

## Moral Laws, Shame and Fear: A Dialectic

**John:** Hey! Mind if I join you?

**Ray:** Sure, go ahead. What did you order from the line?

**John:** Pizza. I think it's the only thing the cafeteria can't screw up!

**Ray:** Hmm, how about we say it's the one thing that is least affected by being screwed up?

**John:** Ha! I'll buy that!

**Ray:** How did your history paper go? The one you were working on last week when we walked to the gym?

**John:** It went well. It was a brief history about how the printing press led to public notices and periodicals that we now call "newspapers," and how they have shaped our world today.

**Ray:** That's interesting. How it work out?

**John:** Quite well, I think. Reporters find things that are wrong and are able to make it public knowledge. Many laws have come to exist because the general public was made aware of just how wretched some people's lives were. Safety laws are a good example of that. If a mine collapses and kills all the miners, the owner of the company used to just hire more men and not worry about changing anything else. News reports changed all that. Also, public notices praise people for doing good things, and shame those who do horrible things. As I was doing this paper, I kept thinking about our talks. I think this answers many of your concerns, and we don't need God anymore to be a moral exemplar!

**Ray:** Whoa, whoa, whoa! How did we get from trying to figure out for ourselves what is right and wrong and searching for the best moral exemplar to just accepting whatever paid entertainers and faceless politicians have to say?!?

**John:** "Paid entertainers and faceless politicians?"

**Ray:** Look, they both make a living by making the public happy, and we agreed earlier that sometimes doing the right thing means that others are not happy.

**John:** Yeah, but they are in positions of importance. They should realize the importance of doing things right.

**Ray:** I agree with your choice of "should;" I just don't have much faith that *they* agree with it. I am of the opinion that fear is what motivates most people's ethics.

**John:** Um, can you explain what you mean by "fear"?

**Ray:** Let me put it to you this way. You can expect a mafia hitman to stop at red lights, right?

**John:** Of course, he would be a fool to pull out in front of an oncoming truck!

**Ray:** Exactly. But he doesn't stop because sometimes he is a good person, he stops because of a rational fear. But when it comes to killing other people, he doesn't fear the consequences because he thinks he can get away with it.

**John:** Makes sense. I guess what we need to do is to ensure there are more consequences if we want a better world.

**Ray:** And how will you do that?

**John:** We can make more laws with stiffer penalties! Break the law, and you suffer the consequences.

**Ray:** Perhaps a few would do us good, but what about the laws we already have, yet get routinely violated? It seems to me that if we can't enforce the laws we already have, then creating more will only mean more laws that are not enforced. And the less people expect laws to be enforced, then the less likely they will obey them.

**John:** You have a point. So we first need more policemen and stricter judges.

**Ray:** I thought you told me earlier that one thing you learned in history class was how excessive the police states of the 20th century were?

**John:** I did! What they did to their people and other countries was horrible.

**Ray:** So, at what point do we stop hiring police and making extra laws before we, ourselves, have a police state?

**John:** Well, I don't know. But I'm sure someone does.

**Ray:** Come on, think about it. How many more security personnel do you want on this campus enforcing school policy? Remember last Saturday before the frat party? How all the guys were complaining about their parking tickets? I distinctly remember you saying, "Yeah, cops have too much power." Which side are you on?

**John:** Yeah, I guess you are right. But what if they, and other people, were controlled by public opinion?

**Ray:** How would that work?

**John:** The internet, mostly. It's already going on now anyway. When someone goes too far, it gets recorded and made public.

**Ray:** So, your solution is to publicly humiliate anyone who does anything wrong?

**John:** Sure. Let the public decide who is right and who is wrong.

**Ray:** How do you ensure the public gets all the relevant facts before they make their decision?

**John:** The internet is open to everyone. If you don't give a good defense, it's your fault.

**Ray:** Let's see ... who was it that tried to post a picture of the rock band he saw last summer on social media, only to have it removed because it violated the platform's anti-violence policy?

**John:** Not fair! The picture wasn't violent. It's not my fault the stupid program didn't know the difference between the neck of a guitar and the barrel of a gun!

**Ray:** Well, if you are publicly humiliated by someone who doesn't like you, and you are unable to make a rebuttal because the "stupid program" didn't know the difference between your explanation and "hate speech," then what will you do?

**John:** I'll contact the company, explain what is going on, and fix it.

**Ray:** Really, and how long will that take? Even if you are successful, you think anyone will really care about it by then?

**John:** <sigh> I guess you have a point.

**Ray:** And what about the bias of the company itself? What if their idea of morality is different than yours, and your point of view is contrary to theirs?

**John:** Well, there are several different platforms out there.

**Ray:** Not that many, and they all seem to take pride in outdoing what the others are doing. If one platform doesn't like what you said, the others are likely to like it even less.

**John:** But what about public opinion? These platforms are companies, and they need to give the public what it wants to stay in business.

**Ray:** Agreed, but what is it that the public wants? Do they want education or entertainment?

**John:** I would say both.

**Ray:** Really? Who won the 2023 Superbowl?

**John:** That's easy, the Chiefs!

**Ray:** Who represents you in the state House of Representatives?

**John:** ...

What's wrong with enjoying football, and who cares about the state House of Representatives?

**Ray:** Well, just a few minutes ago you were saying we need more laws to enforce good morality. It's not the Chiefs who are making laws for this state, you know!

**John:** Yeah, but we also agreed laws are not the way to go.

**Ray:** Only because I convinced you otherwise. Before you sat down to eat, you were perfectly willing to let people you know nothing about define the morality you will have to live with, and instead spent

about three hours of your life watching a single game. Do you really think people place education over entertainment, or even as equals?

**John:** No, I guess you are right. You're always right.

**Ray:** Well, let's not go that far. We actually have agreed on almost everything, at least big picture wise.

**John:** Yeah? Like what?!?

**Ray:** Well, we both agree that man has the capacity to know right from wrong, and, while some details are different, we also both agree that looking at each situation as a unique problem, that we can apply sound reasoning to arrive at consistent conclusions on what is right and wrong.

**John:** I never thought of it that way, but yeah, we did.

**Ray:** And we both agree that, no matter what moral code one uses, there exists the need for motivation.

**John:** True dat!

**Ray:** Finally, we both agree that we need some impartial person to arbitrate what is good and bad, because no single formula can cover every contingency.

**John:** Yeah, so what? Anyone who tries to do that is a tyrant, because no one is perfect.

**Ray:** Well, what if I told you there was a being that was unchanging, and therefore incorruptible? A being that saw all aspects of every situation, one that not only corrected problems, but attempted to improve the individual while he was at it? One who could judge perfectly. Would not this being be the answer to all the problems we've been discussing this year?

**John:** Yes, it would. But it sounds like wishful thinking to me!

**Ray:** Is it wishful thinking that man needs such a being for his sense of justice to be met?

**John:** No, recognizing that only such a being could ensure justice is not wishful thinking, but wanting justice done is.

**Ray:** Is it really wishful thinking, or is it part of our nature?

**John:** I would think it's obvious.

**Ray:** Doesn't sound too obvious to me. If it is merely wishful thinking, then why do skeptics act like good people?

**John:** Hey! Why can't skeptics act like good people?

**Ray:** I never said they couldn't; I asked why they would want to.

**John:** Maybe they just choose to do so.

**Ray:** You keep avoiding the question. Why? What's in it for them? As we've talked before, there is some "scratch my back and I'll scratch your back" that can account for some of the behavior, but that is only a small part of a bigger picture. For example, why would a skeptic give his life to save the life of a child he doesn't know? I know there are those that do that, but what is in it for them to do so?

**John:** I don't know, perhaps they felt death was preferable to being looked down upon by society?

**Ray:** I find that hard to believe, especially in today's world where all one has to do is move to a new location where no one knows about your past.

**John:** Ray, not everyone wants to just pick up and move every time something is inconvenient!

**Ray:** I'm not talking about just any inconvenience, I'm talking about something so bad you would literally rather die. You just said that suicide is preferable to this shame.

**John:** I think you're being a bit hypocritical here. What about the Inquisition, the Crusades, the pedophile scandals, and all the other horrible things Christians have done throughout the years?

**Ray:** They were horrible things to do, no argument from me!

**John:** Then how can you support such a terrible institution?

**Ray:** Ah, *that's* the rub! When these Christians did such horrible things, were they being faithful to what their religion teaches, or were they acting against the teachings?

**John:** I don't know, there are some Christian churches out there that preach hate.

**Ray:** What do you mean by "some?"

**John:** What does it matter? I've been specifically told about two churches in this state that promote hatred. Wouldn't surprise me if there are more.

**Ray:** Are they denominational, or independent?

**John:** I don't know. Independent, I suppose. I don't recall them being identified as Baptist, Presbyterian, Evangelical, Lutheran or anything like that.

**Ray:** How big were the congregations at these churches.

**John:** I don't know!

**Ray:** Would you guess we are talking dozens of people, hundreds, thousands?

**John:** Well, I doubt there were more than a couple hundred each, they were small town churches.

**Ray:** How many Christians do you think are in the state?

**John:** Again, I don't know.

**Ray:** Would you say the percentage of people in this state that are Christian is something like 10%, 20%, half, or more?

**John:** I would think maybe something like 2/3 of the people in this state call themselves Christian.

**Ray:** Fair enough. So, that means there are several millions of Christians in this state, right?

**John:** Yeah, makes sense.

**Ray:** So, there are millions of Christians in this state, and maybe only half of a thousand of them are preaching hate. Is that a fair summary of what you are saying?

**John:** Well, that certainly seems reasonable to me.

**Ray:** Well, you realize that you are saying that less than 1% of 1% of Christians belong to hateful congregations?

**John:** Well, I never did the math before, but you are right. But what does that mean?

**Ray:** Well, why do you think this ridiculously small number of "Christians" is representative of the Christian faith?

**John:** Well, they are the ones making the news. How am I supposed to know what the others think?

**Ray:** Ha!

**John:** Why you laughing?

**Ray:** Because of the absurdity! Remember my Chiefs example just a few minutes ago?

**John:** ...

**Ray:** Come on bro! I ain't mad at you. And you certainly are not alone in thinking that way.

**John:** Well, what am I supposed to think about Christianity then?

**Ray:** Why don't you ask Christians instead of trusting the media?

**John:** What is Christianity for you?

**Ray:** Well, the short answer is this: man was selected by God for greatness, but man chose to screw things up just because he could.

**John:** Frat life if proof of that!

**Ray:** Ha! Anyway, once man made that decision, there was no way for him to reclaim his birthright. But what man couldn't do, God chose to do for him. Christianity is about man's fall from grace, and

God's willingness to bring man back up.

**John:** Man certainly is horrible; our talks proved that much. But how can Christianity be so simple?

**Ray:** Well, there is obviously much more to this. I only summarized what it is about, and there are many details that need to be flushed out. But while different churches have many different ideas on what the details are, I would bet that more than 99% of Christian churches would agree with the explanation I just gave. Even the "hate churches" probably would agree, although they obviously miss the point of what regaining grace means for them.

**John:** I've been an atheist too long. God probably doesn't care for me anymore.

**Ray:** Didn't you hear what I just said? God is willing to bring *everyone* back up. You are certainly no exception.

**John:** You really think so?

**Ray:** I know so.

**John:** I don't know. It's awful scary. I have many friends who don't want to be preached at, I don't want to lose them. I know there are other things in my life I would have to give up if God really existed. I wouldn't be able to trust anything I've held as true my whole life. I'd have to re-examine everything I've ever done. As far back as I can remember! Nothing will ever be the same again.

**Ray:** Yes, you are absolutely right.

**John:** So you see, that would make me a terrible Christian!

**Ray:** Actually, I think you already have a better appreciation of Christianity than those born into it. You already began taking stock of what it would mean to you; they tend to take too much for granted. You are entering it with open eyes; they are often blind to it. Sadly, your conversion means that you will probably be alienated somewhat from those who never converted. Not necessarily cut off altogether, but even those who still like you will see a strangeness grow, and not understand why.

**John:** Ha! So, you are saying that, if I come to believe in God, He will punish my atheism by having me suffer what I've done to you and other Christians?

**Ray:** Not sure I would have put it that way, but there is some truth to what you are saying.

**John:** Oh!?! How would you put it?

**Ray:** I would say that it is not God punishing you for joining Him, but rather the devil punishing you for turning on him. But if God really does exist, and if Christianity and all its promises are true, then isn't it a small price to pay?

**John:** Why do I have to pay any price at all? If God is so loving, why do I have to suffer to believe in Him?

**Ray:** Do you like to take exams?

**John:** No, preparing for them is time consuming and they keep me from doing things I want to do.

**Ray:** Are the professors bad for making you take tests?

**John:** I wouldn't call them bad for making me take tests. I'm paying them to teach me, and exams show me how well they are teaching me.

**Ray:** Well, if the suffering of having to study for an exam is a legitimate price to pay for you to become educated, then is any suffering on this Earth too great a price for Heaven?

**John:** Not if God is real. *And* if He keeps His promise!

**Ray:** "If God is real?" What have your own conclusions from our discussion say about God's existence? Is what's holding you back really about what you believe to be true, or your fears?

**John:** ...  
Fear, I guess.

**Ray:** You guess?

**John:** No, I know it's true. Where do I go now?

**Ray:** Come with me to the Newman Center. There's some stuff there I can give you to help you get started, as well others you can talk to. Including many who have converted. They know what you are going through, because they went through it themselves.

**John:** Can I still come to you?

**Ray:** Of course you can, bro! You're not getting rid of me that easily!

**John:** Okay, donuts will be a great dessert after pizza anyway.

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