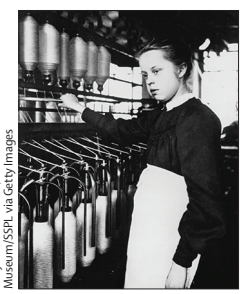
Offline: The moral drift that destroys us



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Are we living through an era of moral progress? Slavery. Child labour. Capital punishment. All gone or going, if too slowly in some countries. The creation of a welfare state. Social protection. Human rights. Progress, surely. Still, we tolerate, and our governments enable, the slaughter of civilians, whom we permit to be bombed, burned, and crushed with impunity in our name. Contradictions abound.

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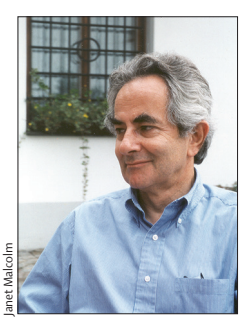
In his 2023 book, *Moral Feelings, Moral Reality, and Moral Progress*, Thomas Nagel investigates whether there can be moral truths, just as there are scientific truths. If we agree that human beings can acquire reliable knowledge about the material world, can we also agree that we have constructed a parallel repertoire of moral knowledge? How advantageous it would be if we could dip into a textbook of moral wisdom to answer questions troubling our societies today—assisted dying, how we treat migrants, or what to do about state-sponsored killing. Nagel argues that moral judgements are neither right nor wrong. There is no independent means to verify their reliability. What we believe to be a moral truth is no more than an intuitive feeling, a subjective evaluation, one that may well change over time. There are ambiguities too. If I kill one person to save the lives of ten others, some might say that the act of murder is itself intrinsically immoral, irrespective of the outcome; others will suggest that judgements about my morality should depend on the consequences of the act, not the act itself. Nagel is concerned that there might be a drift towards judging acts by their consequences alone. We see this drift operating today. The killing of civilians in war is justified because the outcome of those deaths will deliver, so political leaders argue, advantages that outweigh the human annihilation. Nagel's view is that "we must regard each person, including ourselves, as immune from subjection to others". This rule describes a boundary that should never be crossed: "we must not violate it even to prevent more violations of the same kind by others". Our "moral consideration should respect each individual separately". Currently, we take this view very much for granted. We believe that when we set it aside for expedient purposes nothing is lost. Nagel disagrees. Something essential about being part of a moral community is "seriously diminished" when we ignore the importance of a person-centred moral outlook on the world.



Janet Malcolm

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What are the prospects, then, for recovering from the harm we are presently doing to our moral selves? Our moral outlook is a function of the times we live in. The reasons we bring to bear on our moral thinking are historically dependent. That we allow our governments to be complicit in the deaths of tens of thousands of non-combatant women, children, and men during a conflict reflects a mental block among us. Our complicity indicates that we do not confer the same value on those lives being erased as we do on those immediately around us. Our reasoning accords one group of people fewer rights than we accord ourselves. We should be completely honest about this reality. Whether we name it inequity, prejudice, or racism does not matter. What we have embedded in western societies is a view that people living in other societies are simply inferior to ourselves. Can we change our moral standards? Nagel argues that for moral progress to take place we must have reasons for a change in our moral outlook. He calls this "the accessibility condition for moral truth"—that is, we have to be able to access the reasons for any positive change in our moral outlook. It seems that today we do not recognise any reason to believe that killing and maiming people in conflict is morally unacceptable, or at least sufficiently morally unacceptable to object to. Nagel suggests that our moral dispositions will likely change over time. Those dispositions will evolve into new norms. The massacres taking place today will pose new questions and provide new reasons for moral recalibrations. Not yet, clearly, but in time. He predicts that we will eventually see "new forms of associative obligation", a change from an exclusive to a more inclusive notion of global justice, and "an expansion of morality". Meanwhile, we must face our moral savagery with nothing less than horror.

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