

AT THE BACK TABLE

or

THE WOLF AND THE LAMB

A Dramatic Philosophical Dialogue

by

Frank Paine

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Setting

A “house of ill repute”. The walls are whitewashed, not very clean, and are decorated with cheap pictures of nude women. In the rear left-hand corner is a door to the “house”. On the right-hand sign of the room is a wooden bar. There is a juke box across the room from the bar, which plays cheap popular music. The room is filled mostly with cheap wooden tables and chairs. All the tables are occupied, some with men alone, and some with men and their paid “company”. The rest of the room is an open space used for dancing to the juke box music. The lighting is dim, and the room is filled with cigarette smoke. It is about 6:00 P.M.

The Characters

There is a table in the right-hand rear corner of the room, with one person seated at it. He is short (say 5'6" tall) and heavy, and has red hair and face (florid), as if from drinking. He has signs of wrinkles in his face, but he can't be more than 35 years old. He is dressed in a white shirt with the cuffs unbuttoned, which is wrinkled but clean; and dark blue woolen slacks. A black overcoat hangs on the back of his chair. In front of him is a bottle of red wine, of which he has already consumed about a third. His head is down, with his eyes staring at the top of the table.

Behind the bar is the barkeep. He is an unpleasant looking fat man, with scraggly, oily gray hair, and is dressed in a dirty white T-shirt, a dirty white apron, and dark slacks. One imagines that his body odor is impossible to avoid. He is busy wiping the bar. Behind the bar are shelves containing glasses and miscellaneous bottles of liquor and wine. Above the shelves is a cracked, dirty mirror in which his behind and back can be seen. There is a sink, and a small refrigerator in front of him. He wears a nametag which just says “Joe”, and to the left of the barkeep as you face him is a sign that says “Joe's Bar”. The entrance to the bar is to the barkeep's left.

A man enters through the entrance. He is tall (slightly over 6'0") and thin. He is dressed in a brown business suit and tie, and he is wearing brown shoes that have been polished recently. He has a brown overcoat. He is in his mid-thirties, and his face is thin, ascetic perhaps, and his hair is also brown. In his right hand is a brown umbrella, which he shakes, as it is apparently raining outside. He isn't wearing a hat.

This man (Wolf) approaches the bar, and says to the barkeep (Joe):

Wolf: A bottle of bourbon please, Joe, and a glass.

Joe turns his back, takes down an appropriate bottle, and puts it on the bar. Then he places a glass next to it.

Joe: Pay now.

Wolf: Can't I run a tab? Always have before.

Joe: New policy. Pay now.

Wolf: How much?

Joe: "\$25.00."

Wolf: Phew! OK. **[He opens his billfold, and hands Joe \$30.]** Keep the change.

Joe: Thanks. **[He continues to wipe the bar.]**

Wolf takes the bottle and glass, and surveys the room, looking for a free table. [Then he turns back to Joe, and says]: Oh, I want a girl at 9:00 P.M.

[He spots the man (Lamb) in the right corner, and walks over to him.]

Wolf: Mind if I join you? I'm David Wolf.

Lamb: Why not? You're absolutely free. Oh, I'm Henry Lamb.

[Wolf sits down]

Wolf: No, we're not absolutely free.

Lamb: What do you mean? You can either do something or not do it, just as you please.

Wolf: No! We've got to obey the Law, haven't we? At least if we don't want to get into trouble. I don't particularly relish having the Lord on my back.

Lamb: What Law?

[As this dialogue continues, the two men periodically, with no particular timing, refill their glasses, and drink what is in them]

Wolf: The Law of Moses, of course.

Lamb: Oh, that! I read it once. But, man, don't you see that we're so free that we're sick of our own freedom? In fact, we're so sick of our own freedom that we've created a God and Law to be our masters; we need a master because we need to escape the judgement of all other men; because we are the first to condemn ourselves, and we need to spread our own condemnation to all men.

Wolf: But God exists! "I am that I am", he said to Moses. He created the universe, and it is He that will redeem us from our sins, through the Messiah. He was the beginning, and He will be the end.

Lamb: But can't you see that there is no absolution or blessing! Everything is simply added up by the men of the world, and it comes out something like, "You are a drunk, a homosexual, and a liar." Just like that. There is no such thing as innocence or absolution, because every man is guilty. The only solution to this guilt is slavery. You and your people are all so guilty that you need a God breathing down your neck so that you think you're not free. The freedom has made you guilty.

Wolf: But it was God that created Man and the Universe! God was the beginning and God will be the end. Isaiah "saw" Him, and He "spoke" to Moses and Job. Judgement of the wicked is by God in another world, and he cannot be unjust because he is omnipotent.

[As Wolf said these lines, his agony shows through, and one can see the beginning of tears coming into his eyes, and running down his face]

Lamb: No! Every man is judged by other men, right here on earth. Come down to earth, Man. God is only omnipotent because you have made him so. Even that would not make him just, because the quality of omnipotence implies that even an act considered morally wrong by the world, if it is done by God, must be morally right, because He “can do no wrong.” In other words, the bad things in the universe must be attributed to God, as well as the good things. The very fact that you assign him the quality of moral righteousness, the moral righteousness approved by the world, i.e. men, proves that He is a figment of your imagination; for if he were truly omnipotent, all acts, right or wrong, would have to be attributed to Him. And how much relief from guilt can this God give you? None!

[As Lamb speaks these lines, he becomes progressively more vehement—he is also feeling anguish. And as the men progress in their argument, and consume glass after glass of alcoholic beverage, their voices reflect the effect of alcohol—basically, more and more slurring of words.]

Wolf: But these men actually spoke to God!

Lamb: Who says? How do you know?

Wolf: It’s written in the scriptures.

Lamb: Who wrote the scriptures? Men! Men who were who were trying to find some master to enslave them, and who were trying to find some relief from their freedom-guilt and the judgement of men.

[Lamb begins to sound desperate, even to the point of also tearing up]

Wolf: But they actually talked or communicated with God! You can’t get around that.

Lamb: **[slightly calmer]** Well, remember that these men were also artists. They would put that in because, first, they actually believed it, and second, it made the whole business more plausible; that is, it made it a more unified work of art. It’s very easy to say, “These commandments came from God,” or “so sayeth the Lord.”

Wolf: But you can't get around the fact that the men were writing for a religious purpose! **[Now he sounds desperate]**

Lamb: Of course they were! That's exactly what I am saying. They were trying to enslave themselves, and they were trying to free themselves from freedom-guilt and from the judgement of other men. They were free, and had to shift for themselves; and since they didn't want freedom or its judgements, they asked to be watched over by God. Those men invented some laws, hence the Law. But they actually believed, all the while, in sin, never in grace. Grace is what religious people want, but it is grace in sin. You want relief from your freedom-guilt, and He can't give it. There's too much contradiction in the world. There is suffering and injustice everywhere, and it all has to be attributed to God. What use is He?

[Lamb is progressively more vehement here. Both men are in tears off and on for the rest of the dialogue]

Wolf: The Messiah will come and save us!

Lamb: You are already judged by your fellow men. You can't seem to get that through your head, can you? And you'd really like to be saved, wouldn't you? But, man, there is no absolution, or remission of your sins. The world is very matter-of-fact, isn't it? And the men in it judge and do not absolve.

Wolf: But the universe and Man were created by God; and Man was to have dominion over all the earth. But man fell when he ate the fruit of the tree of good and evil; and in time, maybe not too long now, the Messiah will redeem us. That is the test of our purpose on earth, to choose between good and evil; and eventually we will all be judged. That's what Man is, a creature who must choose whether or not to obey the Law, and who must be judged as to whether or not he has obeyed the Law.

Lamb: I agree that Man is born to be judged, but not by your infernal Messiah. Man is to be judged, but he is also to be a judge. That's all men do, really, judge and be judged, but by their fellow men. And if you want to know, it's a joke to judge, because we're all guilty. No man is innocent, so no man can judge his fellow man from the standpoint of righteousness. **[now angry]** And if you believing people aren't righteous, I'd like to know where the Hell your doctrine of righteousness comes from! "Brotherhood of Man!" What a joke!

Judge and be judged! You can't possibly condemn somebody without immediately condemning yourself. **[Lamb pours a drink for both of them.]**

Wolf: Look, Lamb, are you getting wise?

Lamb: I don't like righteousness!

Wolf: You want to step out...**[Rises, and takes a hurried swallow of his drink]**

Lamb: Hey! Cut it out!

Wolf: Well—you're the one who was getting so hot over it!

Lamb: Judging again!

Wolf: **[Sits down again, and after a moment:]** Sorry I got mad. **[Lamb remains silent]** How about you, though? Don't you actually have some sort of belief, even though you profess not to?

Lamb: What do you mean?

Wolf: Don't you really believe in disbelief?

Lamb: Yes. I believe in disbelief.

Wolf: Then how do you guide your life?

Lamb: Well...I'm really what you'd call an existential atheist. I don't believe in God because He is completely irrelevant to the world situation. But, I actually do follow a policy, for my own comfort.

Wolf: What is that policy?

[Both men have calmed down quite a lot at this point, following the text]

Lamb: We all love ourselves, and use other people for our own comfort and benefit. I follow that policy, but in a slightly different way from most people. I do what I like, and once in a while I confess my "sins" to somebody, and make myself righteous so that I can be a judge. And I feel more comfortable

because I enjoy my nature and the repentance itself. It makes me feel like a god, and I absolve nobody. It's not perfect, but it helps; it's about all I can do to escape this world of suffering, injustice, guilt, and judgement. Actually, it works like a charm!

Wolf: **[Horried]** But that's selfish!

Lamb: Aren't we all?

Wolf: **[In tears]** But it goes against the Law!

Lamb: **[Angry]** Didn't I just finish telling you that I don't believe in the Law?

Wolf: **[With tears flowing]** I just cannot understand how you cannot believe in the Law!

Lamb: **[Sarcastically and bitterly]** It's surprisingly easy!_Man, can't you realize that this Law is an invention of your own, something that you only pretend to obey, and that it is only an attempt to create an artificial slavery for yourself? **[And his tears flow]**

Wolf: I guess it's just one of those things I can't conceive of. It just doesn't make any sense! The Scriptures are the Word!

Lamb: But for God's sake, they're not the Word! As the Word, they're just a figment of your imagination! I just can't conceive of such a blind belief!

Epilogue

The posture of both men has been gradually relaxing, and by this point, they have both slumped forward onto the table, drunk, muttering "Can't conceive! Can't conceive!" Both finally become silent. It is 9:00 P.M. (perhaps there is a clock on the wall), and two girls, with whom they both apparently have appointments, enter from the "house", and come to their table. They find the two men asleep, possibly snoring, with their right hands interlocked as if they were shaking hands.

THE END