

## Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 4: Moral Relativism and Absolutism II

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The last article described the drawbacks of deriving ethical behaviour through reason alone. Mankind is subjective, ethnocentric and biased towards specific vested interests. In contrast, the Jewish perspective on

morality is that God is the objective arbiter of human ethical behaviour, the absolute truth of which is woven into the reality of creation.

One might argue that mankind *does* have the capacity to agree on global moral standards, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, as British philosopher Simon Blackburn puts it, “there will be a little voice saying that we are ‘merely’ imposing our wills on others ... it will not silence the relativistic imp on our shoulders”.

An alternative approach to determine ethical behaviour would be to examine the consequences of a particular action, as opposed to the action itself. The 18th century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham proposed an example of this, termed utilitarianism, stating that: “it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong”. His ideas were refined and popularised in the 19th century by the English philosopher, John Stuart Mill, who focused on well-being as the hallmark of the ultimate good. Indeed, Mill fought for women's rights, improved labour practices and opposed slavery.

Yet while utilitarian ethics still underpin much of western liberal society, this system has many limitations. Firstly, it is difficult to know with certainty whether the consequences of our actions will indeed maximise human happiness. Moreover, even if one could have some certainty, the logical conclusions of utilitarian ethics are disturbing, for they imply that one could, for example, justify the genocide of a minority to please a majority.

The 18th century Scottish philosopher David Hume noted that there is something qualitatively different between factual observations about the world (‘is’ statements), and prescriptive statements about how individuals ‘ought’ to act. Known as the ‘is-ought fallacy’ or Hume’s guillotine, as Oxford philosopher and psychologist Brian Earp puts it: “there is no way to reason from facts about the way the world is, to statements about the way the world should be. You can’t derive values from data”.

One contemporary attempt to apply scientific objectivity to secular ethics was suggested by the American philosopher, neuroscientist and neo-atheist Sam Harris. In his book *The Ethical Landscape*, Harris claims that well-being could be measured scientifically, such that any given action could be impartially tested for how it promotes human happiness. Yet regardless of the practicalities of defining well-being, let alone measuring it, Harris fails to solve Hume’s guillotine, because his premise that morality is about well-being is itself a philosophical statement, not a scientific one. While Harris attempts to utilise the prestige of scientific objectivity to undermine the need for God’s moral impartiality, he falls straight back into a utilitarian quagmire.

Nevertheless, as we will see in the next article, the fact that mankind believes in an inner sense of what is moral and ethical, however subjective that may be, does have some validity in Jewish thought.



Jeremy Bentham  
(1748 – 1832)