

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: C. S. Lewis was an English novelist, literary critic, and theologian. In the following excerpt from his 1943 book Mere Christianity, Lewis argues that standards of good and bad behavior are less variable than some people claim.

Right and Wrong As a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe (1943)

Everyone has heard people quarrelling. 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: "That's my seat, I was there first"--"Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm"--"Why should you shove in first?"--"Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine"--"How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?"--"Come on, you promised." People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups.

Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them isn't just saying that the other man's behaviour doesn't happen to please him. He is appealing to some kind of standard of behaviour 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 doesn't 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 behaviour or morality or whatever you like to call it, about which they really agreed. And they have. If they hadn't they might, of course, fight like animals, but they couldn't quarrel in the human sense of the word. Quarrelling means trying to show that the other man's in the wrong. And there'd be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are; just as there'd be no sense in saying that a footballer had committed a foul unless there was some agreement about the rules of football.

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 falling stones are governed by the law of gravitation or chemicals by chemical laws, so the creature called man also had his law--with this great difference, that the stone couldn't 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. They called it Law of Nature because they thought that every one knew it by nature and didn't need to be taught it. They didn't mean, of course, that you mightn't find an odd individual here and there who didn't know it, just as you find a few people who are colour-blind or have no ear for a tune. But taking the race as a whole, they thought that the human idea of Decent Behaviour was obvious to everyone. And I believe they were right.

I know that some people say the idea of a Law of Nature or decent behaviour known to all men is unsound, because different civilisations and different ages have had quite different

moralties. But they haven't. They have only had slightly different moralities. Just think what a quite different morality would mean. Think of a country where people were admired for running away in battle, or where a man felt proud for 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 unselfish to--whether it was only your own family, or your fellow countrymen, or everyone. But they have always agreed that you oughtn't to put yourself first. Selfishness has never been admired.

But the most remarkable thing is this. Whenever you find a man who says he doesn't 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'll be complaining "It's not fair" before you can say Jack Robinson. A nation may say treaties don't 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 don't matter, and if there's no such things 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? Haven't they given away the fact 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.

TOPIC:

Briefly explain what Lewis' main idea is in this passage. To what degree do you find his argument persuasive? Be sure to discuss specific examples to support your own evaluation of Lewis's view.