of realization or belief. It is not to let the idea go stagnant in a corner of your mind. Instead, the whole point of all of this is to use meditation as a sort of, to borrow Foucault's terminology, technology of the self.[83] According to Harris, meditation is the means by which you internalize the salvific belief, practice experiencing it, and in doing so become an increasingly peaceful and ethical person – or, in my words, be saved. This way, the ideas that one learns from scientific fact and/or from scientific practice can become ingrained, internalized, Returned to, and never attained perfectly, but continually revisited and, of course idealistically, increasingly integrated into one's daily functioning and habits. This enables one to escape suffering and cleanly slingshot away from the disorder and chaos with which evolution has saddled us.

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81) This goal is represented by Gautama – the Buddha – says Harris, who managed to achieve precisely that. (WU, 30).

82) These telescopes come in a variety of forms. Harris has years of experience with various Buddhist schools of meditation such as Dzogchen and Zen. For a comparison of which see WU, 138.

83) Foucault, "Technologies of Self."

Harris admires people who are advanced meditators and who have their thoughts and feelings under great control. Expert meditators, for example, experience less suffering from physical pain than the general public. When tested in a laboratory, these experts "judge the intensity of an unpleasant stimulus the same but find it to be less unpleasant. They also show reduced activity in regions associated with anxiety while anticipating the onset of pain" (WU, 121). Because these experts have significant practice distancing themselves from their automatic thoughts and feelings – that is, leveraging scientific control over their affects – they are able to remediate their negative experiences in a way that non-experts simply cannot. They may be religious figures and devotees, but they are in Harris's view scientists of the highest order as they deploy reason, logic, and discipline to master their feelings and transcend everyday disorder.

We must bear in mind however that meditation can have affective effects without metaphysical baggage, so to speak. A plethora of studies exist that explore meditation's power to engender positive affective responses absent any kind of philosophy or metaphysical injunction. Menezes and Bizarro for example have demonstrated that even brief interventions of five days of meditation training have positive impacts on negative affect and trait anxiety, as well as improvement on responses on the attention test.[84] In this specific study, subjects received training only in basic practices of meditation such as diaphragmatic breathing.[85] Even with this limited training, subjects experienced statistically significant positive affective outcomes. With extended training the potential is even greater, as indicated by studies of long-term, years-long meditation practices.[86] Meditation has a way of simply calming the body down by virtue of the effect it can have on the nervous system.

Harris does not neglect the potential meditation can have on physical and emotional signs of stress. Even while preferring the term "spirituality" for his methods because of its experiential depth and moral breadth (WU, 6–7), he cedes that the phrase "stress reduction" does encompass the effects of his meditation practices. Harris even says at one point that "in one sense, the Buddhist concept of enlightenment really is

84) Menezes and Bizarro, "Effects of Meditation Training," 393.

85) Ibid., 395.

86) For example, see Sukhsohale and Phatak, "Effects of Yoga Meditation."

just the epitome of 'stress reduction'" (WU, 48). So, Harris does benefit from meditation and view people benefitting from it simply in itself, without having to be understood in a particular way or with a particular Buddhist context. But for Harris, that which is truly salvific – that is, the aspect of meditation that remediates his existential anxieties related to chaos and disorder – is its situation within and legitimation by the larger scientific picture. The most important part of meditative practice for Harris is this linking of the fact with the practice – the scientific practice affirms the scientific fact. The "true" discipline, he writes, "is to remain committed, throughout the whole of one's life, to waking up from the dream of the self" (WU, 199). This is a commitment to a belief, enacted through a practice.[87]

How relevant is this belief in science for Harris's salvation and spiritual practice? Maybe it is all just the affective by-products of meditation that soothe him. But it is also important to bear in mind that affect theory is inclusive of the discursive. Even while power is, in Kathleen Stewart's words, "a thing of the senses,"[88] and affects are, in Donovan Schaefer's words, "neither under our 'conscious' control nor even necessarily within the register of our awareness,"[89] beliefs are still a powerful part of the affective experience of what it means to be human. They are enfolded within an affective matrix. Schaefer writes that "this is the insight of affect theory: sovereign consciousness – including reason – is an effect of a matrix of moving lines of force, travelling through us and leaving power in their wake."[90] As potent as meditation is for reducing stress, its basic affects are subsumed within the entirety of Harris's mix that disambiguates.

Harris is affectively compelled by the enticements of a neatly ordered world; this permeates all his cognition and feeling. Indeed, it seems he would not even be inter-

87) It is of course eminently important to bear in mind that Harris's flavor of meditation as stress reducing is narrow at best. In fact, according to Donald Lopez, Buddhist meditation is often intended to be stressful. Lopez writes: "this is the briefest of descriptions of a central topic in Buddhist meditation, one that is often presented in the most gruesome detail. The goal of such meditation is to cause one to regard this life as a prisoner regards his or her prison, to cause one to strive to escape from this world with the urgency that a person whose hair is on fire seeks to douse the flames. *The goal of such meditation, in other words, is stress induction*" (emphasis mine, *Scientific Buddha*, 108).

88) Stewart, *Ordinary Affects,* 84.

89) Schaefer, "Affect Theory and Power."

90) Ibid.

ested in meditation if he could not enfold it into a scientific framework and understand it as a part of an ordered practice and cosmos. The bedrock of Harris's salvation is the process of scientizing the world and all its ambiguities. Included in this process are deeply existential questions that can be neatly sorted by finding the right answers to questions of morality, learning the right scientific beliefs about the self, and enacting the right scientific processes to engage the Buddhist tradition and properly embody the right beliefs. With these things combined in the affective matrix of Harris's aversion to ambiguity, he is ultimately (and genuinely, if imperfectly) saved and delivered from chaos into the arms of science's neatly ordered world.

Conclusion: Context and Nuance

For anyone who is looking with the right lens, Harris wears his salvation on his sleeve. He reveres science and deploys it in such a way to sort political problems, moral dilemmas, questions of value, and spiritual needs. It does nearly everything for him – a function which is best characterized by its universal ability to clearly order and disambiguate the world.

As to whether science reaches as deeply into the hearts of other New Atheists is a live question, and not one that I have at all addressed in this chapter. It is well known that Dawkins has a deeply emotional and even, though he dislikes the term, spiritual relationship with science. He has respect and admiration for the Einsteinian kind of spirituality insofar as it has purely naturalistic reverence for the world and values science.[91] Hitchens reports experiencing awe when encountering science,[92] and Dennett professes to a secular spirituality.[93] They do not, however, at least explicitly, express anything with the same quality of intensity that I have here explored as occurring for Harris. These other New Atheists have attachments to the sciences on levels that appear to be at least somewhat salvific – especially in light of the world-ordering functions – but the question of the degree and quality of these salvations will have to be left for another time.

91) Dawkins, *God Delusion,* 11–19.

92) Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*.

93) Dennett, "Secular Spirituality."

Are New Atheists fundamentalist? They are not. They are not because of their tone and they are not because of the quality of their epistemology. But one thing this chapter has demonstrated is that insofar as there is a certain resemblance between New Atheism and what we today in the West identify as Christian fundamentalism, it is marked by attachment to a salvific epistemology. Christian fundamentalism entails a salvific attachment to faith in the revealed Word. New Atheism entails – at least as evidenced here by Harris – a salvific attachment to science as the arbiter of "facts." Both groups experience this phenomenon because they grasp for sense, order, and control. Humans have the ability to appreciate and become attached to rationalized order. This potential can burgeon into deep needs for and attachments to unambiguous epistemologies when cultural circumstances are in any way socially, politically, morally, or existentially disruptive. Disruption, disorder, and chaos have been demonstrably the case in recent history and current events as modernism has given way to postmodernism and the ambiguities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In scholarship on religion and society in general, it is crucial to resist language that polarizes without due cause. "Fundamentalism" carries far too much weight, is over-simplistic, and further contributes to the construction of straw men across our dialogues. It is better that we look to the functions that these beliefs and habits of interpretations perform amongst certain groups, or rather the powers that compel, and that we seek understanding of affective matrices and thought, so that we can discern proper resonances and dissonances. "Salvific epistemologies" as those which offer certitude and help us cope with chaos is a useful concept that stays loyal to resonances and dissonances in this specific comparative instance.

Harris is an exemplar for the quest to reclaim the modernist rationality characterized by order and certain means by which to adjudicate truth. Given how he blankets and smooths away the world's problems under the orderly promises of science, he participates in a salvific dream of order and a salvific experience of control over self and world. He exemplifies a longing for simplicity and safety that all of us may carry to some degree or another – as bound by the embodied limitations of human experience as we all are – and illuminates for us the need to interpret with as much nuance as we are able.

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