

Review of Thomas Nagel's book *Moral Feelings, Moral Reality, and Moral Progress*

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I didn't get much out of the first essay. I do like Nagel's way of framing deontological values:

The positive interpretation of deontological values is less transparent [than that of consequentialist values], but I believe we can give them a definite sense. When we think in this way about how to value others, it is their status as autonomous beings independent of us that is central, not their susceptibility to pleasure and pain, or other good or bad things that might happen to them. Deontological requirements govern our direct interaction with each other person; they determine how we may treat him rather than what we should want to happen to him. As with consequentialist values, this is an extension to everyone of a value whose importance we can recognize in our own case.

But I would point out that we don't seem to feel a need to respect most "autonomous beings". Plants, bacteria, and robots are in some sense autonomous beings, but most of us don't think this creates moral obligations not to interfere with them. What makes humans and (I hope you'll grant) animals different? I would argue the most important difference is "their susceptibility to pleasure and pain"—including the psychological pain an intelligent being is likely to experience when its autonomy is interfered with. Consequentialist values thus still seem, to me, more fundamental. (Or perhaps I only think that's the most important difference *because* I'm drawn to consequentialist values.)

The second essay is more interesting, but not more convincing. Although Nagel (like me) believes "moral propositions can be true or false independent of what we believe", he also argues that some moral propositions that were not true in the past can come to be true:

Sometimes moral progress will be presentable as the discovery of what was true all along; sometimes it won't. In the latter case, it will be because the recognizability of such truth (like the progress of scientific knowledge) is path-dependent: that a certain policy or practice would be an improvement may be understandable on reflection only by those who have already passed through certain prior stages of moral thought and practice.

If you don't believe in libertarian free will (I don't; I don't know whether Nagel does) then I don't know how (or why) you would distinguish between reasons that a person *could recognize* and reasons they *do recognize*. I'm also not clear on what the practical implications of Nagel's view would be, if any.