

ter as much from the outside as you matter to yourself, from the inside – e from the outside you don't matter any more than anybody else.

Not only is it unclear how impartial we should be; it's unclear what would be an answer to this question the right one. Is there a single correct way everyone to strike the balance between what he cares about personally what matters impartially? Or will the answer vary from person to person depending on the strength of their different motives?

Study questions

Why does Nagel reject the idea that what is wrong is what goes against accepted rules – or what goes against God's commands?

What is Nagel's general argument against hurting other people? Explain the role of consistency and resentment in his argument.

Does Nagel think that some things are wrong from a general point of view that everyone can understand? How does he defend his answer?

How does Nagel evaluate the idea that we should care about every person as much as we care about ourselves, our family, and our friends?

What kinds of issues does the idea of impartiality raise for ethics?

For further study

This selection is from Thomas Nagel's *What Does It All Mean?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pages 59–69. See also his *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and *Equality and Partiality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Harry Gensler's *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) discusses related issues in Chapters 2 and 8.

Related readings in this anthology include Ayer, Benedict, Hume, Mackie, Sartre (who oppose objective values); Lewis (who defends a religious basis for moral objectivity); Kant (who defends objective values); and Hare, Frankena, and Kohlberg (who defend impartiality).

Notes

For more on this point, see Plato's *Euthyphro* or Chapter 3 of Harry Gensler's *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

To appreciate his point, imagine how you would feel if your parents cared as much about a child they just met on the subway as they do for you.

C. S. LEWIS

The Moral Law Is from God

C. S. Lewis, a British scholar and novelist who lived from 1898 to 1963, was one of the most popular and influential religious writers of the last hundred years. He wrote much in defense of Christianity. Here he argues that there is an objective moral law, that this moral law must have a source, and that this source must be God.

As you read the selection, ask yourself how you would respond to this argument if you were an atheist. Is Lewis's defense of an objective moral law convincing? Could someone reasonably accept an objective moral law without believing in God?

The objectivity of the moral law

Everyone has heard people quarreling. Sometimes it sounds funny and sometimes it sounds merely unpleasant; but however it sounds, I believe we can learn something very important from listening to the kind of things they say. They say things like this: "How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?" – "That's my seat, I was there first" – "Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm" – "Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine" – "Come on, you promised."

Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man's behavior does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some standard of behavior which he expects the other man to know about. And the other man very seldom replies: "To hell with your standard." Nearly always he tries to make out that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard, or that if it does there is some special excuse. He pretends there is some special reason in this particular case why the person who took the seat first should not keep it, or that things were quite different when he was given the bit of orange, or that something has turned up which lets him off keeping his promise. It looks, in fact, very much as if both parties had in mind some kind of Law or Rule of fair play or decent behavior or morality or whatever you like to call it, about which they really agreed. Quarreling means trying to show that the other

man is in the wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are.

Now this Law or Rule about Right and Wrong used to be called the Law of Nature. Nowadays, when we talk of the "laws of nature" we usually mean things like gravitation, or heredity, or the laws of chemistry. But when the older thinkers called the Law of Right and Wrong "the Law of Nature," they really meant the Law of Human Nature. The idea was that, just as all bodies are governed by the law of gravitation and organisms by biological laws, so the creature called man also had his law – with this great difference, that a body could not choose whether it obeyed the law of gravitation or not, but a man could choose either to obey the Law of Human Nature or to disobey it.

This law was called the Law of Nature because people thought that everyone knew it by nature and did not need to be taught it. They did not mean, of course, that you might not find an odd individual here and there who did not know it, just as you find a few people who are color-blind or have no ear for music. But taking the race as a whole, they thought that the human idea of decent behavior was obvious to everyone. And I believe they were right. If they were not, then all things we said about the war [World War II] were nonsense. What was the sense in saying the enemy were in the wrong unless Right is a real thing which the Nazis at bottom knew as well as we did and ought to have practiced? If they had had no notion of what we mean by Right, then, though we might still have had to fight them, we could no more have blamed them for that than for the color of their hair.

Is morality relative to culture?

Now that some people say the idea of a Law of Nature or decent behavior common to all men is unsound, because different civilizations and different ages have had quite different moralities.

But this is not true. There have been differences between their moralities, but these have never amounted to anything like a total difference. If anyone will take the trouble to compare the moral teaching of, say, the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Chinese, Greeks and Romans, what will usually strike him will be how very like they are to each other and to our own. Some of the evidence for this I have put together in the appendix of another book called *The Abolition of Man*; but for our present purpose I need only ask the reader to think what a totally different morality would mean. Think of a country where people were admired for running away in battle, or where a man felt proud of double-crossing all the people who had been kindest to him. You might just as well try to imagine a country where two and two made five. Men have differed as regards what people you ought to be selfish to – whether it was only your own family, or your fellow country-

men, or everyone. But they have always agreed that you ought not to put yourself first. Selfishness has never been admired. Men have differed as to whether you should have one wife or four. But they have always agreed that you must not simply have any woman you liked.

Whenever you find a man who says he does not believe in a real Right and Wrong, you will find the same man going back on this a moment later. He may break his promise to you, but if you try breaking one to him he will be complaining "It's not fair." A nation may say treaties do not matter; but then, next minute, they spoil their case by saying that the particular treaty they want to break was an unfair one. But if treaties do not matter, and if there is no such thing as Right and Wrong – in other words, if there is no Law of Nature – what is the difference between a fair treaty and an unfair one? Have they not let the cat out of the bag and shown that, whatever they say, they really know the Law of Nature just like anyone else?

It seems, then, we are forced to believe in a real Right and Wrong. People may be sometimes mistaken about them, just as people sometimes get their sums wrong; but they are not a matter of mere taste and opinion any more than the multiplication table. Now if we are agreed about that, I go on to my next point, which is this. None of us are really keeping the Law of Nature. If there are any exceptions among you, I apologize to them. They had much better read some other work, for nothing I am going to say concerns them.

Is the moral law a human invention?

Some people object to me saying, "Isn't what you call the Moral Law just a social convention, something that is put into us by education?" I think there is a misunderstanding here. The people who ask that question are usually taking it for granted that if we have learned a thing from parents and teachers, then that thing must be merely a human invention. But, of course, that is not so. Some of the things we learn are mere conventions which might have been different – we learn to keep to the left of the road, but it might just as well have been the rule to keep to the right – and others of them, like mathematics, are real truths. The question is to which class the Law of Human Nature belongs.

There are two reasons for saying it belongs to the same class as mathematics. The first is, as I said before, that though there are differences between the moral ideas of one time or country and those of another, the differences are not really very great – not nearly so great as most people imagine – and you can recognize the same law running through them all: whereas mere conventions, like the rule of the road or the kind of clothes people wear, may differ to any extent.

The other reason is this. When you think about these differences between the morality of one people and another, do you think that the morality of one people is ever better or worse than that of another? Have any of the changes been improvements? If not, then of course there could never be any moral progress. Progress means not just changing, but changing for the better. If not of moral ideas were truer or better than any other, there would be no sense in preferring civilized morality to savage morality, or Christian morality to Nazi morality. In fact, of course, we all do believe that some moralities are better than others.

Very well then. The moment you say that one set of moral ideas can be better than another, you are, in fact, measuring them both by a standard, saying that one of them conforms to that standard more nearly than the other. You are, in fact, comparing them both with some Real Morality, admitting that there is such a thing as a real Right, independent of what people think, and that some people's ideas get nearer to that real Right than others. Or put it this way. The reason why your idea of New York can be better or less true than mine is that New York is a real place, existing quite apart from what either of us thinks. If when each of us said "New York" it meant merely "The town I am imagining in my own head," how could either of us have truer ideas than the other? There would be no question of truth or falsehood at all. In the same way, if the Rule of Decent Behavior meant simply "whatever each nation happens to approve," there would be no sense in saying that any one nation had ever been more correct in its approval than any other; no sense in saying that the world could ever grow morally better or morally worse.

To conclude then, that though the differences between people's ideas of Decent Behavior often make you suspect that there is no real natural Law of Behavior at all, yet the things we are bound to think about these differences only prove just the opposite.

But one word before I end. I have met people who exaggerate the differences, because they have not distinguished between differences of morality

and differences of belief about facts. For example, one man said to me, three hundred years ago people in England were putting witches to death. Is that what you call the Rule of Human Nature or Right Conduct?" But surely the reason we do not execute witches is that we do not believe there are such things. If we did – if we really thought that there were people going out who had sold themselves to the devil and received supernatural powers to return and were using these powers to kill their neighbors or drive them mad – surely we would all agree that if anyone deserved the death penalty, these filthy quislings did? There is no difference of moral principle here: the difference is simply about matter of fact.

In the case of stones and trees and things of that sort, what we call the Law of Nature may not be anything except a way of speaking. When you

say that nature is governed by certain laws, this may only mean that nature does, in fact, behave in a certain way. The so-called laws may not be anything real – anything above and beyond the actual facts which we observe. But in the case of Man, we saw that this will not do. The Law of Human Nature, or of Right and Wrong, must be something above and beyond the actual facts of human behavior. In this case, besides the actual facts, you have something else – a real law which we did not invent and which we know we ought to obey.

Two views of the universe

I now want to consider what this tells us about the universe we live in. Ever since men were able to think, they have been wondering what this universe really is and how it came to be there. And, very roughly, two views have been held. First, there is what is called the materialist view. People who take that view think that matter and space just happen to exist, and always have existed, nobody knows why; and that the matter, behaving in certain fixed ways, has just happened, by a sort of fluke, to produce creatures like ourselves who are able to think. By one chance in a thousand something hit our sun and made it produce the planets; and by another thousandth chance the chemicals necessary for life, and the right temperature, occurred on one of these planets, and so some of the matter on this earth came alive; and then, by a very long series of chances, the living creatures developed into things like us. The other view is the religious view. According to it, what is behind the universe is more like a mind than it is like anything else we know. That is to say, it is conscious, and has purposes, and prefers one thing to another. And on this view it made the universe, partly for purposes we do not know, but partly, at any rate, in order to produce creatures like itself – I mean, like itself to the extent of having minds. Please do not think that one of these views was held a long time ago and that the other has gradually taken its place. Wherever there have been thinking men both views turn up.

You cannot find out which view is the right one by science in the ordinary sense. Science works by experiments. It watches how things behave. Every scientific statement in the long run, however complicated it looks, really means something like, "I pointed the telescope to such and such a part of the sky at 2:20 a.m. on January 15th and saw so-and-so," or "I put some of this stuff in a pot and heated it to such-and-such a temperature and it did so-and-so." Do not think I am saying anything against science: I am only saying what its job is. And the more scientific a man is, the more (I believe) he would agree with me that this is the job of science – and a very useful and necessary job it is too. But why anything comes to be there at all, and whether there is anything behind the things science observes – something of a

rent kind – this is not a scientific question. If there is “Something and,” then either it will have to remain altogether unknown to men or else itself known in some different way. The statement that there is any thing, and the statement that there is no such thing, are neither of them statements that science can make. Supposing science ever became complete so it knew every single thing in the whole universe. Is it not plain that the questions, “Why is there a universe?” “Has it any meaning?” would remain as they were?

The moral law is from God

the position would be quite hopeless but for this. There is one thing, only one, in the whole universe which we know more about than we learn from external observation. That one thing is Man. We do not only observe men, we are men. In this case we have, so to speak, inside information; we are in the know. And because of that, we know that men put themselves under a moral law, which they did not make, and cannot forget even when they try, and which they know they ought to obey.

The position of the question, then, is like this. We want to know whether the universe simply happens to be what it is for no reason or whether there is ever behind it that makes it what it is. Since that power, if it exists, would not be one of the observed facts but a reality which makes them, no mere observation of the facts can find it. There is only one case in which we can find whether there is anything more, namely our own case. And in that one case we find there is.

Put it the other way round. If there was a controlling power outside the universe, it could not show itself to us as one of the facts inside the universe. The only way in which we could expect it to show itself would be inside ourselves as an influence or a command trying to get us to behave in a certain way. And that is just what we do find inside ourselves. Surely this ought to remove our suspicions? In the only case where you can expect to get an answer, the answer turns out to be Yes; and in the other cases, where you do not get an answer, you see why you do not.

Suppose someone asked me, when I see a man in a blue uniform going down the street leaving little paper packets at each house, why I suppose that they contain letters? I should reply, “Because whenever he leaves a similar paper packet for me I find it does contain a letter.” And if he then objected, “You’ve never seen all these letters which you think the other people are getting,” I should say, “Of course not, and I shouldn’t expect to, because they are not addressed to me. I’m explaining the packets I’m not allowed to open by the ones I am allowed to open.” It is the same about this question. The only packet I am allowed to open is Man. When I do, especially when I

open that particular man called Myself, I find that I do not exist on my own, that I am under a law; that somebody or something wants me to behave in a certain way. I do not, of course, think that if I could get inside a stone or a tree I should find exactly the same thing, just as I do not think all the other people in the street get the same letters as I do. I should expect, for instance, to find that the stone had to obey the law of gravity – that whereas the sender of the letters merely tells me to obey the law of my human nature, He compels the stone to obey the laws of its stony nature. But I should expect to find that there was, so to speak, a sender of letters in both cases, a Power behind the facts, a Director, a Guide.

I have got to a Something which is directing the universe, and which appears in me as a law urging me to do right and making me feel responsible and uncomfortable when I do wrong. I think we have to assume it is more like a mind than it is like anything else we know – because after all the only other thing we know is matter and you can hardly imagine a bit of matter giving instructions.

Study questions

- 1 According to Lewis, why should we think there is an objective moral law?
- 2 Lewis considers two objections to his belief that there is an objective right and wrong. What are the objections? How does Lewis answer them?
- 3 What is the difference between a “mere convention” and a “real truth”? Give an example of each.
- 4 What are the two basic ways to view the world? What is the key to deciding between the two views?
- 5 Formulate Lewis’s argument for God’s existence.

For further study

This selection has excerpts from Clive Staples Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), pages 3–20; the rest of this book defends basic Christian beliefs. His many other books include *The Abolition of Man* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), which he refers to in this selection, and *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), which defends the reasonableness of believing that this world (which includes much pain and suffering) was created by an all-good and all-powerful God. Plato’s *Euthyphro* raised an important objection to basing ethics on religion; for a recent debate on this objection, see “Is God the source of morality?” by Sharon M. Kaye and Harry J. Gensler, in *God Matters: Readings in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Longman Press, 2003), edited by Raymond Martin and Christopher Bernard.

es 481–7. Immanuel Kant gave a somewhat different moral argument for existence of God in his *Critique of Practical Reason* (New York: Library of Moral Arts, 1956), translated by L. W. Beck. Harry Gensler's *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) discusses whether ethics is based on religion in Chapter 3.

Related readings in this anthology include Moore, Nagel, and Ross (who also accept moral objectivity but don't base it on religion); Mackie and Sartre (non-believers who reject moral objectivity because they think it requires belief in God); Ayer (whose approach excludes both God and an objective ethics); and Ricoeur (who connects ethics with religion but doesn't deny the possibility of non-religious ethics).

THE BIBLE

Love of God and Neighbor

The Judeo-Christian Bible has had an important influence on moral thinking. Here are a few of the passages that relate to morality.

The ten commandments

Then God delivered all these commandments: "I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery. You shall not have other gods besides me. You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or worship them. You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain. Remember to keep holy the sabbath day. Six days you may labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord, your God. No work may be done then.

"Honor your father and your mother, that you may have a long life in the land which the Lord, your God, is giving you. You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife nor anything else that belongs to him." (Exodus 20:1–17)¹

God desires justice

What care I for the number of your sacrifices? says the Lord. Trample my courts no more! Bring no more worthless offerings; your incense is loathsome to me. When you spread out your hands, I close my eyes to you. Though you pray the more, I will not listen.

Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds; cease doing evil; learn to do good. Make justice your aim; redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow. (Isaiah 1:11–7)