

Life without God

Have you ever imagined what it would be like if someone you loved was never born? What experiences would no longer be a part of your history? What influences might have been lost? What joys and sorrows would be missed? Thoughts like these are not foreign to the human psyche, and so it is not completely out of the question to consider what life might be like—not just for you, but for all humanity—if there was not just the absence of a single person, but the absence of God. For some, the question of what life would be like if there is no God is easy to answer. It is life as we know it. Plenty today do not believe that God exists and so a world without God is the world that we live in. No imagination is necessary. But are there things about this world that an everyday atheist readily accepts that are actually incompatible with the inexistence of God? I tend to think there are and will explore a few of those things below.

Rationality

Just to read what you have so far has required you to use reason in order to understand what was written. If what has been written makes sense to you it is because you have chosen to invoke reasoning skills in which you trust. But is reason something that warrants any confidence if there is no God? Is it something whose present existence is trustworthy? The common story for those who do not believe in God is that life in the cosmos was created through a random process and furthermore that this random process is continually changing life forms on the planet in substantial ways. In the framework of this story, there was a time when reason, as we currently know it, did not exist for what is now called *Homo sapiens*. Furthermore, there will be a time when the reason that *Homo sapiens* use today will not exist in the future. Now if this is so—if reason is only a term we use to describe how in our present biological condition we analyze data and draw conclusions and is not something that is a consistent feature of humanity as endowed by God—is it something that we can have any confidence in? And if it is likely that contemporary rationality will be gone tomorrow, it would seem that any particular reason given to have confidence in an existence without God (or anything else for that matter) would be in jeopardy. Along these lines, C.S. Lewis wrote:

Supposing there was no intelligence behind the universe, no creative mind. In that case, nobody designed my brain for the purpose of thinking. It is merely that when the atoms inside my skull happen, for physical or chemical reasons, to arrange themselves in a certain way, this gives me, as a by-product, the sensation I call thought. But, if so, how can I trust my own thinking to be true?...But if I can't trust my own thinking, of course I can't trust the arguments leading to Atheism, and therefore have no reason to be an Atheist, or anything else. Unless I believe in God, I cannot believe in thought: so I can never use thought to disbelieve in God.¹

I would venture that the vast majority of atheists exalt rationality, and I do not disdain them for doing so. I myself think that a thinking life is far superior to the alternative, but the issue at hand is not whether reason is of great value or not but whether it is has any grounds for confidence in a world without God.

Free Will

Theists have always recognized the existence of human free will, even if it at times it is restrained or guided by the sovereign will of God. They recognize that God himself is an undetermined being and in creating humanity in his image granted us with the ability to make undetermined choices in the time and space in which we live. Thus, Joshua (the successor of Moses) said to the Jews:

Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.²

Most today still believe, as did Joshua, that humans possess a free will regardless of whether they are Christians or not. Atheists, however, do not have such a luxury.

Neo-Darwinism is the current best explanation of biological life forwarded by those who are atheists. As indicated above, it is the idea that life has come about through random changes and those changes that endure through the generations are those that are conducive to survival. Human life as we experience it from a first person perspective is therefore not a function of free choices made through the course of our lives. Rather human experience is reduced to a series of chemical reactions to the environment in which we find ourselves. These reactions are not controllable although they might appear to be so, according to the atheist, and the free choice to which we often appeal is just an illusion. Accordingly, Sam Harris, a prolific writer and vociferous atheist, writes this in his recent book entitled *Free Will*:

Free will is an illusion. Our wills are simply not of our own making. Thoughts and intentions emerge from background causes of which we are unaware and over which we exert no conscious control. We do not have the freedom we think we have. Free will is actually more than an illusion (or less), in that it cannot be made conceptually coherent.³

Sam Harris is not alone. Many thoughtful atheists have come to the conclusion that the concept of free will is not compatible in a world without God. Face up to a godless world, says the atheist, and free will becomes a rightful casualty. In other words, if one is prepared to be an atheist, he must also be prepared to forgo any idea that humanity does little more than dance to its own DNA.⁴

Morality

It is not uncommon for people to question the co-existence of God and evil, but when such questions are asked doubt is nearly always placed in the existence of God and not in the existence of evil. But if there is no God, is it right to even speak of evil and any moral code that seeks to avoid it? The answer to this question would seem to be no. As has just been discussed, free will is a dubious human concept for those who do not believe in God, and without free choice it is difficult to see how as individuals any of our actions could be deemed wrong. When a man rapes a woman or a woman embezzles another's fortune or even when one ethnic group "cleanses" another, they are simply responding to their environment in the only ways their chemical machinery will allow. Yes, it is possible for atheists to call these actions "wrong," but ultimately they could only be called wrong because we are chemically disposed to call these wrong at this stage of our evolutionary development and not because there was anything inherently wrong with them. Like it or not, without God there is nothing we can call wrong or right in a universal or permanent sense.

Justice

If God does not exist, there is no free choice, no evil, and no anchored call to morality. It follows then that the call to justice in a Godless world would be an empty one. If people cannot control their actions and if there is no real standard of right and wrong, justice is simply one set of human chemical responses to another set of human chemical responses. In other words, if a person is acquitted of a heinous crime that she did indeed commit, we could not speak of justice having been aborted. We could only say that the actions taken or not taken against such a person are simply what is pre-determined by our evolved DNA and the current environment with which it interacts. Justice is therefore also lost as a transcendent value in a world without God.

Design

In my office sit two new chairs. On these chairs are decorative pillows that have been embroidered with colorful designs the shape of autumn leaves. I do not know how the design on these pillows came to be, but I have considerable confidence that behind them is human ingenuity and creativity. I wonder, however, great a confidence I can really have in a world without God, where the appearance of design in the cosmos is readily attributed to random chance even for the most intricate of biological units. Take for example DNA. The odds of a single DNA strand randomly coming into being have been estimated at 1 in $10^{41,000}$. These odds are unimaginable and suggest that DNA could not have come about by chance. The response to such a claim, however, is something along these lines, "But there has been so much time since the beginning of the cosmos that there has been ample opportunity for something with such small odds to come to be." The thinking goes like this: if drawing two pairs from a 52-card deck has 20 to 1 odds, but a person is given 20 opportunities, the odds are reduced to 1 to 1. It is suggested that the same is true for DNA. The odds may be incredibly low, but given the chances available, DNA

could have quite readily come to be. This sounds like a reasonable argument, except when one realizes that given the current purported age of the universe and the number of particles in the universe, the possible number of interactions that could have taken place since the universe began is only 10^{141} , also a remarkably huge number, but a number which pales in comparison to the odds of a single strand of DNA randomly organizing itself. In fact, even given the age of the universe, there is still at best a 1 in $10^{40,859}$ chance that DNA could have ever randomly configured itself to create human life.⁵ I don't know what the odds would be that the design on my pillows could randomly come into existence, but considering that they are nowhere near as intricate as DNA, the likelihood of the embroidering organizing itself into the pillow would undoubtedly be far greater. All this is to say that if I am to doubt the existence of a designer behind DNA, would not I be forced to doubt that a human designer was involved in the making of my pillows? Likewise, would I have to doubt that there is any human design behind the cookies I find on my kitchen counter, the painting that sits in the Smithsonian in Washington, or the \$50,000 that has gone missing out of my bank account? It would seem to me that life without God is a life wherein confidence in design of any sort is undermined.

Purpose

Some time ago I was told a story about prisoners of war who were forced to move a large mound of rocks. Once the mound was moved they were told to move it back to its original location. The work was physically painstaking, but what made matters unbearably worse was that there was no purpose to their activity. Moving the rocks was meaningless. An existence without God can be argued to be just as meaningless. As human masses of matter that have come about randomly, that are responding in pre-determined ways, and that will deteriorate into thoughtless matter at death, there is little to ground the concepts of meaning or purpose relative to human activity. Without God, we simply do what we must do because of what has happened in our genetic past and any meaning we conjure up for our existence is not real but is simply the way our brain conceives of things given its evolved state. Although there are many today who make it their purpose to preserve the planet, help the poor, achieve wealth and status, do good, live an honest life, or convince others there is no God, all such purposes have no transcendent worth without God. They are not the ends which humans must or should pursue for the very reason that the cosmos itself has no reason or purpose. Any purposes we propose in a godless world are simply story lines that make us feel good about ourselves in the time being, but are fictional nonetheless.

Love

Humanity longs for love. It sings songs about love. It risks greatly in order to pursue love. It has known countless broken hearts in unrequited love. For many, life without love is not a life worth living. Yet when we consider life without God, one must seriously doubt a notion of love that resembles anything a poet would write about. Indeed love in a Godless world is reduced to nothing more than a chemical reaction akin to the fizz created when baking soda and vinegar are combined. When we say that we love our children, we are not really saying they are of great worth and that we adore them for any reason other than the reaction they produce in us. Similarly, if a man tells his wife that he loves her, he is not telling her there is anything going on other than an uncontrollable chemical reaction that causes certain responses in his body and brain. This, of course, is not a very romantic picture of love, but it is all that is left if there is no God.

Concluding that life without God equals a life without rationality, free will, morality, justice, design, purpose, or love, might seem to go too far. But these conclusions are not just those of outsiders examining the atheistic worldview, they are also the views of respected and thoughtful atheists. Richard Dawkins writes:

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, and other people are going to get lucky; and you won't find any rhyme or reason to it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good.⁶

William Provine of Cornell University echoes these sentiments:

Let me summarize my views....There are no gods, no purposes, no goal-directed forces of any kind. There is no life after death. When I die, I am absolutely certain I am going to be dead. That's the end for me. There is no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning to life, and no free will for humans, either.⁷

In my experience many atheists don't realize that in staking their claim to a godless world that they are also precluding the possibility of things like justice, free will, and love. On the one hand, they embrace atheism as the only rational worldview, but on the other hand they practically embrace a belief in the reality of certain constructs that have no place in a godless world. Loyal Rue, Professor Emeritus at Luther College, admits this to be true, but says this sort of conflict is necessary for humans to be psychologically sound. That is, humanity must deceive itself into thinking that rationality and morality are true in order to avoid becoming crazy and destructive. He calls this a "Noble Lie"—noble because it brings a sense of meaning even where there is none.⁸ Ultimately "living a lie" seems to be the position in which the atheist is placed.

Personally, I do not find this a very satisfying position. It calls us to hold to a worldview in which we believe one thing, but act as though something different is true. This conundrum is something that is not required of those who believe there is a God who by his nature is a self-determined, rational, and purposeful designer. His character informs our morality and shapes the very best of love and justice. And as those made in his image, the press we feel from them is not illusory, but as real as the rising sun. A life without God comes with many ramifications. I can only think that an examination of those ramifications point us back to the very God that has been dismissed.

John Hopper © 2013

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Case for Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 32.

² Joshua 24:14-15

³ Sam Harris, *Free Will* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 5.

⁴ It was Richard Dawkins who said, "DNA neither cares nor knows. DNA just is. And we dance to its music." See Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Book, 1995), 133.

⁵ Statistics shown here come from Stephen C. Meyers, *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 194-228.

⁶ Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Book, 1995), 133.

⁷ "Darwinism: Science or Naturalistic Philosophy?: A Debate between William B. Provine and Phillip E. Johnson at Stanford University, April 30, 1994" *Origins Research*, vol 16, no .1, <http://www.arn.org/docs/orpages/or161/161main.htm> (accessed March 4, 2013).

⁸ See Loyal Rue, *By the Grace of Guile: The Role of Deception in Natural History and Human Affairs* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1994).