

## Moral Imperative Argument – JewishClarity.com – Rabbi Asher Resnick

### PART I — Consider what type of a world would exist if there were no absolute, objective morality.

**A.** If there were no absolute, objective scale of morality, then all choices of actions would be based simply on our personal inclinations, what we “felt” like doing. We could call this what is most practical, productive, or what seems best — but it would never be what is **right**. When we say that an action is “right” or “wrong” we aren’t merely referring to our own personal beliefs — we mean that the action is **actually** right or wrong. Without an absolute, objective scale of morality, a decision of stealing or not stealing would be the same as the choice between chocolate and vanilla ice cream. No one action could ever be more justified, more moral, or more right than the other.

**B.** Just as matter is amoral (i.e., neither good nor bad), people would also be immoral. A brick falling on one’s head and a volcano may certainly be destructive, but they could never be considered “bad” or “evil.” Likewise, human beings would be nothing more than an elaborate collection of atoms and electrons — merely suffering from the delusion of being more than that.

**C.** If this were true, we could never morally condemn or judge anything! Senseless violence, incest, the Nazis ...there would be nothing wrong with shooting children (it just might not be “our thing”). While some things might be very unpleasant, we couldn’t judge any of them; we could never say that these types of actions were “wrong.”

#### Is this Reasonable?

We all **know** that this is absurd! We expect and demand people to rise above what they **feel** like doing and consider whether an action is **right or wrong**.

We **know** that we are much more than merely a collection of atoms and electrons.

We **know** that we are fully capable of judging values.

We **know** that we can and must condemn atrocities!

We **don’t** equate morality with opinions; we connect it to an absolute, objective scale of morality.

A support for this is that virtually all people would ultimately die rather than transgress **some** moral limit, or would at least admire others who would do this. This demonstrates that morality is as real to us as anything in our lives and is of crucial importance to all of us.

For example, most of us would be willing to risk our lives for our family, for causes like democracy or freedom, and perhaps also for Israel. We know that there is a justification for our behavior that goes beyond life itself (i.e., physical survival alone is not the highest good).

#### Moral Outrage

We have all experienced moral outrage — upon hearing of gruesome crimes and violence, the slaughter of thousands of innocent people, upon seeing photographs and writings depicting the atrocities of the Holocaust, etc.

When we experience this, it puts us in touch with a perception almost as vivid as our five physical senses. We have no doubt that we are reacting to a terrible wrong. This intuitive clarity renders irrelevant all of the silly pseudo-philosophical questions that one hears about objective morality:

Do right and wrong really exist?  
How do I know that morality is something greater than simply my opinion?  
Who is really able to know what is right?

Any serious doubt about the validity of this perception of moral outrage would ultimately raise questions about the reliability of **all** of our other senses. These atrocities that elicit moral outrage in us, we view as universal absolute wrongs — wrong even if the perpetrator would genuinely believe the actions to be right. We would give our lives rather than commit many of them, and we would certainly admire others who would do so.

### **We recognize the scale of morality as absolute.**

In America during the 1950s, there was widespread agreement on three moral prohibitions — homosexuality, abortion, and premarital relations. By the late 1960s, less than a single generation later, the prevalent views on all three seemed to have changed drastically. What happened? Obviously, what was very wrong one day could not become perfectly permissible a mere ten years later. (We do not view morality like a light switch — “on” today and “off” tomorrow, “good” on Tuesday, “optional” on Wednesday, and “wrong” on Thursday).

Rather, it must be that either during the 1950s, certain proper actions were incorrectly condemned, or shortly afterward, aspects of truly immoral behavior were mistakenly viewed as being proper. Both the upholders of the morality of the 1950s and the “liberals” of the 1960s would agree on one critical point — they can't both be right. Whether the stricter standards of the 1950s were incorrect, or the looser standards of the 1960s were improperly lenient, we all recognize that morality itself is absolute; it is the people's behavior and attitudes that change.

### **We see morality as independent of ourselves.**

Imagine the world had become so morally confused that the great majority of people didn't even recognize the Holocaust was wrong. Only 1000 individuals throughout the world recognized the evil of this genocide. Now imagine that every one of these 1000 individuals had gathered together inside a conference hall to discuss this tragic lack of awareness all around them.

The fact that there were a mere 1000 people inside the hall with one moral viewpoint vs. billions outside with a different view would not persuade the 1000 that they must necessarily be wrong.

Finally, imagine if one of 1000 were then asked — “What do you think would happen if someone threw a bomb into this conference hall right now and everyone was killed? If no one in the entire world that viewed the Holocaust as wrong remained alive, would it then cease to be wrong?” He would certainly answer that this tragic occurrence would not affect the moral status of the Holocaust in any way whatsoever. It would still remain absolutely evil, despite the fact that nobody in the world would then be aware of it.

The book “Eight Questions People Ask About Judaism” (pp. 8-9) summarizes this moral imperative argument very succinctly –

*“If there is no G-d, the most significant aspect of life which must be recognized as a delusion is morality. Moral relativism is the only possible consequence of the denial of G-d's existence, but this, of course, means that morality is nothing more than a personal opinion. As this century's most eloquent atheist philosopher, Bertrand Russel wrote: ‘I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values but (Russel conceded) I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don't like it.’*

*Russel's second point is our whole point. All that can possibly be wrong with wanton cruelty according to atheism and its moral relativism, is that some individuals may personally not like it. Amoralism is, therefore, inherent to atheism.”*

## **Our moral judgments refer to an absolute, objective scale.**

When we say that some idea or some behavior is right or wrong, we're not saying that it's right or wrong from "my point of view," merely because I happen to believe so, or even because my society may view the idea or behavior in this same way. When we say that something is "wrong," we're saying that we believe it to be **really** wrong. When we declare something to be "right," we mean that it is **really** "right." Every human being, through his desire to be good or her belief in right and wrong, has a clear perception that there **are** a right and wrong independent of one's personal preferences and society's transitory definitions.

If morality is not dependent on man, it must certainly be dependent on something. Furthermore, if the scale of morality is both absolute and objective, then the entity that it is rooted in must similarly be absolute and objective. This notion of an absolute, objective moral force is one of the fundamental aspects of the Jewish concept of G-d.

Not only does our intuition tell us that morality is real, it is the central standard around which the rest of our life is built. In terms of our behavior, therefore, regardless of what we may claim to be our belief structure, we are all certainly living, to a large degree, as if there is a G-d. Even so, an individual may claim that, while this intuitive recognition is as strong as virtually any other knowledge he possesses, it is merely the result of a deeply rooted illusion within him. This particular claim will be dealt with in Part II.

## **PART II — Every Human Being Has a Moral Imperative — The Imperative or Desire to be a Good Person.**

**A.** Everyone has at least **some** things that they believe are absolutely right, and others which they believe are absolutely wrong.

Common examples of absolute rights are freedom, justice, peace, equality, brotherhood, love. Common examples of absolute wrongs are wanton violence, tyranny, incest, rape, slavery.

**B.** Virtually all people will sacrifice and work hard for what they believe is right. We wish we were strong enough to always expend the effort necessary to accomplish the right thing (and never give in to laziness). Why is this so important to us? Why should we **ever** be willing to exchange immediate physical gratification for some intangible, non-physical, future goal? If the answer is that we recognize longer-term pleasures to be more satisfying and more pleasurable than short-term ones, then the question becomes — why would it be **wrong** to settle for less pleasure? The point, however, is that we do view laziness as wrong. An obvious area where we see this is how upset all parents get if they perceive that their children are wasting their potential or their lives. Whether the right thing is as mundane as being on time for work, working hard, or sticking to a diet — almost no one *always* takes the easy path in life.

**C.** This moral imperative is deeply ingrained within each of us. Try saying the following statement aloud — "I want to consider myself worthless and rotten. I am striving for abominable behavior and character, and to do the wrong thing." Is there any person in **any** society who could honestly say this about himself and mean it?

**Conscience, Regret, and Rationalization** – Every human being has a built-in mechanism which continually tells him, "Be a good person. Do the right thing. It is important to do what is right." This mechanism is commonly called "the Conscience."

When we listen to and follow this message, we feel a spiritual satisfaction.

When we do **not** listen to this initial message and we do that which we believe is wrong, we get a second message — “You made a mistake to have done the wrong thing.” The spiritual pain that comes as a result of this causes us **all** to feel **regret**. (There are, however, some fundamental differences between this feeling of regret, which can be very beneficial to a person, and the phenomenon of guilt, which can often be very damaging.)

In an attempt to avoid (or at least to minimize) this unpleasant feeling, virtually all human beings exhibit a particular behavior. After doing that which we had considered being wrong, we **rationalize** to ourselves and to others. We have a strong need to come up with **some** reason, no matter how flimsy, to explain our behavior. “It wasn't so bad... It was probably OK... But everybody does it... I'm only human!”

What is the origin of these mechanisms and why do they affect us so strongly? While society attempts to delineate for us which behaviors are right and which ones are wrong — the question is: Why is it so important to us that we conform to **any** system of moral standards at all?

### **Possible Sources for the Moral Imperative**

We have attempted to demonstrate up until this point both the strength and the universality of the Moral Imperative. We see that all people in all societies want very much to be good people and to do the right thing (however differently they may perceive that “good” to be). If, in reality, there existed no such thing as morality that was real, how could this incredible phenomenon (of everyone wanting to be in accordance with it) have possibly come about?

There are essentially two alternatives which could possibly be secular sources for the existence of the Moral Imperative — socialization and evolution:

**Socialization** posits that every newborn baby begins life with a blank “moral slate.” Society, however, through an educational process involving family, friends, and the rest of the child's environment, is somehow able not only to convince him that morality exists but also to instill within him an overwhelming desire to incorporate that system of morality into his life.

**Evolution** would suggest that the possession of a moral imperative is a survival-oriented characteristic of human beings. The first individuals with a moral imperative were able to produce greater numbers of offspring than those without it, and in time, became far more numerous. The reason, according to evolution, that we now see a moral imperative in **all** people throughout the world is that all of the people without the “morality gene” have long since died out. As a result, every child born today has a moral imperative already built into its genes.

### **The Problem with the Socialization Argument**

Simply put, education is limited. Could an individual with no inborn moral predisposition whatsoever, living in a world in which morality has no actual reality, be convinced not only that the concept of morality exists, but that it is the fundamental principle around which his life should be ordered? Furthermore, is it possible that every one of the millions of Americans was educated in exactly this same manner — to want to be a “good person”? And, finally, given the tremendous differences among societies all over the world, how could it be that Americans, Russians, Chinese, Arabs, and Africans have all ended up with this equal desire to want to do the right thing? It is impossible to imagine that there would not be huge numbers of exceptions that were never properly “programmed.” These amoral individuals, going through their lives without the illusion of morality (i.e., no conscience, guilt, rationalization at all!) would wreak so much damage on society that it wouldn't take long before those that had been fooled about morality would wake up and see that morality was nothing more than a big hoax.

## The Problem with the Evolution Argument

The problem here is the primary assumption of Evolution — namely, that the possession of a moral imperative will enable an individual to survive better. There are two important points to keep in mind in terms of evolution — it operates on an **individual** (as opposed to a societal) level, and it is a model for explaining **physical** survival, not the “spiritual quality” of life.

Even though society would certainly benefit from the widespread illusion of morality, an individual himself would be able to do much better if he were able to see through it. While the survival of human beings would be enhanced by the ability to **cooperate**, this is very different from the drive to actually want to be **good** (i.e., the moral imperative). Wolves in a wolf pack are able to work together, but only when it is to their own **individual** advantage; it is certainly not because they care about each other, or have a desire to be “good wolves.”

And the most obvious contradiction between the moral imperative and basic **physical** survival is the fact that most people would risk death rather than commit some action which they viewed as fundamentally evil — like killing 1,000 babies. If the belief in morality only developed because it aided man's **physical** survival, then how could it have evolved to the point where it now supersedes that very **physical** survival?

## At Most, a Good Illusion

An important clarification needs to be made at this point independent of the adequacy of either of these two explanations. When socialization and evolution are being offered as alternative sources, the most that they could even possibly be are sources for an **illusion** of morality, not morality itself. It is not that both theories deny G-d, it is that neither one is requiring morality to be based upon anything which is real. As explained in Part I, for morality to have any real meaning, it must be based on an absolute objective scale. If the actual source of the moral imperative were either socialization or evolution **alone**, then morality would have no basis in reality at all. The only question then remaining would be: “How did this **illusion** of morality begin? How is it possible that billions of people were brainwashed or duped into believing that morality is real and objective, given the fact that it has no actual reality at all?”

## Explaining the Moral Imperative

The existence of a strong moral imperative within all people, which can be seen from human values, beliefs and behavior, demands an explanation. The reality of an absolute objective moral scale as one of the fundamental aspects of G-d is both a complete and a satisfying explanation for this phenomenon. Anyone that wishes to deny the fact that an absolute objective moral scale really exists has the burden on his or her shoulders to provide an alternative approach which explains the moral imperative **at least as well**. Neither socialization nor evolution even come close.

## PART III — Appendix

*Does disagreement over right and wrong contradict objective morality?*

One of the questions which bother people most about the moral imperative argument often goes like this:

*How can there possibly be a single, absolute, objective scale of morality, when we see so much disagreement among people throughout the world on what actually is right and wrong in real-life situations?*

More often than not, this question is presented as a challenge: “If people all over the world have such different customs and lifestyles, and disagree so fundamentally on specific moral issues, what makes you think that they're wrong and you're right?” Or, people will ask, “If this absolute morality is so universal, why isn't it obvious to everyone? Why doesn't everyone agree on moral issues?”

To answer these questions, we first need to refocus on the fact that our point throughout the latter section of this argument has simply been to demonstrate that every human being in the world has a constant, innate desire to be good, to do the right thing. Since neither evolution nor socialization (nor any other approach) provides an adequate alternative explanation for the source of this phenomenon, then the only remaining possibility is that there must actually exist a universal, objective moral/ethical standard. This is the standard that, because of our drive to be good, we try to live up to. So, therefore, it should be clear that the purpose of this presentation is not to claim that we're right and anyone else is wrong, or that any specific moral issue should be viewed one way or the other, but rather that an absolute, objective standard of morality does, in fact, exist.

### **As the Earth is Round**

Logically, the existence of conflicting ethical opinions is in no way a contradiction to the existence of a single universal standard of morality. For example, we see that the existence of disagreement about the nature of physical reality in no way contradicts the fact that there is only one true physical reality. Even if, for example, some people believed that the earth was flat, while others knew that it was round — it is obvious that the earth could not simultaneously be flat and round. In the same way, the existence of disagreements on specific moral issues would in no way contradict the evidence for the existence of a single absolute moral standard.

Even after realizing that the mere fact of disagreement on moral issues in no way contradicts the evidence for the existence of a single absolute moral standard, many people are still bothered by the fact itself of the widespread argument and confusion on moral issues. Moreover, they don't understand how there could be so much barbarism, violence and immorality in the world.

### **A True Choice**

What is fascinating is that not only is the present existence of moral disagreement **no contradiction** to the fact of a single absolute standard (embodied in an Absolute Objective Moral Entity), but if we examine the process of human free-will decision-making, we will see that this widespread disagreement is **precisely what we would expect** if, in fact, there was a Moral Designer (G-d) Who had designed our world and the moral beings living within it. As we shall see, **the only way to ensure free-will** — the essential ingredient for meaning in life — was to create the world where wrong-doing and disagreement on moral issues was possible. Because for human beings to have free will, they must have the option of not only choosing correctly but also choosing incorrectly, which unfortunately includes killing other people, committing atrocities, etc.

### **Three Aspects of Moral Decision-Making**

There are three distinct aspects to every individual's moral decision-making process:

1. The basic unceasing **desire** to be a good person (i.e., the moral imperative).
2. The **choice to search independently for truth** and think out moral issues, **or to passively accept** whatever positions on moral issues one's society has already decided are proper.
3. **The actual decision itself** in any given life situation — **whether to act according to what one has concluded is morally right**, or to do whatever one feels like.

Of these three aspects, the first is not subject to human choice — in other words, people are actually incapable of not **wanting** to be good. Both of the latter two aspects, however, **are** subject to an individual's choices.

It is obvious from the fact that there exist so much disagreement and confusion over moral issues that the second aspect outlined above — the decision of whether or not to strive for moral clarity — is very much dependent upon human choice. Furthermore, everyone intuitively perceives that he has this free will to decide what is actually moral. The third aspect, the fact that we can choose, in practice, to act according to what we understand to be moral, or to go against our moral judgment, is also obvious. It is the very essence of human free will, without which the concept of “choice” or “free will” would be meaningless.

### **Contradiction vs. Support**

Now, if G-d was, in fact, the architect of the human being, why would He have designed man and arranged the moral choice structure in this manner? For example, why was man designed so that he is compelled to desire to be a good person? And, on the other hand, why is certainty in the realm of morality not as easily obtainable as a certainty in the area of logic or mathematics (for example, as evident by the fact that  $2 + 2 = 4$ )?

Let's examine the various combinations of these three aspects of human free will, and consider the implications of having or not having the ability to choose:

- a) the desire to be good
- b) to strive for moral clarity, and
- c) to actually do the right thing in any given situation.

We will see that it is specifically our existing condition (i.e., an unceasing desire to be good, the need to strive for moral clarity, and free will to act morally or immorally), which ensures the maximum level of human free will.

The only other combination which we might imagine would be effective for free will would be — having a choice regarding our desire to be good, no possibility to be confused about what was actually right or wrong, and choice for the decision of whether or not to actually be good. The problem with this configuration, however, is that without a constant desire to **want** to be good, we would be unlikely to actually **choose** to act morally with the clarity we had of right and wrong. The decision to choose to do good almost inevitably involves more effort and difficulty than avoiding doing what we know is wrong. The only reason we **ever** actually choose to do good is because of our built-in moral imperative (i.e., our constant unceasing desire to be good). Therefore, we see that our existing situation, rather than being some sort of a contradiction to the existence of a Moral Designer, is actually a very strong support — because its arrangement ensures the maximum capacity for human free will. This is, of course, exactly what a Moral Creator would want — for us to be able to use our free will to make moral decisions.

**In Summary**, We all know that morality is as real as anything else in our lives and that the scale of morality is both absolute and independent of us. This intuitive awareness is strongly supported by the universal phenomena of moral outrage and the widespread desire to be good, along with conscience, regret, and rationalization. And not only are neither socialization nor evolution able to serve as a source of morality itself, neither are able to even explain why every person in every society throughout the world is convinced that morality is real.