

Dr. Laura

Ruminations from a Listener *

Laurence Thomas
Syracuse University

It was in the fall of 1996 that I came across a riveting conversation on the radio between a caller and a talk show host. I was impressed by what struck me as an extremely powerful moral voice. I tuned in the next day, and the next day, and the next. I became a regular and quite appreciative listener of the Dr. Laura Program. Did I always agree with Dr. Laura Schlessinger? No. But what human being always agrees with another human being? Why I even disagree with myself over time. But did I sense her to be a person deeply committed to a high standard of moral right and wrong? Absolutely.

**Since 1996, Laura Schlessinger has evolved enormously yet again. A most notable aspect of her evolution this time is that she no longer identifies herself with the rituals of Judaism—a decision that she announced on her radio program in the summer of 2003. That, however, is not the only way in which she has evolved. It is also the case that she concerns herself much less with

political issues these days, preferring to focus her attention, instead, primarily upon moral issues—especially moral issues as they pertain to the family. Her commitment to the well-being of children continues to be a fundamental aspect of her thinking.

Thus, Laura Schlessinger continues to take herself to be on a moral mission, although she rarely references God these days. Certainly, she does not reference biblical authority as she once did.¹ At any rate, DR. LAURA has been ridiculed for having such a view of herself. However, my reaction to her being on a moral mission can be aptly

*Revised: April 2004

** There are embedded PDF files in this document. Wherever a paper clip symbol appears, clicking on it will produce the PDF version of the homepage of the website under discussion. I have done this for the sake of veracity. These PDF pages were all created on 4 April 2004. Typically, the most recent version of the Adobe reader will be necessary in order to read the embedded PDF files. A free copy is available from the Adobe website.

¹ She once held that all moral authority is tied to biblical authority. It is not obvious that she has actually abandoned this view, though undoubtedly she needs to re-formulate it.

summed up in one word: *Awesome* ! In a culture that seems to be deadening our moral sensibilities at every turn, a commitment to rejuvenating them strikes me as most admirable. Merely the reminder that morals matter, and that this stance is not something about which one should be ashamed, strikes me as a remarkably wholesome project, and a much needed counterbalance.

Another aspect of DR. LAURA's recent evolution centers around her new book *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* (2004). Some people think that this book is a call for every wife to be subservient to her husband. Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, the book reflects the very deep disaffection that DR. LAURA has with feminism, which is that feminism is an ideology that trivializes important and fundamental difference between women and men. Crucial to DR. LAURA'S thought, about which I shall a little more later, is the view that fundamental differences between women and men are quite compatible with fundamental equality between women and men; and she is absolutely in favor of equality between the two. She does not belittle the role of the housewife and stay-at-home mother. Quite the contrary, she thinks that they are two of most exalted roles that a woman can have. What could possibly be more important than

caring and nurturing the life that a man and a woman conceived together?

DR. LAURA is very pained by the fact that we live in a society that glamorizes just about anything that a woman might do—including becoming a slut—except devote herself to caring for the children that she and her husband conceived together *and* caring for the man with whom she conceived them, as he cares for her—albeit in a different way. And she thinks that certainly in the early years of a child's development women *qua* mothers are more suited to care for children than men *qua* fathers. Although DR. LAURA has an ole-fashioned view about mothering and fathering, she does not, in fact, have an ole-fashioned view about women and men. For instance, she does not think that women cannot be good at mathematics or physics and that men cannot be good at the culinary arts. She is, in fact, all for mothers having stay-at-home businesses. In the language of the philosopher, then, it might be said that DR. LAURA holds an ole-fashioned view of the role of women and men in the home without embracing any of the deplorable views regarding the intellectual abilities of women and men vis à vis one another.

Two of the essential points of the book are as follows: (a) good sex

is essential to any marriage and (b) women and men experience sexuality differently, and that women need to understand this. In one sense, what DR. LAURA is saying here is hardly new; for all sorts of people joke about the way in which women and men differ in their attitudes towards sex. Here is a line from Jerry Seinfeld:

To men, sex is an emergency, and no matter what we're doing we can be ready in two minutes. Women, on the other hand, are like fire. They're very exciting, but the conditions have to be exactly right for it to occur.

Yet, some people react with such hostility towards DR. LAURA'S views here that one would think that she had said something quite different than what Seinfeld said. I do not know a sexually aware human being alive who does not appreciate the humor of Seinfeld's analogy precisely because it speaks to a truth about matters.

Specifically, DR. LAURA thinks that in the marital situation, women and men differ in how they feel appreciated. For a woman, flowers and chocolates from her man will do just nicely as a gesture of appreciation; whereas for a man, good sex from his woman carries the day just about any day. So a crass version of DR. LAURA'S view might be put as follows: "If a wife wants more flowers and chocolates, then all she has to do is give her husband more sex". The

point that I have put ever so crassly admits of considerable refinement.

No one thinks that two close friends must give one another the exact same gifts. Why that would be utterly foolish. Instead, a gift is suitable to the needs and interests of the friend for whom it is intended. The essence, then, of DR. LAURA'S point is that a wife and husband should treat one another like good friends rather than as if they were law-firm partners. She holds that when a woman makes a man feel like he is the most important thing in the world to her, then he will return the compliment many times over.

Now, DR. LAURA makes the claim that women have all the power. This might seem to be overkill. But if one accepts the view that good sex is essential to marriage, then her point has more validity than one might be initially inclined to suppose. This is because non-consensual sex is by definition rape. Accordingly, given the assumption that men are ready for sex at any time (as Seinfeld reminds us), then it turns out to be true that it is the woman who controls whether consensual sex actually occurs or not. No amount of political posturing will change this reality.

As I have said, DR. LAURA takes herself to be on a moral mission. She thinks that a wife and a husband constitute the proper familial context

for bringing children into this world and raising them. Thus, one of her primary concerns is to speak to maintaining a loving and, therefore, a strong marriage; hence, she wrote *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands*. The book is replete with letters from husbands, many of which are very movingly written, desperate for affection from their wives. And since the book's publication, DR. LAURA has read numerous letters of this kind on the air. At least this was the case initially. Of late, she has been reading letters from women extolling the virtues of the book. Some of these women have pointed out that while the house is perhaps a little less tidy, everyone is happier. Why? Because when husband and wife are happier, the children are happier in turn.

It is perhaps fitting to conclude this discussion of the book with a few lines from one of the letters:

from Bill

I would walk through fire for my wife. I FEEL that she loves me. More than anything, I want to make her happy because of all the love and caring and feeling she gives to me. I give back to her from the bottom of my heart, and it is the best feeling I've ever had in my life

. . . For me it is to FEEL in my heart that someone truly cares for me and loves me; that I am immensely important to her. I can only get this

through my wife's actions. Words are a whisper, but what she does for me is thunder. (p. 90, capitals in the original)

In many ways, DR. LAURA is a very pragmatic individual. Theory is good, but for her the bottom line is whether or not a given course of action actually has better or worse consequences. Having acknowledged that she was a former feminist, it would seem that part of what got her to her present position is the poignant reality that, since the rise of feminism, women are not obviously happier and children are certainly not better off.

~ ~ ~

At this point in time, it would seem that DR. LAURA'S general public reputation remains somewhat tainted by one thing in particular, namely the stance that she took in the late 90s regarding gays. Below, I discuss other criticisms of her. This one, though, seems especially virulent. Although I shall not try to defend DR. LAURA here, since I actually did not share her views regarding the matter, it does seem to me that she was in many ways her own worse enemy; for many of her concerns could have been formulated more generally and thus without reference to gays.

DR. LAURA holds a very conservative view regarding expressions of sexuality in public. By contrast, she has said ne'er a word about how people should engage in the sex act. DR. LAURA thinks that the topic of sex does *not* belong in the

classroom generally, be it about gay sex or straight sex. Moreover, she thinks that the American society has become more than a little oversexualized. And here, too, it does not matter whether we are talking about gays or straights. On the other hand, and at a very practical level, she was probably less concerned with what gays did in private than one would have supposed. Why? Because children are never the unintended consequence of sex between two females or two males.

To be sure, DR. LAURA frequently invoked the Old Testament passage regarding homosexuality being an abomination. However, she did not need this passage to press her general concerns. Nor did she need to suggest that homosexuality constitutes a biological abnormality,²

² I believe that it was the suggestion of biological abnormality that truly raised the ire of many. For the claim that homosexuality is a sin was obviously not new. However, sinful behavior has never been thought to entail that the sinner is thereby biologically abnormal (i.e., prone to a kind of malfunction). Although there can be a non-pejorative use of the word 'abnormal' (e.g, having six fingers or a cleft palate is abnormal), this seems not to be the case when the term is applied to an entire group. Thus, Laura Schlessinger's charge of abnormality made it very easy for gay rights activists to gain the sympathy and support of those who would have otherwise not aligned themselves with gays. Calling homosexuals sinners does not allow for an allusion to the wrongful behavior of the Nazis, whereas calling homosexuals biologically abnormal does.

since she was primarily concerned with public displays of sexuality, be they straight or gay, and *not* the origin of a person's sexual orientation. And as I have already indicated, from a practical point of view gay sex in private no more concerns her than heterosexual non-married sex between a woman and a man both of whom are 90 years old, since in either case children are out of the question.

DR. LAURA often commented on her radio program that she has friends who are gay—indeed, friends whom she sometimes invited over for Shabbat dinner. Not only that, DR. LAURA admires Tammy Bruce, a noted author who is openly gay.³ So the truth of the matter is that DR. LAURA did not have anything like the kind of visceral hostility towards gays that many of her actual remarks, I am sorely afraid, inclined people to think that she had. So while with her words she seemed to have aligned herself with a kind of vicious hostility towards gays that is characteristic of a certain kind of religious fundamentalism, she was never like that in practice. It is

Accordingly, Schlessinger unwittingly alienated herself (even to her own surprise, I suspect) from many Orthodox Jews.

Hitler, of course, generally thought that abnormality of any kind pretty much warranted death, an idea that decent people find repulsive. Needless to say, Schlessinger never even came close to suggesting that homosexuals should be killed.

³ *The New Thought Police* (2001) and *The Death of Right and Wrong* (2003).

next to impossible to imagine Christian fundamentalists freely interacting with gays unless they (the fundamentalists) are trying to convert them (the gays). This, though, was never DR. LAURA's *modus operandi*. I cannot imagine her trying to convert Tammy Bruce; and it would be really inappropriate to have someone over for Shabbat dinner with that goal in mind.

Fortunately, DR. LAURA has long since refrained from making any pronouncements on her radio program regarding homosexuality. Unfortunately, she has been inextricably linked with that ferocious moment. Indeed, as of 4 April 2004 (some three years after the controversy ended), the website

www.StopDrLaura.com

comes up 5th for a simple Google search under the name "Laura Schlessinger". Although the actual campaign against DR. LAURA has ended, those who launched the campaign are quite pleased by its success.

~ ~ ~

People often claim that DR. LAURA is hard-hitting and abrasive. This strikes me as misguided. One can be that way simply because one likes treating others viciously and condescendingly. Or, one can be that way in order to *jar* people into thinking correctly—the moral jarring approach. This is DR. LAURA's approach. She calls it nagging.

Someone else could have a different approach. Nonetheless, DR. LAURA is quite good at moral jarring. In fact, she is extraordinary when one considers the constraints under which the conversation is taking place. In 5 to 10 minutes, I have heard her do incredible good. Later on, I shall offer a few examples.

So if people call the show for a good moral jarring, then how does it turn out that DR. LAURA is a moral monster for doing precisely what people of their own volition call to have done? This would require embracing the view that jarring must always be vicious and derisive and, therefore, that it can never be for the sake of the moral good. This is patently false. For the sake of the moral good, good parents jar their children from time to time, and so do friends. Every good instructor has jarred her or his students upon occasion. A good moral jarring has prevented many an egregious error. Of course, we all tend to think that our moral jarring is ever so appropriate, whereas the other person's moral jarring is most despicable.

In any case, what has to be borne in mind is the *point* of the show. The DR. LAURA Program is not, and does not pretend to be, private counseling (free or otherwise) via the radio. Accordingly, the program is not the occasion for self-ventilation, however valid and useful that may be. Those who want an opportunity for

that should go elsewhere. Rather, the program's aim is to illustrate and underscore the validity of a core set of moral principles. Thus, she wants to bring out the virtues of adhering to these principles and the pitfalls of not doing so. It is this aim that animates how she handles callers; and, in particular, the questions that she asks of them.

So, for example, when Alex called and asked for some advice on how to end what is supposed to be "just a friendship" that he has had with a woman, DR. LAURA abruptly interrupts at one point and asks Alex whether or not he has been having sex with the woman. One might think "What an irrelevant and unseemly question, what prurient curiosity, on DR. LAURA's part!" Not so, however. DR. LAURA draws attention to the reality that if Alex has been frequently having sex with the woman, as was in fact the case, then he himself had misdescribed the situation; hence, it is no accident that the woman thinks that she and he are more than "just friends". DR. LAURA holds that same gender friendships and male-female friendships are not quite the same and that (once again) women and men think differently about sex. The guys can make a point of hanging out together; the gals can make a point of hanging out together. But when a guy and a gal make a point of hanging out together and, furthermore, they throw sex into the mix, then they are no longer "just friends". Psychologically,

most women want there to be love with the sex act. Most men, on the other hand, are much more capable of separating the sex act from love.

No doubt this seems ole-fashion, and some would even say sexist.⁴ DR. LAURA, though, would simply insist that it is the reality, since women bear children. Hence, men and women are mistaken to think otherwise. A man mustn't think that he can turn the sex act into a mere physical transaction by saying "we are just being friends, aren't we?," because the typical women will hold out the hope for more than friendship. By contrast, women should not use sex as a "hook", as that is far more likely to be disasterous than not, because it is much more common for a man to want sex without having any interest at all in a romantic relationship. There is more than enough (ir)responsibility to go around. And everyone has to be honest about the reality of male-female interaction.

This brings me to DR. LAURA's "controversial" conception of the moral

⁴ And even if it is sexist, it might be the reality nonetheless. There is after all a time and a place to pursue change. It can be unreasonable to expect a person to change even if the person ought to do so. Thus, if Jones is known for his gossiping, then I ought not to confide in him. It would be foolish of me to do so on the grounds that he ought not to gossip. Or, if he is given to violence, then it would be foolish to be alone with him, though once more he ought not to be like that. See note 7 below.

self. What lies at the core of her thinking is very straightforward: (a) We must be individuals who are responsible for our own actions and (b) Our actions must not be guided by misplaced compassion.⁵ And at the concrete level, (c) Children are the first moral priority. So, to take an example, DR. LAURA certainly understands the sentiments that incline a 15 year-old to want to keep her newborn. All the same, DR. LAURA holds that the newborn is far better off being adopted. Needless to say, this is taking a hard line. But is it wrong? Not obviously. For the reality is that a lot of feelings and mushiness, however understandable these sentiments may be, do not make for being a good mother. Is it wrong to bring this reality home to a 15 year old who has just become a mother and who

⁵ A characteristic feature of misplaced compassion is that it ignores the bigger picture. Imagine two drivers, A and B. Driver A is in a car accident that was caused by an animal that ran in front of the car or a tree that fell in front of it; Driver B is in a car accident because he was driving drunk. Both drivers are hurt. However, we have a serious moral fault in the second instance and none in the first. Focusing upon Driver B's hurt and ignoring the fault yields misplaced compassion. To see this, imagine that both A and B hit a pedestrian. Both Driver A and the pedestrian merit compassion. With Driver B, though, surely only the pedestrian merits compassion. And if one thinks that I am mistaken here, just imagine that the pedestrian is one's child.

calls for moral advice about motherhood at 15 when the reality is that putting the newborn up for adoption (a highly responsible act) will result in an immeasurably better life for the newborn? I do not see how.

The 15 year old can do whatever she pleases when she hangs up; and if DR. LAURA jars the teenager into thinking beyond her feelings, this hardly makes DR. LAURA a moral monster. On the other hand, merely attaching weight to the teenager's feelings would be an instance of misplaced compassion, and would be decidedly unhelpful to both the teenager and the newborn.

Where, pray tell, is the viciousness? The condescension? The self-aggrandizement? Hard-hitting? Yes. But one can be hard-hitting without exhibiting any of the vices just mentioned. Is the recommended course of action, namely putting the newborn up for adoption, difficult to do? Does it require considerable resolve? No doubt about it. But in some instances, so does remaining faithful to one's spouse or not stealing or telling the truth. Parenting is extremely difficult on a number of fronts. But for DR. LAURA, difficulty alone is no excuse. And driving this point home to a caller is what makes DR. LAURA so objectionable in the eyes of many. Their criticism is without merit.

Here is another illustration, from a rather different direction, of DR.

LAURA's view regarding personal responsibility. In one instance, Gina calls to ask whether she should stay with her husband with whom she has 2 children and one on the way. It turns out at that prior to their marriage the man had lied about the fact that he already had 6 children with at least two different women. The question that DR. LAURA asked Gina is whether or not she had had any reason to doubt the general character of this man prior to their marriage. DR. LAURA's general point here is twofold. First of all, it is most unlikely that a man who has lied about having 6 children with at least 2 other women would have an otherwise flawless character. Second, and this gets to the heart of the matter, had Gina been responsible as supposed to simply enthralled with having found herself a man, then she would have noticed that something was deeply amiss with the character of the man she married.

In addition to subscribing to a strong sense of personal responsibility, DR. LAURA also subscribes to the principle acceptance. This principle applies to past circumstances in a way that is surfeited with nothing other than simple common sense.

Acceptance is not a form of complacency. Rather, it is about not trying to change that which it is not within one's powers to change. For instance, it is not within a person's powers to change another's personality or character traits.

Suppose that Rachel wants to marry Robert and discovers that he cannot make a decision without first consulting his mother, a fact about Robert which she does not like at all. Well, according to DR. LAURA, Rachel is faced with a choice that involves accepting him the way that he is. Rachel can either marry Robert and understand that their marital life will be an open book to his mother, or she can move on. What she should not do is marry Robert in the hopes that he will change or pretend that the trait is not really significant because, after all, she loves him so.

A more poignant example might be an adult child who has parents that were never really loving and caring. Understandably, the adult wishes that the parents were otherwise; and DR. LAURA is very, very clear that this is so. Nonetheless, she would insist that the adult must accept the reality that he is not going to have loving and caring parents. The idea here is that it is better for the adult to do this than to create further pain or even turmoil in his life by holding out the hope that the parents will change, and so constantly setting himself up to be disappointed.

Acceptance, then, is simply a form of realism about things over which we have no control. But make no mistake about it, she thinks that individuals have plenty of control with respect to their own behavior. So while Mary may have to accept the

fact that John smokes or consumes lots of alcohol or parties nightly, Mary does not—I repeat: does not—have to accept the fact that *she* does these things, if indeed she does.⁶

~ ~ ~

Now, having listened to the DR. LAURA Program regularly since 1996, I am generally stunned by many of the hostile reactions that she has elicited from her critics. There are roughly two broad categories. One is illustrated by Betty Bowers at

www.bettybowers.com/newsdrlaura.html who refers to DR. LAURA as a slut. The basis for this is that DR. LAURA has a sordid past. Let us assume that in years gone by DR. LAURA has done something of which she is mightily ashamed. Hmmm ! There cannot be more than 10 adult souls out of the 6 billion people on the face of this earth for whom this does not hold true. Let us further assume that events forced

⁶ A very important exception here is the category of child sexual offenders. DR. LAURA holds that such offenders never really put this defect of character behind them. Or, at any rate, she thinks that this is such a deep, deep defect of character that it would very unwise to trust children such a person. Though I do not know her argument for this, I share her sentiments. There is a warpedness of the soul here that does not come with lying or stealing or even fighting. For sex at its best is reciprocal; and an adult who engages in sexual behavior with a child cannot possibly suppose that there is reciprocity on the child's part.

DR. LAURA to acknowledge this past. Well, I do not know many people who introduce themselves by pointing to a past of which they are ashamed.

At any rate, the charge of a sordid past is used to insist that DR. LAURA is a hypocrite. The late George Wallace used to think of blacks as “niggers”. He evolved; and by the time of his death, he was deeply admired blacks. His moral evolution, far from making him a hypocrite, speaks to the depth of moral character he came to have. Perhaps he would not have changed had he not been rendered paralyzed by a gunshot. Be that as it may, he changed; and the change was in fact genuine. In this regard, the critics of DR. LAURA reveal either their own intellectual shallowness or the depth of their mean-spiritedness. By the way, DR. LAURA's earlier moral evolution had nothing whatsoever to do with her getting caught—a very important fact readily overlooked by those who call her a hypocrite; for she had changed long before she had been exposed, which underscores the genuineness of the change.

Now, surely everyone knows that a hypocrite is one who leads people to believe that she is presently adhering to a principle when in fact her present behavior is actually contrary to that principle. So it can only be mean-spiritedness, a kind of grasping at the straws of moral shortcomings, to call someone a

hypocrite if the person has radically changed her life and is actually living by the principles that she espouses. And it most certainly is a virtue—rather than a vice—to draw upon the mistakes of one’s past in order to help people, who ask for one’s opinion, avoid similar pitfalls in their lives. Moreover, in doing so one does not need to reveal the shortcomings of one’s past.

The charge of hypocrisy is also made with regard to DR. LAURA’s academic credentials as if she says the words “Ph.D in physiology” but hopes that her audience thinks that she is saying the word “psychology” or “psychotherapy” instead. It is so clear that this is not what is going on—because DR. LAURA is so straightforward about this—that I can only attribute sheer unbridled hostility to those who make the charge. Her website gives her credentials and, often enough, she speaks of how she handled things when she was in private practice, mentioning along the way the license in Marriage, Family, and Child Counseling that she holds. We are motivated to mislead people in the way that DR. LAURA is *accused* of doing only when we know that we come up short and we wish to hide this truth. But, alas, DR. LAURA simply does not have that worry; for she does not come up short.

Besides, no degree or license at all is needed in order to host a radio program that dispenses moral advice.

If tomorrow, Sam Donaldson wanted to start a radio show dispensing moral advice, he would be perfectly free to do so. And we should judge him by the quality of his answers. Moreover, if perchance he had a Ph.D, he would most certainly be entitled to refer to himself as Dr. Sam or Dr. Donaldson. Henry Kissinger, might I observe, is always referred to in an interview as Dr. Henry Kissinger.

What I find most striking, though, and this brings us to the second broad category of criticism, is the charge that DR. LAURA believes that wives should be docile and submissive to their husbands, even enduring abuse if that is what it takes to keep the family together. It is simply not possible to listen to what she actually says and come away thinking that she holds such a view. Indeed, she says nothing at all that even comes remotely close to resembling such a view. She thinks that (i) there are natural differences between women and men, that (ii) a stay-at-home parent is best for the child, and that (iii) during the first few years the stay-at-home parent should be the mother. But these three theses, taken separately or individually, do not in any way constitute a call for wives to be docile and submissive to their husbands.

What is more, it is just plain obvious that DR. LAURA delights in brilliance regardless of the gender form in which it appears. She would

never think to suggest that a woman should appear to be less brilliant for the sake of appeasing her man. Nor is this what she means when she speaks of a woman being womanly.

Laura Schlessinger holds that *mutual respect and trust* are the lynchpin of any marriage and that within that framework men must sometimes do manly things in order to keep the marriage exciting and women must sometimes do womanly things in order to keep the marriage exciting. She attaches such enormous importance to mutual respect and trust that she holds that a single instance of infidelity or physical abuse can be suitable grounds for divorce, be the victim of this infidelity or abuse the wife or the husband. She also understands that there are reasons why neither women (mostly) nor men may want to get a divorce owing to a single instance of spousal infidelity. As for physical abuse, she thinks that anyone who puts up with that is already a little sick.

In many ways, DR. LAURA is more of a feminist than the feminists. For she holds that an intelligent and self-respecting woman would not put up with half the nonsense from men that feminists seem to allow in the name of equality of gender roles. At the very least, DR. LAURA reminds women that lots of *men* will say just about anything it takes to get into bed with a woman, while never producing

any concrete signs of a commitment.⁷ Hence, a man's utterance of "I love you" followed by the act of sex should hardly be taken by a woman as a sign that he is ready to commit to her. And so it seems even with the assumption of equality of gender roles. If anything is true, it is true that DR. LAURA is a realist.

The feminists insist that women and men are equally desirous of sex. Most interestingly, DR. LAURA has never denied that. Quite the contrary, she has made it vividly clear on numerous occasions that from both the woman's and the man's point of view sex is a vital part of a marital relationship. But the thesis that women and men are equally desirous of sex does not entail that sex means the same thing for both women and men and, therefore, that their experience of it is exactly the same. She holds— please work with me here! —that women get pregnant whereas men do not; accordingly, there are deep reasons based in biological differences for why women and men do not experience sex in exactly the same way.⁸

⁷ This may be sexism on the part of such men; and one day, there may not be men like that. But for the moment, it would be quite foolish for any woman to ignore this reality in the name of some egalitarian ideal. See note 4 above.

⁸ Noted biologists have draw attention to the difference between women and men regarding the sexual experience. See, e.g., Robert L.

Surprisingly, some regard as insignificant the fact that women can get pregnant. Even more surprising is that some who think this see ethnicity as being decisive in every aspect of life. Thus, DR. LAURA is a misogynist for taking it to be a significant fact about women that they can get pregnant and, therefore, that they experience sex differently. By contrast, she would be uttering profundities were she to announce that race alone deeply influences every aspect of our life, from the toilet paper we choose to the ice-cream we

Trivers, "Parental Investment and Sexual Selection" in T. H. Clutton-Brock and Paul Harvey (eds), *Readings in Sociobiology* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1978); Donald Symons, *The Evolution of Human Sexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); and Rany Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer, *Rape: A Natural History of the Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000). As for the difference between the moral sensibilities of women and men, see Carol Gillian, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), whose work marshaled in what is known in philosophy circles as an ethics of care. See Nell Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). So much of what DR. LAURA says regarding the sensibilities of women is quite consistent with the general spirit of the writings of these female authors, who are not regarded as misogynists (or self-hating women) and who have been widely embraced by the left. So much so that one would expect a sense of kinship towards her rather than the venom that is all too common.

consume. Go figure !!!

Let me return to the moral jarring that DR. LAURA gives her callers. One of my very favorite calls is from a gentleman who was contemplating adopting his sister-in-law's children, but suggested that this would be a burden for his wife although she had expressed her enthusiasm for doing so. At the end of the call, the man had understood that he was using "concern for his wife" as a façade to hide his own fear about taking on this parenting task. The call ended with the man in tears thanking DR. LAURA for helping him to see what his responsibility was and courageously accept it.

On another occasion, a woman called and started with the claim that she is a survivor of sexual abuse. DR. LAURA chastised her for this use of language. DR. LAURA was not minimizing the harm of child sexual abuse (her tolerance for child sexual abusers is zero [see note 6]). Rather, she had sensed that the caller was looking for excuses to not fully live her life; and DR. LAURA invited the woman to stop finding excuses for not taking charge of her life. The woman was so amazingly transformed. There was such a wonderful moment of self-discovery on the woman's part.

On a third occasion, a woman by the name of Michelle called and was concerned about not being invited to a wedding rehearsal dinner that her husband would be attending.

DR. LAURA's initial response was: Wow, go enjoy. Have a night out with the girls. Upon further questioning it turned out that the caller's husband had regularly lied to her, and this was at the heart of the problem. DR. LAURA sensed that something was amiss, and questioned Michelle rather tenaciously.

I had my 400-student Ethics class listen to this one. Why? Because I wanted my students to see that DR. LAURA's persistence has a point, and is very often quite fruitful. This call so marvelously illustrated that. I asked my students was it better that the woman continue in her denial of her husband's lying behavior or that DR. LAURA tenaciously question the woman and have her acknowledge to herself her husband's lying behavior thereby making it possible for the woman to protect herself. Then, of course, I could not resist asking my students which option was more consistent with feminism and taking women seriously.

In each of these cases (and I have not done justice to the calls), I could imagine a listener drawing a rather harsh initial judgment about Laura Schlessinger if the person listened to only the beginning of the call and then tuned out because DR. LAURA was supposedly being too harsh. This judgment, though, would have been mistaken. In matters of this sort, the whole of what transpires is so very important.

Most recently (Friday, 2 April 2004), a caller by the name of Wendy expressed guilt over having sex with her husband. DR. LAURA masterfully (and I have deliberately used that word) helped the caller to see that Wendy feared becoming like her mother who had put the various horrendous men whom she (the mother) dated above her own children. I mention this for two reasons. One is that DR. LAURA is no prude when it comes to sex which, one again, suggests that she is far more liberated than many give her credit for being. It is not uncommon to hear DR. LAURA to tell a female caller "Now, seduce your man when he comes home tonight!" DR. LAURA encouraged Wendy so to behave. The other reason is to underscore the fact that Dr. Laura can be extremely insightful in a very brief period of time, *even as she is being jarring*. DR. LAURA was jarring with Wendy, rejecting out of hand her claims that her feelings of guilt had anything to do with religion. And guess what? In the end, Dr. Laura proved to be absolutely right, and was able to offer Wendy some very helpful advice upon hearing Wendy's account of her mother's despicable behavior.

Typically, DR. LAURA begins each call with a very high bar of critical excellence. When, for example, she asks for an instance of, say, a caller's charge of so-and-so's horrific behavior and the caller says something off the mark such as he left

the light on in the garage, then DR. LAURA already has an important bit of information about the caller. For it takes a very long story to before leaving the garage light on can serve as an example of horrific behavior. At the very least, the caller is holding back. Is this not just good ole fashion commonsense? Regrettably, though, we have become so accustomed to mediocrity that excellence frightens us. Furthermore, critical self-reflection has been so eschewed that people believe that anything they say is acceptable merely because they have said it—even when what they say flies in the face of common sense. DR. LAURA does not think so. Nor do I.

Then, too, there is the spectre of moral objectivity that DR. LAURA unabashedly raises. And this bothers her critics to no end. However, there is no doubt that on this point the critics can be easily hoisted by their own petard. For social diversity, the sacred cow of the left, makes no sense without equality and equality is empty if there is no moral objectivity that anchors it. This, then, means that liberals have more in common with DR. LAURA than they would ever have imagined. Alas, it is true unfortunately that it will take more jarring than anyone would ever have imagined before liberals will come to realize it.

We all pick and choose what we emphasize about what another says or does. DR. LAURA is no exception. Nor should she have to be. What is

most revealing about her critics, however, is that they are unable to see any good in her at all,⁹ though they are able to squeeze out a drop of goodness in any and everything else. If, for instance, Smith is a serial killer or a systematic child abuser or a rapist or a wife batterer, well these things have to be understood in perspective. He always means well. He just has trouble communicating his feelings; and we mustn't overlook the fact that once upon a time Smith gave \$2.00 to charity. Surely that counts for something in his favor. One does

⁹ A most brazen example of the hypocrisy of her critics is with regard to interracial marriages. DR. LAURA'S moral stance regarding interracial marriages is absolutely flawless. No caller with a concern over the fact that her/his child is dating (and perhaps contemplating marrying) an M (an individual of a minority group) has ever received even an ounce of sympathy from her. None whatsoever. And if, on the other hand, it is an adult-child calling about her or his parents' rejection of M, DR. LAURA comes through again. The problem is with the parents—and not at all with M. Nor is there ever even the slightest suggestion that if the person is an M, then special care must be taken in order to make sure that M is of sound character. Never ever ! Yet, her critics (some of whom can find a way to say something good about those who have committed the most despicable acts) have never once complimented her on her stance here. I shall say more about this in a revision of these ruminations. I shall also address the issue of forgiveness, as DR. LAURA understands it. Although she regards that forgiveness is a virtue, she holds that it (like the virtue of kindness, for instance) can be misapplied.

not have to think that DR. LAURA or, for that matter, anyone else is perfect in order to see a problem with this line of thought.

The principle of her critics seems to be this: If a person has and advocates high moral standards, then any flaw whatsoever and whenever makes that person an utter moral misfit—the scum of the earth. By contrast, if a person wallows in the cesspool of immorality, then the smallest decent thing that the person does reveals that the individual is morally good or, at the very least, that she or he has great potential for being morally good; otherwise, it is not possible to explain the one good miniscule deed the person did. Hence, it would be most inappropriate to criticize such a person, since that would discourage the individual.

By this principle, Moses (who is embraced by all three monotheistic religions) should be regarded as

sheer scum since he did make a few mistakes, notwithstanding the high moral ideals that he held and advocated; whereas Hitler should be regarded with much moral admiration; for he meant well or at least he thought that he did, even as he advocated the ruthless killing of millions of people. *Enough said!*

A final comment: There used to be a time when I was extremely puzzled by the viciousness that has characterized so many of the criticisms of DR. LAURA. Comparing her to a Nazi (see note 2), for example, was just beyond the pale. But I think that I have some insight into this now. At the point in time: Whenever individuals give up the language of objective morals—the language of objective right and wrong—they have no choice but to resort to name calling and slander in order to press their case.

© 2004

Laurence Thomas, Ph.D

*Professor in the Department of Philosophy
& the Department of Political Science in the Maxwell School
Member, The Judaic Studies Program
Syracuse University
Syracuse, NY 13244*

