

Living happily without God

The Cranky Professor

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For an atheist, life has no meaning. But a life without meaning cannot be a happy or satisfying one. Therefore, atheists cannot, in the end, lead happy or satisfying lives.

That many people who claim to be happy also profess to be atheists shouldn't be taken to refute the above argument. The happy atheist might just suppose he's an atheist, while the truly atheistic might not actually be happy. If we think the argument unsound, we will have to criticise it without drawing believers into a war of anecdotes.

We might try to undermine this argument by denying its first premise, the claim that for an atheist, life has no meaning. This attempt will fail. To be an atheist, at least a clear-headed one, is to live without much that others take for granted. (An atheist cannot give thanks at Thanksgiving, for instance.)

For a theist, on the other hand, life cannot but have meaning. Religion brings meaning to people's lives through its doctrine that the cosmos is a unified whole, one that is good—ultimately good or good overall (though perhaps bad in one or another isolated detail). Religion assures the faithful that everyone has a proper place within this good whole and a contribution to make to it. The faithful live believing that their actions and passions are not in vain, no matter what happens.

The meaning of life, then, is to discover and inhabit one's role, the role one has been assigned. This might be hard to do, given that we are all a bit selfish, or because we are preoccupied with our hardships or pain. But it cannot be impossible to discover and inhabit one's role, for the Creator, being loving and providential, would not place on anyone a burden that that person cannot bear. Indeed, any failures we experience along the way are themselves part of the process. The challenge to live in light of one's place is itself part of the meaning of life.

An atheist, on the other hand, cannot think of the cosmos as an organic whole, shot through with intelligence or purpose. An atheist cannot conceive of his life as a quest to find and occupy his assigned role, for there is no assigner and, thus, no role. An atheist's life must, then, be without meaning.

So let us turn to the second premise, the premise that says a life without meaning cannot be happy. It is this claim the atheist should reject.

One objection to the claim that to live happily one must think one's life meaningful is that happiness consists simply in living without pain. Anyone not presently experiencing either physical or emotional pain and confident that she won't experience pain tomorrow is happy. That's all it takes.

But how can one be confident one won't be in pain tomorrow? Easy. The trick is to live without anxiety, and all that that requires is that one not want anything one isn't sure to get. To live simply and quietly, within one's secure means, without wanting power, fame, or fortune, is to live without anxiety and, thereby, to live happily.

Those who do live quietly might well love their lives and couldn't be happier. But the quiet life strikes the rest of us as bland and dull. We want something more energetic. We would like to have something analogous to the thrill of the quest and the sense of accomplishment available to the faithful.

And that's just where we can find happiness without meaning. The quests a person sets herself and her accomplishments can themselves, all by themselves, be sources of joy and satisfaction. A person need not believe either that her questing or her success has any significance outside this material world. One can, that is, be content and happy just to exercise one's talents, without assigning any meaning to that exercise.

Now at this point the faithful will note that because atheists do not see their pleasures as transcendentally significant, they must experience them as empty. Empty pleasures do not add up to a happy life. This truth will eventually become apparent to atheists, for the fact that we all die will make its way into their consciousnesses someday.

But from where does this need for transcendence come? Likely enough, it comes from religion itself. Religion creates the need that religion then seeks, with varying degrees of success, to satisfy. The pleasures of life taken just for what they are will not feel empty to a person who lacks a religious sensibility.

Is our conclusion, then, that religion is necessary for the religious, but not for the irreligious? No, we can go a step further, once we note the difficulty and psychic costs of being religious.

To be religious, at least such that one finds one's life meaningful, one has to believe that all is for the best, that everything happens for a good reason, that a being outside time and space understands and loves us all. One has to believe this not only without evidence, but against the evidence. That requires strenuous self-deception. The believer must, then, be aware that the bottom could fall out at any minute.

Better, then, for the religious, that they struggle to free themselves of the need to see life as meaningful. Better for anyone who cares to live well and happily that she enjoy her friends and her endeavours simply for what they are.