

Barbara Kay: The cold, cramped, atheistic world of Sam Harris

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Harris argues there's no use hailing heroes, since it was all written in their genes anyway

So the famous atheist Sam Harris believes that “free will is an illusion” and every single thing we do or say is programmed to be said or done by our genes or early childhood experiences. Such is the brief he makes in his book, *Free Will*, excerpted in the Post July 31. According to Harris, there is no point in assigning moral blame to those who murder, whether because they had a brain tumour or whether they just felt like it, nor is there presumably any point in lauding the heroism of the 9/11 firemen who rushed upstairs to save lives while everyone else rushed downstairs to flee. They were simply programmed to do it.

It's an interesting thesis – and a rather horrifying one, as Jonathan Kay [points out](#) in his accompanying commentary on the book. As Kay notes, speaking no doubt for the majority of us, “I believe I am more likely to live a meaningful life if I take the existence [free will or God] – in some vague, unspoken form, at least – on faith.

Harris does not go on, in this excerpt anyway, to posit what kind of world it would be if children were taught that they had no free will, and that they were basically programmed to act out inbred impulses and responses to their lived experience. I am assuming that just as Harris would not want children “lied to” about the existence of God, as he would perceive such teaching, he would not wish them to be lied to about their so-called “accomplishments.”

I am trying to imagine a scenario in which the Harris belief system would unfold in real life. Kid: “I'm going to be a fireman when I grow up.” Mummy: “That will depend on your genes. So far I have not seen any indication that you are genetically programmed for empathy, so I doubt that will happen.” Kid: “Maybe I could be a scientist.” Dad: “Your IQ would preclude that, son.”

If children are taught that everything is written in their genes, how is that any different from fatalistic religions that teach people's karma governs their lives, and that they were destined in this life anyway to be beggars? We would not wish to have the kind of social indifference to suffering such a belief system engenders. If Harris' belief system were actually put into practice, we would live in a Hobbesian universe where it was useless to strive for an ideal society or for justice – science cannot define justice for us – and where every man's hand was against his brother. Where there is no sense that one can transcend one's background and imposed limitations through free will, there is no motivation to aspire collectively for a better world.

As the poet Robert Browning wrote: “A man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?” In more contemporary terms, the great social scientist Charles Murray put it this way: “A major stream of human accomplishment is fostered by a culture in which the most talented people believe that life has a purpose and the function of life is to fulfil that purpose.” In Sam Harris' cold and sterile world, the word “talented” has no real meaning, nor does the word “purpose.” There is no heaven in Harris' cramped mind, but there is a hell.

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