

Discussion with a Marabout

[Currently this is an extremely shortened version - I want to get the thrust of the argument on paper before getting into all the details of the argument. I hope to expand it in due course.]

- Q = A Christian, asking questions from
R = A Marabout.

1. Introduction: the imperfect world

Showing that a true religion needs to address the paradoxical combination of a perfect creator and an imperfect creation.

The main reason for this part is to create interest in the Marabout: show that he does not have the answers, and make him curious and interested to hear my version.

- Q You Muslims agree with us Christians that God is holy, almighty, and good, don't you?
R Yes, we do.
- Q And God created the world.
R Yes, He did.
- Q Now, do you think the world is perfect, faultless, and good?
R No, there is evil in the world
- Q How can that be, with God having created it? Is He evil, that He wanted the world to be imperfect, or is He simply not mighty enough to create a perfect world?
R No, God is good, and almighty. I don't know how to rhyme that with a world that contains evil.
Here the Marabout first started talking about how big creation was, and that the earth was only a negligible part of it, but that was besides the point: either God's creation is perfect or it is not, and even a microscopic flaw would render it imperfect. It took a while to get him to accept that he simply didn't know, but eventually he realised he might learn something from me, and he became open to listening.
- Q But the question is of paramount importance, because the state of our world seems to indicate that either God is not good, or He is not almighty. Doesn't the Koran answer this all-important question? Hasn't it been discussed at the Medrese?
R Not to my knowledge.
- Q Why do you think no one ever discussed it? Is it maybe because nobody knows the answer? Yet, Christians do know it, but it will take a bit of background to explain it, so it may take a while.
R Go ahead, we have all night before us.

2. Perfection and freedom

Showing that perfection implies freedom, and that true freedom implies the possibility of evil.

- Q Let us see what the Bible has to say on this subject. One of the reasons for men's creation is that we might honour God by praising Him and doing His will - and I am sure the Koran will agree. If I am being praised, or people do my will, does that honour or dishonour me?
R It is honourable.
- Q Now suppose I **pay** someone to praise me, or I **force** him to do so, would it still be an honourable thing? Or if I had a tape recorder praising me all day, would that be honourable?
R No, it wouldn't. The praise would be devoid of sincerity.
- Q So clearly the praise per se is not enough in itself. What else is needed?
R The one praising must do so from his own free will and inclination.
This took a bit of prodding and helping to get out, but that was good: it made him think the issue through and become really convinced.
- Q Suppose I built a robot that could only do what I wanted it to do, and it would do my will and praise me, would that honour me?
R No, it wouldn't, because it would not be free.
- Q So if I want to be honoured by someone doing my will and praising me, I should give this person (or robot, or whatever) the possibility to go **against** my will, and to **refrain** from praising me, maybe even to curse me.
R Yes, that seems to be the case
Here again, he needed some time to think through and reject other ways out of the dilemma.
- Q Along another track, which is better: a person who is free, or one who is not free to choose his own way?
R The free one is better.

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Q So in a perfect world, men would be free to choose between good and evil?

R Yes, a world in which one cannot choose evil is imperfect.
Again, this took some time.

Q Now suppose that for every choice you make, I already decide the outcome. So you may freely decide whether to go to Sévaré or to Douentza, but whichever you chose, I would make you end up in Sévaré. Would that be free?

R No, it definitely wouldn't.

Therefore, one wouldn't be free to do evil either if the evil effect wouldn't show up. If plunging a knife into someone would not kill that person, there would be no evil in stabbing, and I would not have the choice to do evil. In other words: if I did good, it would not be of my own choosing but from lack of alternatives.

Q So in a perfect world, your choices would have real consequences. In particular, evil choices have evil consequences

R Yes, it must be so. A world that does not allow evil is not a perfect world.
This took some going over.

Q Well, then. The Bible teaches that God created a perfect world, inhabited by angels and men who had a free will, and that one of the angels, the devil, chose the evil way. After that, he seduced man into choosing against God as well. That made the devil perfectly evil, since he chose against God without any external cause, whereas man only sinned under the stress of seduction, so he is not fully and purely evil.

R Yes, that explains the situation well: God is perfect, yet the world contains evil, and man has both good and evil in him. I think this explanation fits in well with Islamic teaching. Thank you for explaining this to me.

Q It was a pleasure. However, the facts we have brought up have some grave consequences.

R Tell me.

This relatively quick explanation out of a dilemma gained me goodwill, especially as the answer was useful within the Islamic framework as well. This made him more willing to listen to other, longer and less Islam-like, arguments. Another result was that we had implicitly rejected the extreme kismet position that whatever we decide, God decides the outcome. If later on he were to appeal to that, I could reach back to the conclusions reached here to show that such a position would imply that God had created an imperfect world.

3. God's law

Showing that if God's Law is perfect, as it must be, it will be so severe as for us to be unattainable.

What is still lacking here is the reason **why** we are under that severe law. To start with we weren't, but since we chose to want to live by the real standards of good and evil (we wanted to live from the fruit of its knowledge), God obliged and gave us enough of that knowledge for us to learn that there was no way that we - tainted by sin as we now were - could live up to it. In the course of time He revealed more and more of it, till Jesus taught us the law good and evil in its perfection.

Q I shall. If God is perfectly good, He must have perfect standards of goodness, mustn't He? Anything that falls short of perfect goodness must be unacceptable to Him.

R Yes, it must be so.

This part has been highly condensed here. The main argument here is that someone who allows evil to exist and go unpunished cannot be perfectly good.

Q So the rules that God wants us to adhere to are extremely severe: anything less than the best is unacceptable.

R It seems it must be so, yet the Koran teaches otherwise. If one falls short, there are still options: one of them is to do a good act to balance the scales again, and another is to hope for God's mercy.

Q All right, let's look at those options one by one. What do you mean by a good act?

R Well, for instance giving alms.

Q So giving alms is better than not giving alms?

R Definitely. And that may balance the scales again.

Q But if not giving alms is worse than giving alms, then not giving alms is not perfectly good, so anybody who **can** give alms but **does not** already falls short of God's standard. In other words, I already need to give all the alms I can just to keep up with God's standard, and I cannot give even more alms to compensate for an infraction I made.

R Well, if you put it that way, that seems indeed to be the case. But if that is what you believe, Christianity must be a terrible faith, because no-one can be saved

Even Christians do not always like the fact that the Law is this harsh. Yet James 4:17 says it clearly: "Whoever can do good but does not, sins", and follows that by a warning for rich people, because whoever is rich is by definition a sinner according to this verse. Accepting this truth is a major step in seeing the extent to which we live by grace! The Marabout's ejaculation was the same as that of the disciples in Matthew 19:25.

Q It seems so, doesn't it? But my exposition has only just begun, and I hope to show you later on how God, in His love, has provided a way out of the quandary. But let us look to the other way out that you

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mentioned: God's mercy. Let us say, by way of example, that we have lied. By mercy you mean that God may decide not to punish our lying, even though by His justice he might. Is that correct?

R Yes, that is what mercy means. God could punish, but instead decides to forgive.

As we are getting into a legal viewpoint, it must be made very clear that God's truth is much higher than any understanding we can have of it. That is why the Bible gives so many different analogues: the Judge who punishes sin yet loves His subjects; the Father who hopes for His son to return; the Shepherd who searches the lost sheep; the Healer who wants to heal us from the affliction of sin, the first Husband who dies, and the second who invites to a marriage of freedom, etc. Any single picture is lacking, and together they come closer to the truth. If anything turns out to be wrong with **our picture of God** as our Judge, that may detract from our intelligence, but not from God's Good News.

Q Then we agree upon the meaning of mercy. God obviously has three options: He can forgive either nobody who has lied, or everybody, or some. If He forgives nobody, then it is no use relying on God's mercy, is it?

R That is correct.

Q Let us investigate the second option: that God forgives everybody who has lied. In other words, lying will not lead to punishment.

R No, that would mean that lying is allowed, and that His law would be imperfect. That is also definitively not what the Koran teaches: only some will be forgiven.

This has been highly shortened again. Obviously, it required quite some discussion to get out the point of God lowering His standards.

Q So that brings us to the third option. Now, please tell me. Does God forgive on the basis of our actions or on the basis of His own free choice. I should think that if it is on the basis of our actions, e.g. He forgives lying provided that we pray for forgiveness, we are still in the same hole: the combination of lying plus praying for forgiveness is not perfect (because not lying in the first place is better), yet God's law does allow it.

R That is correct. We cannot force God to forgive us, we can only hope.

We had to come back to the notion of God's perfect standard all the time, because the impulsive answer was "Yes, such is God's love, that He sometimes forgives imperfect people". We do not disagree with that, of course, but obviously that is not the point here.

Q So you say that there may be two people who did the same things, yet God punishes one and not the other?

R Yes, He may do that. He freely forgives whom He wants, and punishes whom He wants.

Q I see how that would allow a certain amount of love in God — the more people He forgives, the more love —, but it would wreak havoc with His justice, wouldn't it, meting out different punishments for the same crimes. After all, isn't one of the hallmarks of justice the fact that like transgressions deserve like punishments?

R Yes, indeed, this would allow for God's grace at the expense of His righteousness.

Again, this may need quite a bit of discussion, because we imperfect humans deem it often a good thing to forgo on righteousness so that we can act in love. God however, being perfect, cannot play one virtue against the other: He necessarily has them all in fullness.

One story to help get this point across is about the two friends who got separated, one ending up as a judge, the other as a thief. One day the judge was judging thieves, and punishing them with fines, when he suddenly recognised the next accused to be his friend. Would he be just in meting out a light, or no fine because the man was his friend? That would be gross injustice, wouldn't it? [One can take up this story again later on when we get to sacrificial love.]

Q By the way, there is another problem: earlier we saw that perfection required freedom, and here we see a law that forces people to be good out of fear for punishment. It is impossible that in a world where people are driven by fear for the law, man's deeds honour God.

R I see that the presence of a stern law would take away the freedom of will and inclination that are necessary to make man's deed honourable to God.

4. Justice

Showing that if God is perfectly just, he cannot simply allow infractions to go unpunished, either as a rule or by way of exception.

Q Now if God demands perfect goodness, and we are not perfectly good, we needs must fall short of God's law, mustn't we?

R Yes, we must, and there is no way for us to make up for it.

Another subject that may fit in here is original sin: as Adam and Eve contained evil in them, all their children inherited it, and because of that are unable to live up to a perfect law. This proves that if Jesus is sinless, He must be from a different genealogical line than the remainder of humanity - and that result will come useful later when we discuss the nature of Jesus.

Q What is a greater sin: if we dishonour a child or a full-grown man?

R A full-grown man, because He is more honourable to begin with.

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Q And what if we were to dishonour our own father, the village chief, or the president of the nation?

R That would be a worse and worse sin. In fact, the latter would be lese-majesty, which is much worse than simply insulting someone.

Q And what about dishonouring an infinitely honourable God? (And is that not what we all do by sinning?)

R That would be an infinite sin - so it seems we have an infinite debt towards God.

Q So would it be possible for us ever to pay the guilt of sinning against God?

R No. Not with money, nor with bodily punishment or with incarceration, because all we have or are is finite.

Q Maybe it would be possible for someone else to come and pay for our transgressions?

R No, because the other person has his own transgressions to pay for, and even if not: he is not infinite either.

In the discussion here, one can refer back to the story of the judge and the thief: maybe the father could pay - but it turns out he is a convicted thief himself, and even apart from that he doesn't have enough money to pay either his own or his son's fine.

Q So it seems we should need an infinite being to come and pay for us, if we ever are to be free.

R That seems to be the only possibility, doesn't it? Yet I think it would need to be a man, in order to be liable to the human punishment.

[This needs working out, but that will generate a lot of text, so I leave it for the moment in order to get on with the line of the argument.]

Q Now suppose God would provide such an infinite being, and allow us to appeal to him. Would that be a way out for us? And would that allow God to be both just and merciful?

R It would be a way out for us, but it would make God both unjust and unmerciful towards that being, who never did anything wrong himself, yet is asked to suffer for the rest of us.

5. Love and mercy

Q Let's recapitulate using a worldly example. Suppose I break a man's window, and the man wants to be both just and merciful towards me. What can he do? He could pretend there was no loss, but that would be against the truth, because a window has been broken. He could make me pay for it, which would be just, but not merciful - especially if it costs more money than I have. He could make someone else pay for it, but that would be neither just nor merciful towards that other person. So there is only one approach left for him, isn't there

R Indeed. He must suffer the loss himself.

Q Now let me tell you what really happened in the case of the judge and the thief. The judge convicted the thief to a very high fine - and then stood up, drew his wallet, and because of their friendship paid it all. Do you think in doing so, the judge was both just and merciful?

R Yes, he was. In fact, that was noble behaviour.

Q Well, God, being both perfectly just and perfectly merciful, chose the same behaviour. He suffered the loss himself.

R I wonder whether an omnipotent, infinite God can actually suffer a loss.

Q Good question! For something to be a loss, it must leave you with less than you had before, and from an infinite quantity you cannot take in such a way that it diminishes.

R So you agree that an infinite God cannot suffer a loss, or undergo punishment, for that matter.

A fairy tale example may help. Suppose I have a pail of water that always stays full, no matter how much I take from it. Now if someone comes and takes water from my pail, does he make me suffer a loss? No, because the pail will still be full, and will still allow any amount of water to be taken from it.

This part of the argument must be adapted to the background of the other person, because different people have different models of infinity. The way it is put here it will not convince a mathematician, for instance, but the mathematical version of the argument will not be understandable for lay people.

Q Yes, I do. So on the one hand we have seen that in order for God to be both perfectly just and merciful He must suffer the punishment of our deeds, and on the other hand that an infinite God cannot do so. The conclusion seems to be that God must become finite in order to remain perfect, doesn't it?

R But that is impossible!

Q Why do you think it impossible? Do you think God cannot do it, because He is not powerful enough, or do you think he can do it but doesn't want to, because He doesn't care about being perfect?

R No, God can do anything, because He is almighty, and He is perfectly just and merciful too. But I know what you are getting at: God is part of a Trinity, and He has a Son that was finite and suffered. And that is an insult to God - He doesn't get about begetting children!

Here any number of objections may need to be dealt with. Take your time, because the one thing that matters is truth. We are not here to win a debate, but to seek and find the truth.

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- Q It may amaze you, but I fully agree with you there. The nature of God is a very complicated subject, because God is way above our understanding. In fact, a god that would fit into my mind or yours wouldn't be a very big god, would he? As all Christians will agree, God doesn't go about begetting children. We do at times use the term "Son of God", but that has a different meaning, and I would want to leave that subject for now. After all, we just agreed that God would be neither just nor merciful if He would let someone other than Himself suffer the punishment we deserve, and that would include any son of His, if He had one, wouldn't it?
- R It would. If God had a son, and He would punish His son for our sins, He would be unjust, unmerciful, a bad father, and a puny God for pairing up with a wife, and a human one at that!
Trinitarian terminology is very unfortunate here. One should make it very clear that we do **not** see God like a kind of Zeus, lying with goddesses, nymphs and women and begetting children.
- Q I agree wholeheartedly. As we have established, it must be God **himself** Who becomes finite and suffers, not somebody else.
- R Indeed, and I cannot say that that is impossible, because that would make God less than almighty, nor can I say that He can do it but does not want it, because that would make Him unmerciful, but for some reason I don't like the idea.
- Q I can think of several reasons. One is that you have always been told about this Christian God going around begetting a child. Another is that it is hard for us to understand infinity, and our thoughts are limiting us here: simply because **we** think that something infinite cannot become finite, and because **we** think that a Creator cannot become part of His creation, we feel it must be impossible. Yet, God created the rules of creation, and He can create the world in such a way that anything He wants is possible.
- R Yes, maybe it is that.
It may be useful to dwell a bit on the fact that God created all the rules of creation, including our logic. Just like I can invent a story in which $2+2=5$, God can create a world in which $3=1$. Logic is bound by God, not the other way around.

6. The Trinity

- Q Luckily there is a way in which we can maybe glimpse a bit of it. The Bible tells that God has created us in His image. Now that does not mean our bodies, because the infinite God doesn't have a body, but He has created us with creative minds. We only have to close our eyes, and we can dream up a world of our own. That is only a very feeble semblance of the way in which God creates, yet in our own little way we do create stories and dreams.
- R I had never thought of it that way, but yes, we indeed are miniature creators, each of us. In a way God is dreaming the world, and His dream is so real that it is our reality. Yet, a dreamer is more real than his dream, so God must be a lot more real than we are.
Take time to get this notion across before continuing. Or, use another image if you have one with which you feel more comfortable.
- Q All right, so let's see how we can imagine God becoming finite. Suppose I lie in bed, and (day)dream of a valley full of flowers. In my dream, I am picking a bouquet, say. Now there are two, or even three ways in which someone else in the valley may conceive me. First of all there is the creator me, who is lying in bed. Then there is the me who is picking flowers, and who is part of the creation. And finally, I may decide what I want people in my dream to think and do, so there is a third way in which people can experience me. In Christianity, these three aspects of the same, single God are called the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I fully agree that these names are confusing, though.
Stress that this is only a helpful image to grasp a supernatural truth. Any problem with the image just shows how hard it is for us to grasp the reality - it is no indication of a problem with that reality.
- R You can say so. I have always thought that the Trinity was a kind of family, with God at the head.
- Q Yes, many Muslims think so. The whole thing is the more confusing, since on the one hand the Father and the Son are clearly one single God, yet on the other hand, like with me dreaming, one is in the bed, and the other in the valley, so to speak. We could speak for hours on the little that we can understand of the nature of God, but let's leave that for another time, and get our thing on justice and mercy done first, shall we?
- R Yes, let's. But I definitely should like to come back on this Trinity thing someday.

7. The nature of Jesus

- Q God willing, we shall. For the moment it suffices to see, or to accept, that God can appear as a finite being within His Own creation.
- R I suppose that must be Jesus, peace be upon Him.
- Q Oh, you don't need to add that prayer. Jesus surely is in eternal peace with God. Go on praying it for Muhammad, however, because He certainly needs it.
- R I suppose you know that according to the Koran, Jesus is just a prophet, and that he didn't really suffer on the cross.

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- Q Yes, I know, and there is so much to say to that that I hardly know where to start. For one thing, If Jesus was a prophet, why did He have a prophet to announce Him? He had John the Baptist preparing the way for Him. Then, doesn't the Koran teach that Jesus has been taken up to heaven and will return as the judge? How could a mere man, born in sin, be the judge of mankind? Will He end up judging himself? But I propose we leave this subject to another day as well, since it is already late.
- R Yes, let's get on with the mercy thing. In fact, I think I already see where you are going: since Jesus was infinite God made finite, in a way, He could suffer for us and at the same time pay the infinite fine - or suffer the infinite loss -, and that way God could save us from eternal punishment and still be just.
At this point, the first thread of the logical argument has come to an end. The only way for God to be perfect, given man's choice for evil, is to become man himself and suffer. Any religion accepting both a perfect Creator and a creation containing evil, yet denying a suffering Servant is logically lacking.
The second thread will show that punishing law itself must be abolished in order for man to be able to honour God again.
A third thread will be that Jesus needs to be accepted as ones Saviour, and that a non-punishing law of love will go with that.
- Q You got it! But there is more to come. You remember that I said that the whole notion of a punishing law was irreconcilable with a perfect world? Well, Jesus offers to buy us free from that law.
- R But how can He do that?
- Q Yes, how can He. Let us go back to the notion of paying a fine for someone, and see what that really implies. After that we shall be better prepared to answer this question. Suppose my brother and I have both broken the law, and have both been condemned to pay a fine. Now I come forward and I pay **his** fine - say, because he has no money. For the law, will I have paid my fine?
- R No, you will not. **He** will have paid **his** fine, and yours is still to be paid.
- Q Now suppose it was no fine, but a beating, and I offered to suffer his.
- R It will be the same thing: for the law, he will have been beaten, and you will not.
- Q Now suppose it was the death penalty?
- R Ouch! I suppose you cannot undergo his death penalty, because then you can no longer undergo your own punishment.
- Q All right, so I can only offer that if I myself are blameless before the law. Suppose I am.
- R I have never heard of such a thing, but if the law allows it, your brother will have died for the law, and in a way he will be leading your life from then on - because if ever a charge will be brought against you, it is only fair that he accepts it. And if you have a family, he will be responsible for it.
Here again the argument has been much condensed. The notion of "stepping in someone's place" must be stressed and worked out.
I skipped the moral side here: even if both parties agree, it can be morally wrong to let one party suffer for the wrongs of the other. Of course Jesus not merely bore our punishment, but He actually bore our very sins (e.g. 1P 2:24) that exacted the punishment, so He, the sinless One, was actually guilty when He was punished. That is also why He did not declare His innocence (e.g. Mt 27:12).
- Q Now that is exactly what Jesus has done for us. If you allow me, I should like to read a few verses from the Bible explaining that.
- R Go ahead.
- Q In this bit, the question is addressed why a Christian should be willing to live fully for Jesus Christ, and do all to continue the work that Jesus began. The answer is:
For Christ's love compels us [Christians], because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all [of us] died. And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again.
Other verses, such as Galatians 2:20, may be used here as well. The meaning of the resurrection will be addressed presently.
- R So you are saying that Jesus died for you, and now you have the moral obligation to do what He would have done if He hadn't died, is that it?
- Q Yes, that is part of it. But there is more: legally we attain the status He had, just like legally He accepted the status **we** had - that of death convicts. As we say: when God looked at Jesus on the cross, He saw us, and when He looks at us, He sees Jesus. But, having been born a human being, Jesus was under the law too - and kept it scrupulously and perfectly.
- R So you will still be responsible for the sins you commit after Jesus died.
- Q Yes, we would be, wouldn't we? However, as the verse I quoted says, something miraculous happened: Christ conquered death and rose from the grave. Can you see the consequences of that?
- R Please help me.
- Q We live in Christ's place, and now Christ Himself is alive. He has died, and therefore is no longer under the law - I shall discuss that in a moment. So we live the life of someone who stands outside the law, that is: we are no longer under the law ourselves!
- R Yes, you must explain that. If it is true, then we can do what we want without fear for punishment, because there is no law.
The explanation currently is in the bits at the end of this text.

8. The freedom in Christ

- Q No, we should not do whatever we want, but I shall come back to that in a moment. Let me first explain how we can be free from the law. Suppose a dead corpse falls down and breaks something, is the dead man responsible for that?
- R How can he be? He is dead, isn't he? It is only his body that remains. If his brother had put the body on a table in such a way that it would fall, maybe that brother would be responsible, but definitely not the dead man!
Depending on the background of the other person, this may be obvious or require elaborate arguing. If the latter, it may be wise to skip the second thread altogether initially. Once people are willing to consider Christ, and thus look beyond their cultural idea world, they may be open to reconsidering their notions about the nature of death and spirits as well.
- Q So you agree that a dead man has no responsibility, in other words: that no law has power over a dead person.
This, of course, is not a logical result, but follows from the way God made His law. Proving it logically would require discussing the Adamic, Noahic and Mosaic laws, which I had not done. Don't hesitate to do so if necessary, of course. In my case a step-by-step proof wasn't necessary, because the Koran teaches the same thing.
- R Obviously. A dead man has no power to do anything on earth, so a law forbidding certain things to a dead person would be useless. As the Koran teaches, until his death he adds to his good and evil deeds; at the moment of his death the books are closed, and his deeds thrown in the scales of justice, and from then on he will get his eternal reward or punishment.
I took some time approaching this result from several sides, such as: if a slave obeys his master in breaking the law of the land, the master, not the slave is responsible. So to the extent a slave obeys his master he is not under the law of the land, being screened from it by his master.
- Q And, as we have seen, one of the scales, the one with good deeds, will remain empty. Because for a deed to be good it has to be better than what God's perfect law requires of us, and certainly no-one will claim to have done anything that surpasses God's standards of goodness.
- R It will remain empty but for God Himself who fills it with mercy.
- Q I fully agree. Our discussion here centres on the form that mercy takes.
- R Which you claim to be Jesus.
- Q Indeed. But now I am talking of the death of Jesus Himself: He died, and fully paid the punishment for all the sins He carried. That means that in His case both scales are empty, and He may live in the presence of God, under the law of heaven.
- R But there is no law of heaven, because there is no punishment in heaven. People are free there to enjoy!
- Q Yes, to enjoy the highest possible bliss: being in the presence of God! Well, there is the law of love, but you are right that Jesus is not under any law that carries a punishment with it. This is the meaning of the resurrection – that Jesus has paid the infinite debt we stood in, the punishment, the fine we could never have paid ourselves. He – and therefore anyone who had accepted Him to suffer in his place – is now under the law of love that carries no punishment.
- R So it still seems true that a Christian can do whatever he wants, there being no law to restrain him. Because a law that does not punish carries no force.

9. Our responsibility towards Jesus

- Q It is true that a Christian is free from fear for heavenly punishment, but we certainly should not just do what we want. Jesus can only die in our place if we accept Him to do so, and if we accept it we also accept to take on His life, just as He takes on ours. And Jesus lived to show the loving respect that every man should have for God. So if we sincerely accept Jesus' offer - and since God can read our hearts, it is impossible to be a hypocrite here - we also sincerely accept to live the perfect loving life.
- R But you cannot live a perfect life, can you?
- Q No, we cannot, because we still have our same sinful bodies. But instead of a law that scares into being good by threatening with punishment, we now are under a law of love that draws us to do good out of love and gratitude - without any fear for punishment. And don't you agree that, whereas doing good out of fear for punishment could not honour God, doing good out of love for God will do so?
- R Yes, doing good out of love is definitely an honourable thing. If my son prepares a meal out of love for me, he honours me, but if he does it only because I will beat him if he doesn't, he will in fact be a shame to me.
- Q On the other hand, someone who does **not** accept Jesus Christ's offer is still under a law that no-one can hold, and that exacts an eternal punishment, and apart from that he has rejected God's offer. So that makes it fairly sure that he will end up in hell, doesn't it?
- R Yes, it seems to do, but for God's mercy.

J. A. D.

Q But for God's mercy? But as we have seen Jesus' offer **is** God's mercy, so he just rejected God's mercy. What can be the verdict for a person who rejects God's mercy?

R Someone who rejects God's mercy must needs spend eternity in hell.

Q So we see there are only two options: he who sincerely accepts Jesus' offer to suffer his punishment in his stead can be sure of eternal life in heaven, and he who rejects Jesus' offer will be separated from God for eternity in hell. Which do you choose?

R I must think a bit more about this.

Q By all means do so, but don't forget that death may find you tonight or tomorrow, and if you haven't accepted God's mercy before your death, what can you appeal to after death?

J. A. D.

The following bit has not yet found its place in the larger whole.

- Q If a master orders his slave to do something, who is responsible, the slave or the master?
R The master, of course. The slave is responsible if he does not obey, but the master is if he does.
- Q I agree. But if a slave does disobey his master, is he responsible to the law of the land, or to his master?
R To his master.
- Q So you say a slave is free from the law of the land?
R No, only to a certain extent. If the slave does something about which he had received no instructions, he is neither obeying his master nor disobeying him, and for his deeds he is personally responsible to the law.
- Q So it is. Now we have seen that in order for us to honour God with our praise and deeds, we must be free from the punishing law that God must necessarily hold up to be perfectly just.
R That sounds like a dilemma again: if God does not enforce His law He is not just, and if we are not free from it we cannot honour Him. And having Christ suffer time and again for every infraction we commit is no way out: we know that He suffered only once.
- Q Indeed. Now God is omniscient, isn't He, knowing all of past, present and future, including our future sins.
R Oh yes, He knows all the days that are still to come.
- Q And we are God's property