

Moral Reality and Moral Evasion

by [Albert Norton, Jr.](#) (October 2024)



The Death (Gustave Doré, 1883)

Outline

My thesis is that we all have a source of anxiety I'll call the "tragic sense," an awareness of these unavoidable elements of our existence: (1) our own mortality; (2) the reality of justice; (3) personal moral accountability; (4) our own moral failures; and (5) resulting guilt. I discussed the idea of "tragic sense" in "[The Tragic Sense and Its Dissolution in Therapeutic Culture.](#)"

Fear of death is certainly a motivator, as is the fact that we don't know the day or hour of our death. No one can question the reality of death. One could question the reality of "justice," however. To say justice is "real" is to say there is some cosmic justice, so to speak. Not just in the sense of karma, but in the sense that justice in the abstract is not merely a social or evolved construct. That we are in some way accountable is another way to acknowledge the reality of abstract justice. "Real" as opposed to existing merely as a human invention projected onto the world. If justice is real, then our moral failures must have real consequences. And certainly guilt is real, we all feel it because we have all fallen short morally in some way.

The tragic sense stays with us all through life and we must navigate it as best we can. I propose that there are three ways, primarily, though with many variations on the theme. I label these "fate," "faith," and "fiction," borrowing from Philip Rieff's construct in his *My Life Among the Deathworks*, but I don't attempt to track his reasoning concerning these entirely, I merely borrow the three-word construct.

First: "fate." By it we *Minimize personal responsibility*, by belief in: (1) the inevitability of events; (2) that we must follow the rules (e.g., "honor the gods"); (3) the rules merge with society's mores; (4) doing what is expected absolves us of moral responsibility; and (5) death does not mean invocation of justice, but transition to some other form of

existence.

Second: "faith." By it we *Accept moral responsibility*, by these beliefs: (1) Moral responsibility is personal to me; (2) I cannot measure up; (3) there is judgment, and a Judge who renders it; (4) my hope is forgiveness, not perfection; and (5) a desirable afterlife is conditioned on present moral striving.

Third: "fiction." By it we *Conclude there is no moral responsibility*, with these beliefs: (1) There is no Judge; (2) there is only this-life accountability to society; (3) I am fragile; (4) my life task is to manage me for me; and (5) death is far from me, antiseptically removed from my field of vision.

I conclude that the Fate perspective attempts to answer the ultimate questions raised by our existence and experience with implausible or fanciful or incomplete answers. The Faith perspective does answer ultimate questions, but does not eliminate entirely the tragic sense. The Fiction perspective avoids ultimate questions, leaving us in an ongoing state of angst and exhaustion, or else willful blindness to our condition.

An Explanation

These categories roughly correspond to epochs of history. "Fate" refers to the pagan world; "Faith" to the Christian world up to the twentieth century more or less; "Fiction" to the post-Christian, postmodern world. Having said that, I don't insist these ways of thinking are confined to those eras, nor that there can be no overlap or confusion among them. The pagan "fate" way of thinking re-appears from time to time, and its elements are intermixed with those of postmodernism, the "fiction" perspective. There are people of faith now, certainly, though often infected to some degree

with the postmodern, fictive way of thinking, exacerbating the dissonance of the tragic sense.

Fate

Now about the 3 divisions, starting with "fate." The very word "fate" suggests an outsourcing of moral responsibility. Things just happen because they do. I started to take the concept seriously when I read Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* written in about 524 A.D. It requires stepping out of one's current set of assumptions about reality, and into another. We're talking about a world in which you rigidly follow mythic dictates for planting, harvesting, trading, and making war; you honor your ancestors' bones literally beneath your hearth by keeping the home fires burning; you carry your new wife across the threshold signifying her repudiation of old gods and acceptance of yours. You dare not fail to honor the ceremonies concerning birth, death, miscarriage, famine, and plenty. Consider the trial of Socrates. What does it mean to "honor the gods?" There were highly developed ideas of what the gods of a particular locale required, but Socrates elevated reason above unreason, even unreason attributed to the gods. So he was executed.

In those days, you lived by dictates of the gods' will. We think of the gods as deities of polytheism, but it's likely their characteristics were supplied by the imaginations of the ancients; to explain idealization not otherwise reducible to matter in motion, like fertility, victory, eros, death.

In the "fate" mentality, there was a fear of death. This is of course a constant for all people in all times, but the fear was mitigated then by the sense of inevitability combined with the idea that death was a transition to some vague alternative form of existence. Likewise the sense of ultimate justice was attenuated, in that "honoring the gods" was a moral safe

harbor, so to speak. This meant doing the right things at the right time. The “right” thing was the accretion of social norms, not a system of virtues handed down by the gods. You felt personal accountability, but accountability to what was expected of you socially.

You may already be thinking this sounds a lot like what’s going on today, subtracting the pantheon of gods and ancestor worship. Some say we’re devolving back to paganism upon our departure from Christianity. There are resemblances, but I’m going to say our current source of angst differs qualitatively from what we understand of the tragic sense in pre-Christian paganism.

I also affirm some overlap, however, and that occasions this important qualifier: the methods and means of avoiding or mitigating or denying or reconciling the tragic sense occur in all times, and in all places. I’ve identified pagan, Christian, and postmodern eras, but there’s substantial overlap temporally and from place to place. The fate, faith, and fiction outlooks recur over time, but fiction predominates now.

Faith

In this paradigm we open our eyes to the reality of mortality, justice, judgment, and justified guilt. It’s like letting down our guard and saying: “life, you win. We’re not fighting truth.” The Old Testament sets us up to understand ultimate, not-to-be-negotiated-with truth. It strongly projects the means of reconciliation, and in the New Testament, it is made so explicit that it takes on flesh and blood and execution and Resurrection.

This is the basis, incidentally, for the philosophical stance known as “Realism” that predates even Plato. I’ve written before about mathematical realism (*Dangerous God*, New English

Review Press 2021), to say mathematics are real, not merely a mental projection onto the world outside our heads. That's a tidy example, but the principle applies also to other idealizations like the logos, the rationality of the mind and of the cosmos, and also to categorical differences in things, the grouping of like with like, and also to irreducible and transcendent intangibles like truth, beauty, and good; falsity, ugliness, and evil. I mention this because the fictive perspective rests instead on philosophical "Nominalism."

Now to return to the elements of the tragic sense. We're certainly aware of our mortality. Faith sees us through this, to something Beyond, as with the One who went before, bodily, in His Ascension. Our hope in an afterlife is our hope in following after Him to a "place" not plagued with the limitations and disappointments of this one, in which we are relieved of the tragic sense. Mortality here is not a source of terror because we are immortal beings. This is outside our experience of life in the body, now, obviously and definitionally, so it requires "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen."

Our intelligent self-awareness, what we might call the God-breathed portion of our being, makes us alive to the realism of certain concepts that are not dismissible as mere abstractions, like love, mercy, justice, virtue; hate, retribution, injustice, vice. Because there is justice, and because we have moral failings, we are guilty, and our guilt clings to us most tightly when we approach that portal that takes us from this known life to that unknown afterlife which is hoped-for but not certain.

Anyone who says he is certain of an afterlife is denying the tragic sense. We don't know this with perfect certainty. That's what it means to hope. We hope rather than know. Our assurance can increase, especially as we come to understand the rational source for it. But the tragic sense is not wholly

resolved while we breathe.

We have this afterlife not because we're sinless, but despite our sin. We're told we can enter heaven even though we fail morally. How? By faith, we're told. But that answer by itself doesn't resolve the tragic sense. How do we know we have faith? Or enough faith? Or the right kind of faith? Or even sufficient understanding of the Story of God's redemption of us to know what we have faith *in*? We're clearly not relieved of the tragic sense, with faith. Indeed, the tragic sense is the seed of faith. Our faith can grow tall and strong, but the tension makes it grow.

Faith substitutes for the requirement of moral perfection, we're told. But we're also told that doesn't mean go out and do your worst. There should be some fruit of the Spirit to indicate more than unthinking acquiescence. "Belief" as told in the Christian story means stepping out in some way, in reliance on the truth asserted. We're preserved despite our moral failure because of faith, not our own merits, but the marker for the genuineness of faith is moral striving. So though we know God does all the work, so to speak, it still feels like the desired afterlife is conditioned on our moral striving. Again, the tragic sense is not wholly resolved just by knowing the Story and believing on some always-less-than-perfect level that it's true.

Striving morally must mean at a minimum overcoming the default tendency to live life at its most mundane level. It must mean time out to place oneself prayerfully in eternity, as with daily prayer or meditation or contemplation. Beyond that, it may not be clear what moral striving looks like, though it (thankfully) becomes more obvious when it has to be countercultural, as it must be in the fictive postmodern era.

Fiction

We can think of the postmodern era, c. 1900 to present, as an age of "fiction." It is distinguishable from the ages that went before mainly in that we live in a fictive reality we invent for ourselves, and don't inquire into big questions that, just in the asking, would expose the big self-lie.

Before explaining further, let me hasten to add that, as with the "fate" and "faith" perspectives, the "fiction" perspective is not unique to the postmodern era, nor applicable to everyone living within it. If you were to identify it to the mass of humanity you would place it in the postmodern era, however. In earlier times you'd find it exceptional, as with the materialists of the Enlightenment or pagan era, deniers of a reality beyond this time- and space-bound material one. The chief element of the fictive is atheism. It's best not to describe a positive belief by what it isn't, however, so let's say instead "materialism." If you subtract any supernatural from your understanding of reality, that's what you end up with.

Materialism is more consequential than, say, one's left or right political leanings. It means that all of reality is matter in motion, and indisputably intangible bits of reality, like good and evil, beauty and ugliness, even truth and untruth, are merely emergent properties of our biology. That's a lot of baggage to attribute to abiogenesis and natural selection. More importantly, it means nothing is true in any absolute sense. There is no evil, except as man has evolved to describe certain things as such. Nothing is really real. All categories fail. All walls collapse. All divisions are erased. All is all, a universal hum of existence, and nothing you do matters, now or ever. When you die, you die, and all the worries you carry about your future and that of your children are utterly pointless wastes of emotion.

And yet we don't live that way, and so that's what it means to live in fiction. There's a dark cloud on the horizon: the question: what if it—God, the Christ, the Holy Spirit, ideals

that are not tangible, yet “real”—what if it’s all true? Just put your hands over your ears and say “La la la la” really loud and laugh with fake sincerity at the rubes who believe this stuff.

This denial of objective truth out there means a turn inward to subjective “truth” in here. The world outside one’s head is a dangerous place full of real thorns and real death and judgy people. The only actual moral standard for those living in fiction is an oddly-circumscribed “kindness.” This is a breakdown-all-walls, you-do-you moral landscape; flat and sterile and boring, but safe.

Or safe-seeming. It’s not safe for those cruelly excluded and vilified by this oversimplified rubric of “kindness.” Postmodernists don’t really break down walls, they just erect them in different places. This is to maintain the illusion; to live inside a fiction and avoid recognizing it as such.

The threat to living in fiction comes from those hoary old religious people who lift the veil to expose an objective morality; the truth of justice and therefore of moral accountability; and of death and a putative afterlife connected to this-life morality. It is offensive, to fictive mankind, and so must be screened off and its adherents scandalized so that the true morality seems to be with those who deny death and deny judgment. Their perspective is not one of “fiction,” they insist, but of progressive openness to a world without barriers. The God/man barrier is swept aside. The male/female barrier is next. Imagine there’s no religion; no heaven or hell; all the people living in peace; when all will be as one.

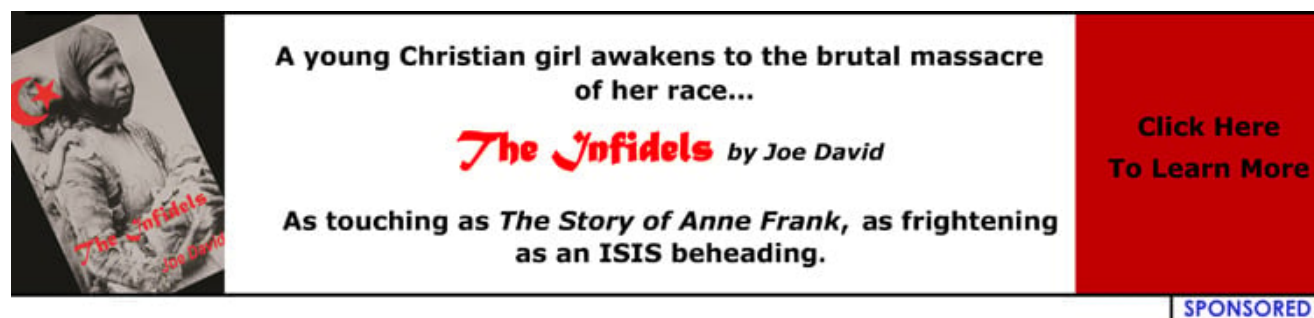
This fictive posture in relation to the real world leaves one fragile, defensive, vulnerable, and victimized. The resulting fragile self turns away from the hard edges of moral reality to the urgent necessity of maintaining inner psychological vitality against these onslaughts. It is an overriding ethic

of self-care, the self being the measure of all things. The vulnerable inner psychological being is maintained separate from the hardened front which navigates the harsh world of judgy moralists. There's a dissonance between the angry me at the ramparts, guarding against external assault, and a vulnerable me in here, inside the castle keep, engineering a world vision for palliative psychological maintenance of the fictive self. Not just for me. For everyone. And this requires re-making the world to protect the vulnerable self from death, judgment, and especially the combination of them: ultimate judgment, in ultimate timelessness.

[Table of Contents](#)

Albert Norton, Jr is an attorney and author. His most recent book is [The Mountain and the River: Genesis, Postmodernism, and the Machine](#) (New English Review Press 2023).

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