

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 2: What is Ethics?

by Rabbi Dr Moshe Freedman, New West End United Synagogue



Broadly speaking, the philosophy of ethics aims to determine which actions and behaviours are considered right and which are considered wrong. However, before we can consider how to determine ethical behaviour (known as *normative ethics*) or examine specific cases (known as *applied ethics*), we must first explore the concept of *meta-ethics*, which delves deeper into the foundations of morality and asks essential questions about the nature of ethical behaviour itself.

The primary question is whether ethical actions merely describe the accepted cultural or societal conventions, regulations and laws, which are subjectively created by mankind; or whether moral values exist as real and absolute entities in a realm beyond subjective human thinking.

The 4th century BCE Greek philosopher Plato believed that ethical values are absolute and objective truths, existing and stemming from a non-physical realm. Concepts such as ‘virtue’ and ‘love of truth’ are fundamentally good. Yet what is the source of these moral axioms?

Theologically, one might point to God as the Ultimate Unity of all things and the foundation of the ethical universe. What is good in the eyes of God is fundamentally and objectively good, for both the individual and society. Jewish philosophers depicted the effect of immorality as something that had an indelible effect on the soul of the sinner and wider society. The 18th Century Italian philosopher, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (d. 1746) noted that Adam and Eve’s sin caused an eternal change in the nature of mankind and the world. Since ethical values originate from God, each one of us not only has a responsibility to ourselves, but also to the rest of humanity to act in a moral way. This is what Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (d. 1993) meant when he described

Jewish ethics in the context of Jewish law as the search for mankind’s “role in the infinite”.

Yet the very idea that there is an objective set of morals that underpins the way we ought to behave has been challenged for hundreds of years. Apart from Plato’s own philosophical objections to an absolute supernal morality (known as the Euthyphro Problem), modern democratic societies seem to function fairly well without having to define a set of fundamental moral or religious principles. Instead, governments take a utilitarian approach, constantly reviewing the law as a response to the will of the people and the practical benefits and consequences of change.

This approach, however, leaves any system of law open to the accusation that subjective, consensus-based ethics are not grounded in anything real. The difference between moral and immoral action is merely a convention in law and only relative to the subjective, societal norms of that time. Known as ‘moral relativism’, the weakness of this position is that it inevitably means that there nothing universal about morality; one ethical perspective cannot be considered as superior to another. The next article will further explore moral relativism, the concept of God as the objective source of morality, the Euthyphro Problem and the Jewish response to it.

