

C. S. Lewis vs. Sigmund Freud on good and evil

by Armand M. Nicholi Jr.

Moral relativism (the prevailing doctrine in our culture today) argues that humans have no moral point of reference, that nothing I think can be more wrong or right than what you think. Such a worldview prompts an important question: Is there a universal moral law, a set of rights and wrongs that is permanent and absolute and has existed in nearly every culture?

For many years I have contemplated that question by comparing the contrasting views of two of the last century's most influential thinkers: C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud. Their writings run in striking parallels, yet lead us to completely different conclusions. Lewis serves as one of today's primary spokesmen for absolute truth and religious faith. With Marx discredited, Freud remains the spokesman for moral relativism and materialism.

We all possess an awareness of right and wrong, or what we "ought" to do. Are these feelings an indication of a God-given moral law? Or do they simply reflect what our parents taught us? Freud believes that we simply make up our own moral codes, just as we make up traffic laws, and that these codes can change randomly from culture to culture. Lewis maintains that we discover moral truth, good and evil, just as we discover the laws of mathematics, and that the universal moral law transcends time and culture.

"There are no sources of knowledge," Freud wrote, "other than carefully scrutinized observations--what we call research." He declares that there is "no knowledge derived from revelation." The Ten Commandments of the Old Testament and the two Great Commandments of the New (to love God, and to love one's neighbor as oneself) come, according to Freud, from human experience, not from God. The scientific method, he insists, is our only source of knowledge.

Lewis couldn't disagree more: The scientific method simply cannot answer all questions, cannot possibly be the source of all knowledge. The job of science--a very important and necessary job--is to experiment and observe and report how things behave or react. "But why anything comes to be there at all, and whether there is anything behind the things science observes ... this is not a scientific question."

Lewis argues that the question of whether or not an Intelligence exists beyond the universe can never be answered by the scientific method. Attempts to answer that question are based on philosophical or metaphysical assumptions, not scientific principles. Similarly, we cannot expect science to answer questions concerning the existence of a moral law.

Lewis continues: "We want to know whether the universe simply happens to be what it is for no reason or whether there is a power behind it that makes it what it is." He thinks that one way we could expect this power 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 ... 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."

Lewis cites two sources of evidence for the existence of a Creator: "One is the universe He has made ... the other is that Moral Law which He has put into our minds." The moral law is better evidence because "it is inside information ... you find out more about God from the Moral Law than from the universe in general just as you find out more about a man by listening to his conversation than by looking at a house he has built." Lewis is joined in this opinion by none other than Immanuel Kant, who also pointed to the "moral law within" as a powerful witness to the existence of God.

Freud disagrees with both men. He thinks it "strange" that Kant would use the moral law within men as evidence for God's existence. From his observations of severely depressed patients, Freud concluded that feelings of conscience and guilt come and go. "It is a most remarkable experience to see morality, which is supposed to have been given us by God and thus deeply implanted in us, functioning as a periodic phenomenon," he scoffs.

Freud did not sneer entirely at internal moralities. He allowed that conscience often plays an important role in mental illness. "If a patient of ours is suffering from a sense of guilt ... we do not recommend him to disregard his qualms of conscience and do not emphasize his undoubted innocence; he himself has often tried to do so without success. What we do is to remind him that such a strong and persistent feeling must after all be based on something real, which it may perhaps be possible to discover" (and, presumably, explain away).

Children's sense of right and wrong comes merely from what they have been taught by their parents, believes Freud. "Their parents' prohibitions and demands persist within them as a moral conscience," he writes. Eventually, they introduce this whole system of rewards and punishments "unaltered into their religion." God and His Commandments are thus simply a projection of parental authority.

Lewis concedes that we learn the moral law, in part, from our parents and teachers, and that this helps develop our conscience. But that does not mean that the moral law is "a human invention." Lewis explains that parents and teachers did not make up the moral law any more than they made up the multiplication tables they also teach us. He points out that some of what children learn from their elders "are mere conventions which might have been different--we learn to keep to the left of the road, but it might just have been the rule to keep to the right--and others of them, like mathematics, are real truths."

Mores and customs change with time; the moral law holds firm.

In his letters, Freud endorsed "the excellent maxim of Theodore Visher: 'What is moral is self-evident.'" He insisted that "We 'just see' that there is no reason why my neighbour's happiness should be sacrificed to my own.... Their intrinsic reasonableness shines by its own light. It is because all morality is based on such self-evident principles that we say to a man, when we would recall him to right conduct, 'be reasonable.'" Freud's internal compass is of course "rationally perceived," not placed there by a Creator. Yet this statement belies his argument against the existence of inherent moral codes.

Lewis's empirical evidence suggests that certain truths are written in the hearts of men. Moral law, he points out, is essentially the same in all cultures. The differences that exist "are not really that great." "Human beings all over the earth have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way." They ought not steal another man's money, or make love to another man's wife. Lewis compared the moral teachings of the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Chinese, Greeks, and Romans and found "how very like they are to each other and to our own." For instance, "Men have differed as regards what people you ought to be unselfish to--whether it was only your own family, or your fellow countrymen, or everyone. But they have always agreed that you ought not to put yourself first. Selfishness has never been admired."

This moral law has been referred to as the Tao, or Natural Law, or traditional morality. Lewis says that throughout history people took for granted that everyone knew the moral law by nature. He reminds us that during the last world war we took for granted that the Nazis knew what they did was wrong. They knew the moral law and they knew they broke it. We tried them and found them guilty. "What was the sense in saying the enemy were in the wrong," Lewis asks, "unless Right is a real thing which the Nazis at bottom knew as well as we did and ought to have practiced?"

Lewis notes that although basic moral law does not change over time or from culture to culture, the sensitivity to the law, and how a culture or an individual expresses the law, may vary. Under the Nazi regime the German nation obviously ignored the law and practiced a morality the rest of the world considered abominable.

Bad ideas, Lewis warned, contribute to moral decay. Indeed, he believed that "the effect of Psychoanalysis on the public mind" could be blamed partly for modern culture's loss of sensitivity to real wrongdoing. Freud's "doctrines of repressions and inhibitions" imply that "the sense of Shame is a dangerous and mischievous thing," Lewis writes. "We are told to 'get things out in the open' ... on the ground that these 'things' are very natural and we need not be ashamed." Thus we tend to accept uncivil behavior--"cowardice, lying, envy, unchastity"--more readily than many earlier cultures.

Freud believed that education and establishing the "dictatorship of reason" would be the only solution to the cruel and immoral

behavior that characterizes human history. "Our best hope for the future," he proclaims, "is that intellect--the scientific spirit, reason--may in process of time establish a dictatorship in the mental life of man." In a letter to Albert Einstein, who had written to Freud asking what could be done to protect mankind from war, Freud responds: "The ideal condition of things would of course be a community of men who had subordinated their instinctual life to the dictatorship of reason."

Yet Freud observed the rise of the Nazis within Germany, one of the most modern and educated nations in the world, and he knew about the terror of the SS troops, one of the most educated fighting forces in history. He also noticed that the increased knowledge of psychoanalysts generally did not make them more moral than other professional groups. "That psychoanalysis has not made the analysts themselves better, nobler, or of stronger character remains a disappointment for me," Freud confessed. "Perhaps I was wrong to expect it."

C. S. Lewis acknowledges that, because of background and training, certain individuals have a more developed understanding of the moral law than others. He recalls that "when I came first to the University I was as nearly without a moral conscience as a boy could be. Some faint distaste for cruelty and for meanness about money was my utmost reach--of chastity, truthfulness, and self-sacrifice I thought as a baboon thinks of classical music." He noticed in some of his classmates a greater awareness of the moral law and a greater desire to follow it, and he gradually discovered these same things in himself.

Freud likewise acknowledges that people differ in the development of their conscience. But he concludes that if God did provide the moral law within us, He "has done an uneven and careless piece of work, for a large majority of men have brought along with them only a modest amount of it or scarcely enough to be worth mentioning." In a letter to his friend Pfister, Freud wrote that "ethics are remote from me ... I do not break my head very much about good and evil." He said that he did not consider most people worth much "no matter whether they publicly subscribe to this or that ethical doctrine or none at all." Freud did not include himself in the "large majority" of thinly moral men, however. In a letter to Bostonian Dr. James Jackson Putnam, he wrote "I consider myself to be a very moral person." Freud compared his own conduct not with a universal law, but against the moral conduct of others, and he liked the comparison. "In a sense of justice and consideration for others, in disliking making others suffer or taking advantage of them, I can measure myself with the best people I have known. I have never done anything mean or malicious and cannot trace any temptation to do so," Freud writes. He insisted he obtained no satisfaction "in concluding I am better than most other people."

Freud points out that although he supported freer sexuality, he himself did not exercise that freedom; he adhered to the traditional biblical sexual code. When he acted differently from the way he argued--for instance by being monogamous while endorsing untraditional sex lives for others--Freud apparently saw no contradiction between what he professed and what he

practiced.

When Freud says "I consider myself to be a very moral person ... I can measure myself with the best people I have known ... I am better than most other people," he falls into a category that Lewis describes in his book *The Screwtape Letters*. In an address to young devils in training, the very experienced demon Screwtape says it is easier to lead a person to hell if he will compare himself to others. A person who knows he is superior in a certain aspect never needs to point that out to others. He simply accepts it. The claim of one's own goodness is made only by those who feel "the itching, smarting, writhing awareness of an inferiority which the patient refuses to accept."

"The ethical demands on which religion seeks to lay stress," Freud wrote, "need to be given another basis; for they are indispensable to human society and it is dangerous to link obedience to them with religious faith." Why dangerous? Because Freud believed that as people became more knowledgeable they would eventually turn away from religious faith. And if the masses no longer believe in God, what will motivate them to live moral lives? "If the sole reason why you must not kill your neighbor is because God has forbidden it and will severely punish you for it in this or the next life--then, when you learn that there is no God and that you need not fear His punishment, you will certainly kill your neighbor without hesitation, and you can only be prevented from doing so by mundane force."

Freud proposed an argument for enlightened self-interest as a basis for social order. "Civilization has little to fear from educated people," he asserted--because reason tells them it is in their best interest to be ethical. (He wrote this in 1927, not long before the Nazi rise in educated Germany.) He warned that "it is another matter with the great mass of uneducated." Rank and file citizens need to be given basic moral marching orders. Freud believed that if the masses were told not to kill "in the interest of their communal existence," they would not. This, however, appears to contradict his strong conviction that passion governs the masses more than reason.

In any case, "it would be an undoubted advantage if we were to leave God out altogether and honestly admit the purely human origin of the regulations and precepts of civilization," Freud asserted. "Along with their pretended sanctity, these commandments and laws would lose their rigidity and unchangeableness as well." As people became more educated, they would understand that these rules were made "to serve their interests ... and they would adopt a more friendly attitude toward them."

C. S. Lewis, however, believed that ignoring the moral law makes it hard for people to see beyond their own selfish interests. After he rejected atheism, Lewis wrote in a letter to a friend, "Who will take medicine unless he knows he is in the grip of disease? Moral relativity is the enemy we have to overcome."

Without a law and Lawmaker to whom we are accountable,

there is little awareness of how short we fall, and little need for forgiveness and redemption. We end up merely comparing ourselves with others, especially those who fail more than we do. This leads to low moral standards, and spiritual conceit.

If, instead of comparing himself to others, Freud had measured himself against the great commandments of the Old and New Testaments, he might not have been so complacent. He openly spoke of "loving one's neighbors as oneself" as foolish and "impossible."

Lewis argued that "when a man is getting better he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less. A moderately bad man knows he is not very good: a thoroughly bad man thinks he is all right." The more we struggle with our bad impulses, Lewis writes, the better we know them. "Even attempted virtue brings light; indulgence brings fog."

When Freud examined his own behavior he acknowledged some force within him that motivated him to act morally--"an impulsion to do good." But he could not fathom the source of his concept of right and wrong. As his official biographer and colleague Ernest Jones wrote, "Freud himself was constantly puzzled [that] a moral attitude was so deeply implanted as to seem part of his original nature."

In a letter to Dr. Putnam, Freud admitted: "When I ask myself why I have always behaved honorably, ready to spare others and to be kind wherever possible, and why I did not give up doing so when I observed that in that way one harms oneself and becomes an anvil, because other people are brutal and untrustworthy, then, it is true, I have no answer. Sensible it certainly was not." We can be glad Freud could not bring himself to be rude, uncaring, or unfaithful. And perhaps his recognition of an "impulsion" within himself to be moral may be a clear indication that, at some level, Freud agreed with Lewis, and with St. Paul, who insisted that "the law is written on their hearts."

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Bad or foolish ideas propagated by today's liberal intelligentsia have serious consequences. In my native Britain, for instance, there is a powerful tendency for wishful thinking to not only replace thought but to be considered virtue in itself. Recently, for instance, I read in one of our leading intellectual journals a review discussing the analytic philosopher A. J. Ayer. The author listed Ayer's virtues and vices, and among his virtues was counted the fact that he was unconventional. Unconventionality in itself was considered a virtue, irrespective of what it was that Ayer was unconventional about.

Now, it doesn't require much knowledge of the world to know that unconventionality is not in itself a virtue. It can be a virtue, of course, if it leads to moral or technical advance or to great artistic achievement. But to give a very obvious counter-example: The British serial killer Dennis Nilsen was deeply unconventional. He would entice young homosexuals to

his flat, where he would strangle them, and then he would sit and watch television with their corpses on the sofa for a couple of days until putrefaction set in. And he would then cut up their bodies and boil them in saucepans, and flush the results down the sink. He was eventually caught only because the pipes of the house in which he lived blocked up.

Even amidst today's moral relativism, I doubt that anyone would enter the fact that Dennis Nilsen was unconventional amongst his virtues. This is so obvious that one wonders how it can be that people who have gone through 20 years of education can omit to think of such a thing. Perhaps it takes 20 years of education to be able to omit such a thing.

I'll give you another example of today's poisonous intellectual insincerity. I recently read a piece in the Times Literary Supplement in which the author praised the British novelist Kingsley Amis for discovering the liberating power of unadulterated rudeness. Again, it takes very minimal reflection to realize what pernicious nonsense that is. Of course, we all give way to rudeness sometimes, and sometimes we experience a momentary gratification when we do so. But unless we're psychopaths, we realize that is not liberating in the slightest--not to us, and certainly not to the person on the receiving end of our rudeness.

I am a psychiatrist, and when I read those words in the Times Literary Supplement I couldn't help but think of my elderly working-class patients, people who'd lived through the Depression, the war, whose cities were bombed, whose country lost half a million men in the defense of elementary decency, and who now live in a society in which it is perfectly normal for them to be pushed aside physically in queues at bus stops by young people muttering, "Get out of the way, you f'ing old bag."

Could there be any more bitter and less liberating end to a life filled with hardship, sacrifice, and often a great deal of bravery than to be the subject of such brutal rudeness and to be so completely defenseless in its face? Yet here we have a venerable organ of Britain's intellectual elite propagating the idea that unmannerliness is in some way noble and freeing.

This quality of insincerity, of untruthfulness both to what we know and to what we feel, has long pervaded the intellectual life

of our elites. It has obscured the most obvious moral truths. Intellectuals spouting such moral relativism exude plenty of sympathy, often in the name of multiculturalism, but none of it is real.

Wishful thinking and willful blindness to irreconcilable conflicts between different moral conceptions of life have taken the place of genuine thought, and paralyzed the will to make important distinctions. In my particular work, I see a lot of Muslim Pakistan girls who at the age of 16 or 17 are taken to Pakistan and forcibly married to someone they've never met. They've been betrothed since birth. There are cases of girls who have been killed for resisting. But what I find surprising is that there is hardly any reference to this by any of our multiculturalists, and none by our feminists, though this is genuine and relentless oppression.

This is the fruit of the post-modernist habit of using words not to convey meaning and truth but rather to earn admiration and to have a penumbra of trendy virtue. And it has helped blind our society to the possibility that there are people in the world whose enmity towards us is earnest. Because some of us don't really mean anything we say, we assume that other people don't really mean what they say either. In modern literary criticism, the-words "playful" and "ludic"--meaning something halfway between meaningless and frivolous--are used as a term of praise.

My hope is that the events of September 11th will exert a salutary effect upon our intellectual life in this area. Specifically, I hope that we will hear no more of all ways of life and all cultures being equally valid, which none of us truly believes but which many people mouth in order to appear broad-minded and generous of spirit. That sort of moral relativism gives comfort to our enemies by convincing them that we are, in fact, defenseless. It saps our will to do anything. And it gives us no moral basis upon which to defend ourselves.

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