



The fingerprint

Nobody seriously denies that morality has profound and inescapable implications for human life. Not only do we face moral choices every day and know what it is to feel guilty or ashamed, we also find ourselves making moral judgements on whether other people's actions are right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust, fair or unfair.

These choices and judgements make it impossible to escape the conclusion that as human beings *we are moral agents with moral obligations*.

Whatever our personal standards we *know* that some things ought to be done while other things ought not to be done.

This sense of obligation is imposed on us by our conscience, which overrides not only our social conditioning but our personal instincts and preferences. Brushing these aside, it commands us to do what we believe to be right and condemns us when we fail to toe the line.

Everyone has a bad conscience about something, but where does conscience get this absolute moral authority?

Some people imagine that it comes from *nature*, but how can this be the case if the universe is no more than matter, energy, time and chance? How can the natural world hold us responsible for moral actions? We are all subject to the laws of physics, but we have no moral obligation to them. Even Richard Dawkins admits that as a basis for morality 'nature is not on our side'.

Others say that *personal judgement* is a sufficient basis for moral decisions and that, as philosopher Richard Rorty claims, 'There is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created.' But this idea implodes as soon as we touch it. If individuals could choose their own rules social harmony would be impossible, as nobody would have the right to say that anyone else was wrong.

Social convention is an equally flimsy basis. How can we be sure that public opinion is any better than private opinion? Which convention shall we choose? What do we do when one culture clashes with another — or when cultures change? How can any given culture be a dependable basis for morality if it has no secure reference point of its own?

The failure of such things to provide a solid basis for moral values tells us that these values must be rooted in something other than human experience, interest or need. In the absence of absolute values there is no basis on which we can make moral judgements about anything or anyone. Conscience's authority demands a basis that is transcendent, perfect, unchanging and personal — *and God is all four*. He is above and beyond all other reality, 'exalted as head over all'.²¹ We are specifically told that 'the law of the LORD is perfect'²² and that God 'does not change like shifting shadows'.²³ What is more, he is personal. He speaks, chooses, cares and gives. He also promises, 'Those who seek me find me.'²⁴

Even of those who deny his existence, God says that the requirements of his law are 'written on their hearts'.²⁵ The conscience is God's fingerprint, an inescapable reminder of our moral obligation to obey him in everything. Whenever you pass judgement on your own behaviour, or on the behaviour of others, you are confirming that you are under the authority of a transcendent moral code. Even the modern atheist Richard Taylor is forced to this conclusion: 'The concept of moral obligation [is] unintelligible apart from the idea of God.'