

# Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 49: I, Conscience 1

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This series set out to investigate the relationships between ethics, religion and the law in society. The relevance to everyday life is both complex and multifaceted: how is the behaviour of each of the 7.73

billion people alive today influenced by each of these three great dominions?

There are many factors which affect our individual perspectives on ethics, religion and the law. We are citizens of different political states subject to our own country's laws, some of which are defined by cultural norms. Some people are adherents to a faith tradition, others are not. We are all members of diverse social, economic and political groups together with an abundance of other defining qualities, characteristics and experiences. These give each one of us a unique set of perspectives on our moral and ethical conduct, when the law – religious or secular – has neither obligated nor sanctioned a particular action.

The last two articles in this series aim to draw together these ideas and address the questions of how and why we develop our unique moral conscience and how this has helped to shape our society, community and individual identity.

In his 1950 novel *'I, Robot'* which is set in the 21st century, biochemist and popular science fiction writer Isaac Asimov (1920-1992) is credited with proposing the first set of robot laws which govern ethical behaviour. The First Law prevent robots from harming humans. The Second Law ensures their subservience to their human masters. Robots are to assert their self-preservation, provided that this does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.

While the robots in Asimov's Sci-Fi fantasy had human-like General Intelligence (see parts 47 and 48 of this series), the very fact they needed to be

programmed with a set of moral rules reveals an important point. Humans have developed an inherent sense of morality either naturally, according to the prevalent scientific view, or spiritually, according to a Jewish theological view.

Asimov explores the problems faced by reducing all moral behaviour to three basic laws. Yet aside from the technical issues, ethical difficulties are far more complex and profound. The robot laws are algorithmic and fixed. Morality requires empathy to understand the needs of the other, compassion to act *lifnim mishurat hadin* – beyond the strict letter of the law and mutual understanding (see part 21 of this series). Unlike Asimov's robots, our conscience is built from a wealth of experience which shapes our own set of moral and ethical laws.

And the same is true for God. The Midrash (Pesikta Rabbati 40) notes that initially God intended to create the world with the attribute of strict Justice. However, He then saw that the world could not exist with Justice alone, so He gave priority to the attribute of Mercy, and merged it with the attribute of Justice (see Rashi on Bereishit 1:1). Morality is therefore a quality that cannot be reduced to a set of laws, however complex.

The final part of this series will explore the fundamental difference between the scientific and religious views of how we have developed our conscience, and the implications for ourselves, our communities and the whole of society.

