

What We Lose Without God

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Survey data tells us consistently that there are more and more people who do not affiliate with any kind of religious perspective. This does not always mean that they have taken a hardened atheistic stand, but rather that they do not see the relevance of God. Family is relevant, work is relevant, sports is relevant, science is relevant, the environment is relevant, but God is not. Perhaps he exists, but if he does he has little if anything to do with the life we live. This is the perspective of a growing number, but is it a thoughtful position? Is it true that God holds no relevance for the modern man or woman?

As you might suspect, I don't believe God is irrelevant to the human experience. In saying that, I am not suggesting that God is just a helpful fiction to make us feel better when we sin or make us less sad when someone dies. Instead I am saying that God is relevant at the most foundational levels of human experience. One way to help others understand this is to explore just what we would lose if God did not exist, regardless of whether we believe in him or not. I will offer three great losses here: the trustworthiness of reason, objective morality, and love.

The Trustworthiness of Reason

The first thing I think we would lose if there was no God is any trust we might have in our reasoning. That is, if there is no God we would have to doubt if the product of our minds is really something that we can put any confidence in. How is that so, you might ask? Let me explain. Let's suppose there is no God. The cosmos in which we live is simply something that came about by chance and with it all the forces of nature and all of its inorganic materials. Then let's suppose that over time those inorganic materials organized themselves into organic matter, and in time that organic matter created little microbes, and then little critters, and eventually beings like you and me.

If the scenario I just painted is true, and there is no God who guided creation and deposited within humanity the ability to reason, we would have to say that the reasoning mechanism in humans is one that is in great flux. At one point in our past, our brains did not reason as they do, and one day in the future they will not reason as they do. But if that is the case, we must ask ourselves how much sense it makes to trust whatever our brains generate today. Charles Darwin recognized this difficulty as well. He wrote:

With me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?^[1]

I think Darwin's question is a good one. If we can't trust the reasoning of lower animals, and we ourselves are a product of them and will one day be lower animals to more advanced creatures, then can we trust our own reasoning on any matter at all? It seems to me that we can't. In contemplating this very matter, C.S. Lewis observed:

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.[2]

So the first thing that it seems to me that we lose if there is no God is any trust in our own reasoning capacities. That's a pretty big loss. Some say, "Christianity is not relevant. Whether God exists makes no difference to me." But if you believe your ability to reason is trustworthy, I think God is much more relevant than you may have ever imagined.

Objective Morality

The second thing I think we would lose if there is no God is any objective morality. Now, this might not bother you. Many today say that they don't believe in moral absolutes. But I don't really believe them when they say that. Here's why.

Let's suppose my friend believes morals are personal—that each person must follow the tune of their own heart. In addition to this, she owns a dog. It is a very cute dog, a fun-loving Cocker Spaniel. One day, I wake up with a thought. I wonder how long it would take that dog to drown if I held it under water. I am so intrigued by this question that I sneak into my friend's backyard and take the dog with me. Heading to the nearest lake, I soon put the dog under water with a stopwatch in hand, noting just when the dog quits the struggle and loses its pulse. This, of course, is an awful scene, and my friend, when she finds out about it, is appalled. She believes she and the dog have been horribly violated. To which I profess, "But I was just following the tune of my heart. You liked your dog, and that is all well and good, but who is to say that my love of seeing how long creatures take to drown shouldn't trump that?" Her answer might be: "The government says so." And perhaps that is the case, but that would not make what I did morally wrong. As you know, governments throughout the ages have not always crafted laws we would consider very moral, and so resting morals on the current wave of legislation is just not going to cut it.

If we are going to say that some things are objectively wrong, like stealing a person's dog and drowning it, then there must be something or someone that stands outside of any time and culture who says that such and such is not right, that it is not good. Christianity says that someone is God, and furthermore it says the reason we cringe when I share what is just a fictional story of drowning a dog is not because we have been culturally conditioned to think so, but because it violates the very character of the God who made us with a sense of right and wrong. Take away God though, and there is very little reason to say that anything is objectively evil. We might say certain acts are not currently popular or that they are currently against the law, but it seems to me we can only say something is truly wrong is if there is a holy God who sets the standard. Richard Dawkins, probably the world's most vocal atheist, recognizes this to be the case. He writes:

In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.[3]

But I believe there is evil, objective evil. And if you are honest with yourself, you probably do too. Take God out, though, and there is no basis for any kind of morality that extends beyond personal boundaries. You see, God is deeply relevant to life, even if you choose not to believe in him.

Love

There is one more loss we would incur if this was a world without God. Actually, there are a number of other losses, but there is one more that I want to share with you today. And that is the loss of love. I enjoy the work that I do. I enjoy a well-prepared meal. I enjoy playing tennis with friends. I enjoy reading a book and learning new things. But all of that pales in comparison to what I receive through loving others and being loved by them. I can't even comprehend what life would be without the love of my family. Love for me is perhaps more real than anything. It is of deepest substance, and worthy of trading all of life for.

And yet it seems to me that love is really a rather shallow thing, if it really exists at all, if there is no God. Again, you might ask, but why is that so? Why is it that we lose love if there is no God? Francis Crick, one of the co-discoverers of DNA, wrote these words:

The Astonishing Hypothesis [of a world without God] is that 'You,' your joys and your sorrows, your memories and ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.^[4]

If there is no God that was involved in our world, who created us and designed us for love, then what we call love is nothing more than "the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules." Love is nothing more than an evolutionary response to an outward stimulus. When I say I love my wife or I love my children, I would not be saying anything deep about love, I would simply be saying that the nerves and molecules that make up my body have given me some sort of feeling or conscious state that I call love.

It seems to me that is a rather sad view of love. It does not match with my experience. My experience, and that of humanity throughout the ages, tells me there is love: deep, substantial, glorious love. Which is why when it is broken or missing, we experience the greatest of hurts. And Christianity affirms that. Christianity says that God Himself is love. Christianity says that God loves us, and he did so much so as to offer his own son as a sacrifice on our behalf. Christianity also says that we are to love one another, and to love God Himself with all we have. There is love because there is God.

I think many people have given up on God these days. They might be willing to say he exists out there somewhere, but they do not acknowledge him more than that. And in many cases, they come to this place because they do not see his relevance in their lives. But I think they haven't given it enough thought. God isn't superfluous. God is not disconnected from our experience. Far from it, God is the very foundation of our ability to think. He is the source of the sense of right and wrong that courses through our veins. And he is the one that originates and encourages the very love that makes life worth living. As far as I am concerned, God couldn't be any more relevant.

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[1] Charles Darwin to W. Graham, July 3, 1881, in *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, ed. Francis Darwin (1897; repr., Boston: Elibron, 2005), 1:285.

[2] C.S. Lewis, *The Case for Christianity* (Macmillan, 1943), 32.

[3] Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (Basis Books, 1996), 133.

[4] Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (Touchstone, 1994), 3.