

ETHICS STANDARDS

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What is the standard and the basis for it?

In *That Hideous Strength* (p. 285) C. S. Lewis has Dr. Cecil Dimble telling his wife that polygamy was not wrong for Abraham. That comment seems misleading, but it does raise the question about standards. There seems to be more than one way of speaking of an “ethical standard.” There is (a) the ideal standard, the one that God has always had in mind for everyone everywhere. The ideal standard is based on the originating purpose of God before creation. PURPOSE

A second standard is (b) the circumstantial standard, the one that God holds people responsible for relative to the revelation they have received. In this second standard, belongs Paul’s comment that in the times of that ignorance God overlooked (Acts 17:30). It is a standard relative to knowledge, an expectancy relative to a person’s opportunities and privileges. RELATIONSHIP

Another standard might be called (c) the developmental standard, or the progressive standard, which correlates with where a person is or where mankind is as they are “growing up.” Jesus appeals to that basis when he says Moses made a concession in allowing divorce for any reason “*because of the hardness of your hearts*” (Matthew 19:8 = Mark 10:5¹). Here God expects people to live up at least to where they are, what they can do at that point in their maturation. Educators call it “readiness.” It is a standard based on ability, the one we use with our children as they are growing up. Paul calls it a tutor leading us to Christ (Galatians 3:24). There is a difference between what can realistically be legislated (“actionable”) and what people should do. By appealing to the original creation situation as more original, Jesus argued that divorce in the Mosaic Law was a concession due to insensitivity. National laws do not embody everything that personal morality calls for. The Mosaic Law was a secondary standard based on rules and regulations, which was a lesser ideal than the one based on reality, divine purpose, or the character of positive interpersonal relationship. NATURE

Fourth is (d) the practical standard, the one that people expect from others given the temptations of their circumstance, the opposition they face, the weaknesses they have. “*He knows our frame*” (Psalm 103:14). The practical standard relates to the developmental one but differs in that it does not necessarily envision the issue in linear terms.

There is (e) the remedial standard relative to which God—or the other person—is willing to forgive because of repentance.

Beyond this, lies (f) conventional standard based on social consensus. But when we move to that standard, we have moved beyond what we have in mind when we speak of ethical or moral matters. That standard is what non-Christians may suppose all “morality” really is. It has the character of language or mores. People agree on them, not because reality calls for them, but so they can communicate. In practice, legislation addresses the need to eliminate one person using force against another.

At the individual level, there is the (g) standard of conscience. In Romans 2, Paul may have that idea in mind, “*Whatever is not of faith is sin*” (Romans 14:23). It is sin for you because it goes against your internal standard even though your conscience is misguided on that point.

The question here is whether these are all ethical or moral standards. It might be less confusing to speak of one standard, the ideal one; or perhaps of two, the ideal and the revealed one, the revealed one being possibly less. But, it does look obvious that in a biblical sense we may speak of some ethical relativity.

Where is the standard contained?

It can be misleading to say that polygamy was not wrong for Abraham. That comment makes morality look relative, as if the standard changes. It is better to say that something is wrong regardless of whether people know it or not, whether they believe it or not, whether they can live up to it or not. The difference does not lie in the standard but in whether God reckons failures to live up to it. The fact that it does not destroy people or separate them from God (destroy them or cause disfellowship or lostness) does not mean it is not wrong in the “first place” (theory). Rather, it is not destructive in the “last place” (practice). Between the “two places” stands God who chooses not to hold against people (second place) their behavior contrary to the standard (first place). The fact that polygamy was wrong for Abraham in a sense, C. S. Lewis acknowledges when Dr. Dimble goes on to say, “*. . . but one can't help feeling even he lost something by it.*”

What is the origin of the standard?

The standard does not originate (1) beyond God, as the ancient Fates lay beyond the Greek and Roman gods so that even they were subject to them. We do not place these standards beyond God to preserve the idea that God is himself ethical. If we were to put them beyond God, we could not speak of him as sovereign; he would not be ultimate.

To preserve divine sovereignty, we put the origin of the standard (2) in God. But when we do so, we cannot allow ourselves to suppose that he chooses behavior as an (a) arbitrary standard. He must be true to himself as per his own nature; otherwise, he would become inconsistent and unethical. But his nature is a given, an ultimate given, because it did not derive from something more original.

The idea is a restrictive one, the broad arrow concept, rather than a positive one, a single line arrow. Determinism restricts down to some level that allows freedom within it based on ability or natural possibilities. God is sovereign to choose within a limited freedom with determinism on the outside of freedom, but a determinism within God's very nature. There is no (b) deterministic standard arising within God because that would not be a standard at all (see below under nature of the standard). Furthermore, it would not be personal or interpersonal. In Christianity we take it as given that God is a person, personal, interpersonal.

What is the purpose of the standard?

A standard is not a standard for its own sake. It is a standard relative to a purpose or consequence; it has a functional goal. The functional goal in the case of ethical standard is positive personal relationship, which leads to structuring and handling non-personal factors in human existence. So, there is more involved than idealism, rules and regulations disconnected from purpose. There is no perfectionism for its own sake or even to please an arbitrary Standard-Setter.

What is the nature of the standard?

It is an interpersonal standard rather than an impersonal one. So, it is not an abstract, metaphysical, or deterministic pattern. It would not be a standard at all if it were deterministic because it would be what it would be. We speak of standards only when something can operate in more than one way.

¹Another, better way of taking Jesus' statement invokes a distinction between what is actionable under human legal process and what has always been God's moral intention.