

## Parallel Thinking Part 40: The Emergence of Ethics II – The Limits of Human Endeavour

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The purpose of God communicating with mankind was to make it possible for us to become partners with Him, in order to engage in the perfection of ourselves and the world around us. This requires an understanding of

the world – both physical and spiritual – as well as a moral code to live by.

Therefore, God gave us the Torah and its mitzvot, as the guide which directs us. God also created mankind in His image (Bereishit 1:26-27) which highlights that as well as being physical beings drawn to physical things, we also possess a *neshamah* (soul), a God-like quality within us (ibid. 2:7), which serves as an inner guide and is intimately connected to God.

King Shlomo (Solomon) writes that, “A person’s soul is the candle of God, searching out the chambers of our innermost parts” (Mishlei/Proverbs 20:27). Rabbeinu Yonah (d. 1264) and Rabbi Levi ben Gershon (known as the Ralbag, d. 1344) explain that the soul’s connection to God is the source for every person’s spiritual intuitions and convictions. In theory, humans can discern moral and spiritual truths about the world, without having to defer to the Torah. The Midrash explains that this is how Avraham originally came to recognise God and keep His commandments.

Yet while the soul seeks eternal moral and spiritual Godliness, the body seeks the opposite, in the form of physical gratification. The Talmud states that a candle shines above the head of an unborn child, with which the baby can see from one end of the world to the other (Niddah 30b). Rabbi Yehudah Loew (known as the Maharal of Prague, d. 1609) explains that the ‘candle’ refers to the baby’s soul. Before birth, the soul is above the baby’s body – outside of it, yet associated with it.

The reason the baby can see from one end of the world to the other, is that this pure soul, as yet unsullied by attachment to the physical world, can discern spiritual truths with absolute clarity. As soon as the baby takes its first breath, its soul merges with its body and comes into contact with the physical world, obscuring the soul’s ability to perceive spiritual truths. As we grow evermore attached to the physical world, our soul’s vision of spiritual and moral truth is increasingly blurred. Our notion of morality and spirituality becomes subject to our physical experiences.

In conclusion, science is concerned purely with understanding the physical world. Mankind has the capacity to be morally and spiritually sensitive, and can develop ethical codes and spiritual convictions through societal consensus and philosophical deliberation. Yet society’s man-made notion of morality, ethics and jurisprudence, devoid of God’s objective ethical goals, can never be free from human bias and prejudice. These are the limits of mankind’s endeavours to understand and manage the world.

*We would like to thank Rabbi Freedman for this excellent series and look forward to him writing again in the future .*

