

Can We Restore Dignity to Our Degraded Times?

The message is loud and clear. Your actions have no more significance than those of a cockroach. Furthermore, like a cockroach, you are in no position to make moral choices of your own free will. When you commit some hideous brutality, it is not that you decided to do so. No, on the contrary, external circumstances made you do it. Once that message is fully absorbed by potential criminals as well as by their judges and juries, civility and safety will be doomed.

Rabbi Daniel Lapin wrote these words more than twenty years ago as part of a withering critique of the “secular faith” that is modern Darwinism. His concern was not with the intricacies of biological science, but with the theology of scientism. The “scientists” who push evolutionary biology as the answer to all questions of human nature, theology, and ethics are aiming toward only one conclusion: “modern science directly implies that free will, as it is traditionally conceived, simply does not exist.” And if free will does not exist, we all are like cockroaches, only less enduring as a species, hence, arguably at least, less important.

People of faith find such comparisons degrading and even frightening. If we are like cockroaches, then on what basis would we be valued more than cockroaches? What is to stop others from treating us like mere bundles of flesh and biological drives, to be manipulated, used, and eliminated as dictated by the needs and desires of those who hold power? But it is important to note that many people find great freedom in such degradation. Am I a liar, a cheat, or even a murderer? So be it, that is simply “the way I am made” or “the system’s fault,” so I might as well enjoy the ride that is this life. Less outrageously, do I desire multiple sex partners,

chemically-induced pleasures, or material goods I can obtain only through sharp tactics and selfish manipulation? Do I lack empathy for others, even desiring to cause them emotional harm for my own pleasure? Again, there is no need for guilt, only caution so that I can achieve my goals without undue trouble or punishments. As to morality, so long as I recognize that my species is relatively unimportant, and seek to lessen its influence on the planet (as through, say greenhouse gas emissions) I am acting in a biologically moral fashion. As to morality in dealings with other people, I may, in public at least, seek to promote principles of equality and "tolerance" in the sense of ignoring bad conduct that does not cause obvious social harm to show that I recognize our common cockroach-ness. In so doing I show my species-humility even as I assert my individual superiority, all the while exercising my ingrained, biological will-to-power.

It is interesting, given the degrading terms of today's political debates, that Rabbi Lapin used as the prime example of scientific hubris a popular magazine's announcement that infidelity is genetic. Rabbi Lapin responded, "Of course it is; it mostly lures men, doesn't it? The only question is whether we should build our social and moral rules upon that observation of nature, or not. Religious Jews and Christians would say that since it violates our spiritual schematic, infidelity should be avoided. Scientific naturalists say that anything natural is normal."

The very notion of infidelity as a wrong seems outdated today. Presidential candidates of both parties dismiss the thing-in-itself as meaningless or, at most, a private concern. Its only relevance, for the political classes, seems to be related to its implications, in specific cases, to one's "attitude toward women." And even here outrage seems more a matter of political calculation than moral sense. People have natural drives, so they must act on them. The only question is how best we can manipulate the public's perception of the circumstances of our

opponent's activities. Moral outrage, being the product of mere conditioning, on this view, should be used, especially against those people of faith who retain the capacity to disapprove the thing-in-itself. Moral outrage is for liars and for suckers.

What, then, is the alternative? To state that "infidelity should be avoided" today is taken to mean that one wants the government to track down adulterers and punish them. This is, after all, the same logic underlying the hateful falsehood that those who oppose abortion want to punish mothers who seek abortions, when the record clearly shows that the goal is to prevent medical professionals from taking the lives of unborn children. Free will now being denied, the possibility of moral suasion and the role of public norms in guiding conduct are perceived as massive frauds, leaving only discipline and punishment as the means of upholding morals.

Thus, for all too many people today, we should simply ignore the "private" conduct of public figures. No one can do otherwise than they do, lacking free will, so we should simply choose to be ruled by the candidate who promises the greatest benefits for us. As Rabbi Lapin pointed out, such thinking has come to pervade our public morals and even our views of criminal justice. It has led to a breakdown of civility and safety as we have lost our capacity to communicate standards of behavior, let alone enforce them in a manner conducive to peaceful interaction.

Infidelity is not, of course, murder. Especially today, the first is seen as causing harm primarily in the form of emotional distress to those with whom one is engaged in intimate relationships. The second brings death as it undermines public safety. Hence one might defend state action punishing the latter while dismissing the former as a "private matter." But the question remains whether infidelity is truly a purely "private" transgression—or indeed a transgression at all. All too many in positions of power believe that their

spouses should “know” (sadly, some do “know”) that part of the price they pay for their relationship with a powerful person is the surrender of marital exclusivity. Thus, many Europeans laugh at Americans for our formerly strong aversion to having open adulterers in high office. But the point is not one merely of punishment or of tender feelings; it concerns the maintenance of public standards.

Acceptance of infidelity is part of the breakdown of the marital bond, already more advanced in Europe than here, though America is catching up rather quickly. The question of whether lewd conversations and predatory attitudes—let alone sexual assault and attempts to demonize the victims of one’s spouse—should be condoned seems far afield from the proper focus of political debate. Yet this is where we are. It seems clear to me that both presidential candidates have committed grave wrongs in their treatment of women. In a better year, we might treat them both as disqualified from office on account of this conduct. This is not that better year. This is the year in which Americans as a nation decide whether to continue down a road we know leads to our entry into third-world cultural disintegration, or to attempt a pivot to cultural sanity. We must take our candidates as we find them, recognize that politics is the art of the possible, and support the candidate who will, overall, best serve the common good of the United States.

Longer term, we who retain our faith and who, recognizing our own sinfulness, seek to rebuild public norms in keeping with man’s higher nature, have much work to do. Human nature since the fall always has been flawed, so perfection is too much to ask. But perhaps this terrible election year can help us re-evaluate the consequences of our acting as if moral standards do not matter, or that we are not, by nature, capable of recognizing them and even seeking to live by them.

Books on the topic of this essay may be found in The Imaginative Conservative [Bookstore](#).

Rabbi Daniel Lapin, "Darwinism is Dead," *Crisis*, November 1, 1995.

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