

Religion for Skeptics

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Opening words

During the youthful period of mankind's spiritual evolution, human fantasy created gods in man's own image who were supposed to determine, or at any rate influence, the phenomenal world... In their struggle for the ethical good, teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal God, that is, give up that source of fear and hope which in the past placed such vast power in the hands of priests. ... The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion, based on experience, which refuses dogmatism.

-Albert Einstein¹

Sermon

Religious conservatives and skeptics don't agree on much, but they seem to agree that skepticism is incompatible with religion. Let's start with religious conservatives:

- Soren Kirkegaard said that to choose faith is to suspend reason in order to believe in something higher than reason.²
- More recently, in early 2000, a frenzy of excitement spread through revival churches by charismatic Christians who believed that the Holy Spirit was miraculously transforming porcelain crowns and silver fillings into gold, despite the fact that dental records contradicted the claims. According to a professor of religion and psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary, "People become impatient with all the folderol of high ritual. They want direct, born-again experiences."³

Turning to skeptics, many prominent scientists seem to agree that religion requires suspension of disbelief:

- Nobel Prize winning physicist Steven Weinberg says of human spirituality: "I don't even know what it means."⁴ He sees no redeeming value in religion, saying that: "With or without religion you have good people doing good things, and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, it takes religion."⁵
- Richard Dawkins, professor of public understanding of science at Oxford, has stated "I am against religion because it teaches us to be satisfied with not understanding the world. ...

1 Reported in *Science, Philosophy and Religion: A Symposium*, edited by L. Bryson and L. Finkelstein. Quoted in: *2000 Years of Disbelief*, by James Haught.

2 Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kierkegaard/#Reli>.

3 "Tall Tales Build Ranks of 'Miracle Ministries,'" Denver Post, January 29, 2000.

4 Physicist Ponders God, Truth, and 'a Final Theory,'" James Glanz, New York Times, January 25, 2000.

5 "The Constitution Guarantees Freedom From Religion," an open letter to US Vice-Presidential candidate Senator Joseph Lieberman, issued by the Freedom From Religion Foundation on August 28, 2000.

Religions do make claims about the universe – the same kinds of claims that scientists make, except they're usually false.”⁶

For many thoughtful people, this apparent conflict between religion and critical reasoning creates a painful dilemma: either force oneself to accept outlandish religious tenets through some kind of “leap of faith”, or live in a world that seems empty and purposeless. This dilemma is painful because most people want their beliefs to be both meaningful and true. It would be deeply unsettling if the beliefs that make life meaningful were fundamentally incompatible with science, logic, or common sense.

This morning I will argue that the choice between religion and skepticism is a false dilemma: one can find meaning and purpose in life—one can in a full and genuine sense be religious—while being skeptical in the sense of basing one's beliefs on reason and evidence rather than emotion, social pressure, or willing suspension of disbelief.

I don't mean to suggest that all, or even most, Unitarians are atheists. This is clearly false. In a recent survey of Unitarian beliefs, significant numbers of Unitarians described themselves as theists or as followers of traditionally theistic religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism. Many others said that they followed a nature or earth centered religion, or Buddhism. However, a plurality (about 46%) described themselves as Humanists. While “Humanist” is not synonymous with “atheist,” the second Humanist Manifesto states that:

We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of a supernatural; it is either meaningless or irrelevant to the question of survival and fulfillment of the human race. As nontheists, we begin with humans not God, nature not deity.⁷

Thus, it seems to me that religious Humanists are obliged to show how religion is compatible with a skeptical, empirical world view.

The first step in showing that religion is compatible with skepticism is to identify the key elements of religion. Considering the central role of religion in human history and current affairs, it may come as a surprise that there is no generally accepted definition of religion. Instead, there are a number of different elements that are usually present to a greater or lesser extent.

Two particularly important elements are *transcendence* and *morality*. By transcendence, I mean a connection to something outside of oneself that subsumes one's own life and experiences and put one's life into the context of broader purposes and meaning. By morality, I mean empathy and compassion for others, and a sense of obligation to treat others as one should wish to be treated.

Let us consider these two elements—transcendence and morality—to see whether they can withstand a skeptical eye. Let's start with morality.

It is often claimed by religious conservatives that without God there is no morality. A recent example is Michael Gerson's July 13, 2007 Op Ed piece in the Washington Post entitled “What Atheists Can't Answer,” in which he says:

How do we choose between good and bad instincts? Theism, for several millennia, has given one answer: we should cultivate the better angels of our nature because the God we love and respect requires it. ... Atheism provides no answer to this dilemma. ... In a purely material universe, what possible moral basis could exist to condemn [self-centered exploitation of others]? Atheists can be good people; they just have no objective way to judge the conduct of

⁶ <http://www.simonyi.ox.ac.uk/dawkins/WorldOfDawkins-archive/Catalano/quotes.shtml>.

⁷ <http://www.americanhumanist.org/about/manifesto2.html>.

those who are not.

To respond to the claim that morality requires God, let's start with the question whether theists and atheists do in fact have different moral judgments. The answer is a resounding, "No." In a recent experiment, Marc Hauser, Harvard Psychologist and Peter Singer, Princeton philosopher, posed 3 moral dilemmas to 1500 subjects, including both theists and atheists, and analyzed their responses. No difference in moral judgments were observed between the two groups; theists and atheists shared the same moral intuitions.⁸

Where do moral intuitions come from? In the book "Empathy and Moral Development"⁹ Martin Hoffman, developmental psychologist at NYU, summarizes 40 years of research showing that children normally progress from sympathetic distress as infants, to basic empathy, and on to full compassion for others in a natural progression if they are raised in a normal environment. Marc Hauser in the book "Moral Minds"¹⁰ argues that this moral development is as hardwired into our mental architecture as our ability to learn language.

Of course, full moral development depends on a healthy emotional environment, just as speaking well requires a rich and stimulating verbal environment, but speech and morality are equally fundamental to normal development as human beings. We can see this from ethnological studies that show that all societies have similar rules involving mutual respect, frequently involving some form of the golden rule or categorical imperative.

Social scientists have shown how altruism and self-sacrifice can emerge from evolution and natural selection.¹¹ Primatologist Frans de Waal has even shown that a sense of justice and morality is present in many primates. In one experiment, capuchin monkeys given a less tasty treat than other monkeys for doing the same task became so furious that they hurled the food out of the cage rather than suffer the injustice of getting less than they were entitled to.¹²

In summary, no leap of faith is needed to justify morality. It is an essential and universal part of being human, and hard-nosed, skeptical scientists are increasing our understanding of our moral sense every day. Moreover, theism doesn't make people more moral, although being a part of a community that monitors and enforces norms definitely has a significant effect on how people behave.

Let's turn to transcendence. Mainstream conservative religions typically posit a spirit realm, parallel to the physical world, that contains gods, angels, devils, and the spirits of people who have died. Actions and events in ordinary life have a broader significance because of their effect in the spirit realm, such as changing how one is reincarnated or guaranteeing salvation. In less conservative religions the transcendent often involves a connection to some greater consciousness or force that doesn't necessarily have the characteristics of a person (such as a "spirit of life").

The challenge for the skeptical humanist is to refute the widespread claim of religious conservatives that if only the material world exists, then love, altruism, creativity, joy, free will and all the other experiences and attributes that make us human are illusions, that we are just puppets of meaningless Darwinian or molecular laws, that, in short, without the supernatural, life is meaningless.

8 <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/hausersinger1>.

9 Hoffman, Martin L., (2001), *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*, Cambridge University Press.

10 Hauser, Marc D., (2007), *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*, Ecco/HarperCollins.

11 Ridley, Matt, (1997), *The Origin of Virtue*, Viking Penguin.

12 de Waal, Frans, (2006), *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*, Princeton University Press .

The first observation in response to this challenge is that many of the things that are most important to a meaningful life are not specific to any one belief system. These include loving, supportive relationships with family and friends, engaging and worthwhile work, the experience of beauty in music, nature, and art, outlets for creativity, and a sense that what we do contributes to the welfare of others. People with these things in their lives are generally not troubled by doubts about meaning and purpose. However, there are exceptions.

For example, at the height of his career, after the publication of *Anna Karenina*, the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy began to be increasingly perplexed by questions about the purpose of his life:

I could give no reasonable meaning to any actions of my life. ... What will be the outcome of all my life? Why should I live? Why should I do anything? Is there any purpose in life which the inevitable death which awaits me does not undo and destroy?¹³

In response to these feelings Tolstoy became a true believer in his own individual form of Christianity and abandoned any reliance on science or empiricism.

How do we respond to feelings like those that tormented Tolstoy? If human beings are the product of purposeless evolution and our minds are generated through biochemical processes of the brain, does it mean that we are puppets and our experiences and free will are illusions? Not at all!

To explain something is not to explain it away. To be biological entities doesn't detract from being moral entities. To say how we got here is not to diminish what we are. It is just to substitute an evolutionary creation story for an older, less believable story.

Computer science provides a useful analogy. If we want to know why a computer chess program makes a certain move, it's not helpful to say, "The computer isn't really playing chess, all its actions can be explained just by the electrons flowing through silicon and wire." This answer misses the forest for the trees. The right way to answer the question is in terms of chess, saying, for example, that the program is trying to capture its opponent's queen. This meaning would be the same regardless of what the computer is made of, where the parts came from, or who put it together. What's important is instead the behavior of the program.

Similarly, to say that our love, compassion, and creativity are really just illusions created by Darwinian or molecular laws is misleading because our conscious experience is just not the same thing as the physical structures that make them possible, any more than the execution of a computer program is the same as the hardware that the program runs on. Evolution and molecular biology don't make us puppets, but merely explain the origin and nature of the biological structures that our minds are embodied in. So, scientific explanations of our origins and biology don't make life meaningless.

For many theists, however, a key element of religious transcendence is a sense of connection to a consciousness that extends beyond themselves. Can a skeptic accept the idea that there is a larger consciousness that we can be connected to? Once again, I think that science provides a useful metaphor.

Surgery used to sometimes be performed on certain epilepsy patients that would sever the connection between the two hemispheres of the brain, the corpus callosum. There are famous cases in which the separated brain hemispheres seemed to have separate opinions, as when one arm would try to pull on a tacky pair of pants while the other arm tried to push them away. Less well known is that this peculiar state of having two independent hemispheres is always temporary. Within days or hours patients

13 Leo N. Tolstoy, *Confession*, Ch. 6, Chapter The Classic Library, <http://www.classicallibrary.org/tolstoy/confession/>.

develop strategies for indirect communication between the hemispheres. This occurs because the halves of our brains are not designed to operate separately, but instead as parts of a larger whole.

In an analogous way, we are designed to operate as part of a larger whole, that is, our minds are designed to be connected with the conscious states of other persons. We are social beings, and the feelings, thoughts, judgments, and goals of the people around us are the most important aspect of our environment. Social psychologists have shown that we continuously and unconsciously recalibrate our perceptions based on cues from the people around us. Just in the last month, research was published showing that the dietary habits of our friends affect us even if they live hundreds of miles away. If they overeat, we are more likely to be fat; if they watch their diet, we are more likely to be thin.¹⁴

The aggregate of all these automatic and unconscious influences and connections that allow us to profit from the ingenuity and sacrifices of our ancestors and that connect us to the generations to come, that enable us to finish a sentence started by our best friend and sometimes recall our spouse's dreams as our own, that gives us the values and musical tastes of our generation, that connects all of us, no matter where and when we live, to one another, this network of psychological connections is a kind of *universal social network*. Our connection to this universal social network is not created by magic or immaterial spiritual stuff, but arises because our minds are designed to operate in synchrony with other minds, just as the two hemispheres of a brain are designed to work in synchrony.

Even after our death we continue to influence the thoughts and experiences of those we were connected to in life. While the effects of our lives are diluted across time and space, those effects are never entirely gone.

So, I think even a skeptic can take comfort in the knowledge that there is a kind of larger consciousness that encompasses us all, even if it isn't quite the same kind of larger consciousness that theists feel themselves in communication with.

But for some theists, an encompassing consciousness is still not enough. Some will argue that notwithstanding loving relationships, meaningful work, the experience of beauty, a sense of contributing to welfare of other, a commitment to morality, and a connection to a greater consciousness, life is still not meaningful unless there is higher purpose or meaning, that is, a purpose or meaning that is more important than any amount of human experience. I don't think that science can help the skeptical humanist with this problem because science deals with descriptions, not valuations.

“The meaning of life, the universe, and everything” is a running joke in the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Universe, but the question whether there could actually be such a thing is a puzzle that philosophers have taken seriously. I personally have come to the conclusion that the best response may be to turn the question around and ask what kind of thing could conceivably be more important than all human experience put together? To my mind, traditional religious answers to this question are not very convincing. For example, the idea that every experience, good or bad, that anyone has ever had since the beginning of the world is significant only insofar as it has contributed to redeeming the world from sin seems to me to make life less meaningful, not more meaningful. In the end, it may be that it is not the universe that gives meaning to us, but instead we who give meaning to the universe. If so, we have a deep responsibility that we shouldn't try to fob off on imaginary deities.

I have tried to briefly show that two of the key elements of religion—morality and transcendence—don't depend on any leap of faith and can be as meaningful to a skeptic as to a true believer. In this, I have disagreed both with anti-religious scientists, like Richard Dawkins, and with anti-scientific true

14 <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/26/health/26fat.html?ex=1186718400&en=c2b23b9c71dc961a&ei=5070>.

believers, like Kirkegaard and the charismatic Christians for whom dental exams are no match for the power of faith.

What I have presented is only a start. Indeed, creating a humanistic religion that can attract—and satisfy the psychic and social needs of—its adherents as fully as mainstream religions do is the work of a lifetime, or more likely of many lifetimes. However, I think that an important near-term objective of humanism should be to develop simple, understandable humanistic answers to a handful of basic life questions. Here are two examples.

The main claim of the article by Michael Gerson that I mentioned earlier was actually not that morality only exists for theists, but rather that atheists have no way to *justify* morality, regardless of how they act. I have argued that morality is a fundamental part of what it is to be human, but I myself don't have the right vocabulary for a simple, persuasive, humanistic answer to the question “Why do the right thing rather than whatever is in your self interest?” Instead, I have only the long and complicated answer I just gave, or else the very short but circular argument that one should do what is right because it is right.

A second example comes from conservative commentator Dinesh D'Souza, who after the Virginia Tech shootings published a blog entitled “Where is Atheism When Bad Things Happen?”¹⁵ in which he claimed that atheists like Richard Dawkins have no words of comfort for those who have suffered losses. Of course, Richard Dawkins never claimed to be a religious humanist, but to the contrary is openly hostile to religion. However, I think that D'Souza's challenge must be answered by humanists. Providing comfort at times of loss is a basic function of religion, and mainstream religions have simple and understandable (if, in my opinion, completely misleading) ways to do this. Humanism must also have simple, understandable, and also hopefully more truthful things to say at times of loss.

In conclusion, I have tried to show specific ways that the moral and transcendent elements of religion can coexist with skepticism, and have argued that no leap of faith is needed either for compassion towards others or for a life of meaning and purpose. I leave you with the challenge of helping humanism evolve into a religion that not only can answer the big questions, but also the simple, common challenges of life, such as hard moral choices and comforting the afflicted.

Closing words:

A human being is part of a whole, called by us the Universe, a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical illusion of our consciousness. This illusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.¹⁶

- Albert Einstein

¹⁵ <http://news.aol.com/newsbloggers/2007/04/18/where-is-atheism-when-bad-things-happen/>.

¹⁶ <http://www.spaceandmotion.com/Albert-Einstein-Quotes.htm>.