



## Life *Without* God

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**L**ife with God? That phrase is almost redundant. There's no such thing as life *without* God. Existence, protein transfer, metabolic function, yes. But life?

Nietzsche once said, God is dead. If so, what does that mean for those made in His image? It means that there is no hope of ever finding out how to live. And, if we don't know how to live, how can we live?

Jean Paul Sartre, the century's most influential atheist, said that "it is very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it." Bertrand Russell wrote that "many traditional ethical concepts are difficult to interpret except on the assumption that there is a God or a World Spirit or at least an immanent cosmic Purpose." Atheist apologist J. L. Mackie argued

that "moral properties constitute so odd a cluster of properties and relations that are most unlikely to have risen in the ordinary course of events without an all-powerful god to create them."

In a life without God . . . the Truth, or the Good (whatever those terms now mean) do not permeate the world as do the Pythagorean theorem, the Laws of Thermodynamics, or Planck's constant; morals are not like Special or General Relativity, fundamental facts of reality waiting thousands of years for Albert Einstein to extract them from the air. Instead, in a life without God, morality is as subjective and personal as fingerprints; perhaps it's not even that real but mere cultural and personal biases more dependent upon one's childhood relationship to his or her mother than upon any transcendent norm. There is no "ought," only "is" and from this "is" no "ought" can be absolutely derived. With God dead, moral knowledge can't exist, only moral *belief*. Morality is a preference, as for Beethoven's

*Third Symphony* over David Bowie's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars*, or for Big Macs over Clams Casino. Values are judged by their utility; "good" gets the trains to run on time, "bad" causes them to be late. Or even less fundamental: "good" is what you like, "bad" is what you don't. Human senses (not divine commandments), human appetites (not sacred texts), and human desires (not religious injunctions), these are the stuff that morality—good, evil, right, and wrong—are made of because there is nothing else. Truth is horizontal, not vertical; it's physical, not spiritual; it comes from mitosis, testosterone, and protein metabolism, not from the Lord, the Torah, the *Ruach HaKodesh*. Values have to be contrived from among ourselves, concocted out of a boiling brew of human passion, flesh, and dreams, and not revealed by some brooding omnipresence in the sky. As players in a game, we make up the rules as we go along; we must, because the primates didn't leave behind detailed instructions.

Of course, Bertrand Russell, Friedrich Nietzsche, John Paul Sartre, and J. L. Mackie all knew that it was wrong to torture little children. Many atheists and secularists have been, still are, and will be "good" people, at times even "better" than their religious counterparts (after all, when was the last time a skeptic strapped himself full of explosives and took out a city bus?). That atheists and secularists can devise internally coherent moral systems is not the issue; the issue, instead, is what they *can't* do—and that is derive an internally coherent moral system based upon any transcendent or immutable absolute because—they assert (often absolutely)—none exists.

A system is only as stable as its foundation. Why build a house on pink elephants when nothing

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more than a purple turtle could knock it down? We work only with what's available, and for the secularist, the atheist, what's available is only conditional, relative, human, nothing more because there is nothing else.

If values are derived from humanity, from human needs, from human nature, from human desires alone, because these needs, natures, and desires are malleable, fluctuating, and transient, all morals systems based on them must be as well. Maybe that's good; maybe values should change along with desires and needs; maybe morals should fluctuate with the Winter Solstice or

*ment* stick together with the sweat of his intellectual and moral turmoil. Sofya Semyonovna Marmeladov becomes a prostitute in order to feed her starving little brother and sister. Rodion Ramonovitch Raskolnikov kills a nasty, spiteful old usurer and steals her money in order to help his mother and sister, to advance his studies, and to become someone great who will devote himself to fulfilling his "humane obligations to mankind."

Were these acts, given the intense circumstances that framed them, wrong? Was Rodion Ramonovitch right when he said that "a single misdeed is permis-

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the full moon; maybe there should be no moral *axioms*, only moral *hypotheses*, maybe there should be no moral *imperatives*, only moral *hunches*. Maybe truth is more poetic than geometric, more hormonal than metaphysical, more like wind than rocks. If so, then, one must admit that, given specific circumstances, torturing little children might be the moral thing to do. Who can say with terminal certainty that it's wrong when, working only with the conditional and the relative, you can never say anything but the conditional and the relative?

Dostoevsky grappled with these questions so fervently that the pages of *Crime and Punish-*

sible if the principal aim is right, a solitary wrongdoing and hundreds of good deeds!" If there be no God who has imposed an immutable moral order on the universe, what grounds can one use to, categorically, condemn murder and prostitution? What authority can, justly, impose these moral restraints upon autonomous souls?

None.

That's what life without God would be like. That's why, in the end, it's not really life.