

MORAL STANDARDS IN A CHANGING WORLD

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THE problem of values, T. S. Eliot has remarked, is the central philosophical issue of the twentieth century. For the common reader a discussion of values means, inevitably, a discussion of the significance of moral standards in our changing world. The rapidity of technological advance, the development of science, the growth of various forms of psychological medicine, and the bitter controversies between capitalists and communists are among the more important factors that have produced the moral restlessness of our time. Everywhere to-day people are raising two main questions concerning ultimate values: first, can science supply us with satisfactory moral standards? Secondly, are moral standards universal or relative? It is proposed, in this brief paper to offer clear and simple answers to each of these questions.

When we inquire whether science can determine moral standards for modern man we immediately raise the question as to which of the various sciences can or does actually perform this high task. Certainly no one would appeal, in this connection, to astronomy or physics. Some would doubtless appeal to biology. Fifty-six years ago, in his famous Romanes lecture on evolution and ethics, T. H. Huxley reluctantly concluded that evolutionary biology cannot resolve humanity's ethical quest; and only six years ago, in his Romanes lecture on the same problem, Julian Huxley merely confirmed his grandfather's profound insight. While admitting that chemistry or physiology is irrelevant for ethics, many of our contemporaries insist that psychology and the social sciences can supply us with the new moral standards that, they ardently believe, are necessary for our changing world.

When we actually examine psychology and the various social sciences, we find that none of them attempts to discover what moral standards *ought* to exist in the world. Indeed, many American psychologists and sociologists scoff when the very question is raised; others assert vigorously that the slogan *Down with value judgments!* should be the first maxim of every social scientist. An objective analysis of psychology and the social sciences makes it clear that these disciplines do not, and cannot, provide ultimate moral standards—for that task

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belongs to philosophy. At the same time, such an analysis makes it equally clear that the philosopher must come to terms with psychology and the social sciences; and no university in this age should pride itself on its ability to resist the development of the newer learning within its walls. For psychology and the social sciences can give us exceedingly valuable knowledge as to how men or groups of men do *in fact* regularly behave in specific circumstances.

But we must also realize clearly that the possession of such scientific knowledge simply gives us the power to control to *our own purposes* the behavior of human beings and social groups. A famous American psychologist, a leader of the movement known as Behaviorism, once remarked: "Give me a child until he is six years old, and I will turn him into an archbishop or a gangster. But society must tell me *what* it wants me to do with the child." It is more evident to-day than ever before that scientific knowledge does not automatically make our purposes good; and it is certainly not true, as some psychiatrists would have us believe, that all the evil in the world is the result of frustration and ignorance.

Over three hundred years ago Francis Bacon, in a spirit of optimism, foresaw the power that scientific knowledge would give to mankind. But we now know that the knowledge and power the sciences give us can be used just as effectively for evil purposes as for good. We have seen that man can use scientific knowledge to kill or cure, to destroy or to build, for tyranny or for freedom, to make war or to implement peaceful living. Psychology and the social sciences are unquestionably of vast importance in the understanding of our changing world. But even if we admit, as we must admit, that psychology by making known to us the laws of human behavior tells us how to make men good, we must, if we are informed, add that psychology tells us just as readily how to make men evil. Science, in itself, is ethically neutral: it cannot determine moral standards.

Are moral standards universal or relative? The discussion of this question may easily become confused through a misunderstanding of the essential differences between universal moral standards and social conventions. By universal moral standards we mean standards of conduct the aim of which is the growth and unfolding of man, his fullest self-realization. During its long history, philosophy has succeeded in formulating such universal moral standards, of which the two most

important are the *Principle of Justice* and the *Principle of the Supreme Worth of Personality*.

According to the Principle of Justice we should always act in such a way that we would be prepared to have everyone else act in the same way as we are now acting: we must be prepared to universalize our action. The Principle of the Supreme Worth of Personality affirms that we should always act in such a way that in every instance we treat people as ends rather than as means: we must respect every man's personality and conscience, and never use people merely as means to our own selfish ends.

Declarations of human rights are characteristic of our age: all such declarations must surely presuppose that the moral law is the same for all men and that there are universal moral standards. To the philosopher this presupposition requires no esoteric justification: though men differ from one another in temperament, taste, cultural capacity and opportunity, nevertheless man's essential moral nature, that is, his moral reason, is the same in all. Therefore all men, insofar as they think about morality and so exercise their moral reason, will agree as to the nature of justice and the claims of personality. The fundamental moral law is therefore one and the same law for all truly moral individuals, and, as such, there flow from it universal moral standards that constitute the only real basis for social harmony and cooperation whether in civic, national, or international relations.

Now it is easy to mistake the flux of social conventions in a changing world for the decay, or even the abandonment, of universal moral standards. By social conventions we merely mean such standards as are necessary for the functioning and survival of a specific kind of society and of the people living in it. There can be no doubt that recent developments in psychology and the social sciences have suggested that the social conventions of a given society (which include various prohibitions and commands) are necessary *only for the functioning and survival of that particular society*. Such social conventions should not be confused with universal moral standards of the type we have described.

In our Canadian society, for example, *economic success* has been elevated to the position of one of the highest virtues because our extremely competitive economic system needs the drive to work as one of its most important productive forces. This is doubtless the reason why even university presi-

dents have been known to tremble in the presence of men of great wealth! Every society tends, of course, to add to the confusion by attempting to elevate what are merely its conventions into ultimate moral standards. Thus the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia have come to think of the social conventions that regulate the distribution of property in their celebrated Winter Ceremonial as universal moral standards. Psychology and the social sciences, insofar as they have assisted the philosopher to distinguish clearly between universal moral standards and mere social conventions, have made an invaluable contribution to the deepening of the moral consciousness of our age.

The confusion and the uncertainty that people are experiencing to-day are in large part due to the flux of our social conventions. Confronted with changing conventions in a changing world, many people have come to feel that there are no universal moral standards at all. One of our cardinal needs is a reassessment of our social conventions in the light of the universal moral standards that philosophers have long since discovered and articulated. Such a reassessment requires not only the insights of philosophy but also the mobilization of the data of psychology and of the social sciences on a large and unprecedented scale. The philosopher, the psychologist, and the sociologist are therefore engaged in a great cooperative enterprise: each, from his own perspective, can make a contribution to the discussion of the nature of ultimate moral standards and the function of social conventions in our changing world.

Nothing is easier to-day, after the gigantic ravages of two world wars, than to assert that science has brought us to the rim of the abyss. It is correspondingly difficult to endeavour to show mankind something of the uses to which science may be put in the light of universal moral standards. But the constructive attitude is the more excellent way, and here, as always, the old maxim will hold good—*Magna est veritas et praevalabit.*