

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 50: I, Conscience 2

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Developmental psychologist Professor Michael Tomasello explains how humans developed their moral conscience naturally over hundreds of thousands of years. Initially, primates were driven by self-interest until

they realised that collaborative hunting would yield benefits for all. Those who failed to contribute were shunned and excluded from enjoying the rewards. The trait of co-operation became a critical factor in choosing a sexual partner. As societies eventually formed and organised, these traits developed into collective moral rules which became enshrined in the cultural norms of each group.

While subject to cultural differences, this Humanist view of morality and ethics claims to be able to build and maintain the laws and ethical framework societies require without the need for Divine intervention. While the lack of God's objective morality may risk opening the door for moral relativism (discussed at the beginning of this series), by and large secular Western liberal democracies function well. What, therefore, is the place for religion or religious laws in such societies?

Without God, human beings are merely complex carbon-based physical life forms. While our immediate behaviour and well-being may be important, in the grand scheme of things what we do today has little long-term value and is mostly irrelevant to the future of mankind. Provided I act within the boundaries of the law, if I choose to live a moral life or choose to indulge in a self-centred, hedonistic life, it will rarely – if ever – make a difference in the long run. This nihilistic view of the world expressed by King Solomon (Kohelet 8:15) seemingly absolves us from moral behaviour. Yet in the end King Solomon concludes that the whole purpose of mankind is to 'fear God and perform His commandments' (ibid. 12:13). Why?

God not only frames morality from an objective perspective, He imposes consequences for our actions that go far beyond their obvious immediate physical manifestations. The Humanist ethic, devoid of the eternal God, means that individual moral decisions are not anchored in eternity. Consequently, an individual's actions – whether moral, amoral or immoral – lack any predicable eternal consequences. This knowledge inevitably demotivates humanity from caring about the virtues of its behaviour, except to avoid anarchy.

The story of Adam and Eve encapsulates humankind's moral imperative: for better or for worse, our behaviour leaves an eternal imprint on the creation. The Mishnah (Pirkei Avot 2:9) describes how one of the paths to uprightness is to be *ro'eh et hanolad* – to see the consequences of our actions – for it is our knowledge, perspective and relationship with these consequences that will determine how we behave.

The role, therefore, that religion plays in society is to teach mankind that God's legal and ethical wisdom is not there to obstruct our freedom or prevent us from enjoying life. God's message is simple: your actions, whether legal or moral, are eternally significant and affect others in ways we cannot possibly know. Only the Omniscient God can understand how, and if we could only trust His judgement rather than our own a little more, we would be able to elevate the world around us for the betterment of all humanity.

We are very grateful to Rabbi Freedman for this fascinating series.

