

## **Reflection on Atheism**

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I am an atheist. By definition that means that I do not believe in god. That said, I think about god a lot. I've read quite a bit about the subject and I've thought carefully about what I think about god, religion and the place of human beings in the universe. Oddly, this isn't peculiar to me, indeed it seems to me (looking around the sanctuary) that it's pretty interesting stuff.

I'm not really particular about singling out the Abrahamic god for disbelief. I also disbelieve in Zeus, Vishnu, Odin, the flying spaghetti monster and the invisible pink unicorn. Those last two for those of you who don't know are constructs by some atheists and are used to make arguments against the existence of god, but I'm not here to start a fight. It's more important to me in this moment to work on being a good UU and that means accepting the beliefs of the members of this congregation and of the other people here who may not be members. You are all important to me and I don't wish to hurt anyone with my personal disbelief in god.

I don't know how else to be. I've always felt strange when matters of faith came up. I've never had it or I've forgotten that I had it. I remember thinking that I was like a spiritual amputee or that I was a little insane. I thought that other people were born with something I didn't have and that I was less than they were because I really don't believe in magic, or miracles that come from deities. That said, I do believe in mystery, beauty, altruism, truth, love and a host of other things that are difficult to define.

I may not believe in a personal god, but I do believe in love. I think that love is a common emotional response that provides an evolutionary advantage. Love is a gift from our ancestors, they selected each other for mates based on the ability to express love and thus selected love as an important attribute for all of us. I see love in humans and animals (mostly mammals, but I've seen it in birds). My son has a kitten. They have a special relationship that looks like love. She will look at him and he will reach for her and she will just fall into his arms where he gently smothers her with affection. And I mean smother, he constrains her and prevents her from moving and she just takes it. She doesn't do that for just anyone. She loves him. He doesn't even usually feed her or clean her box, but for some reason she loves him. She takes special care not to hurt him with her sharp claws and teeth. She checks on him in the night, apparently to make sure he is alright. When she's finished she tears around the apartment until even the lighter sleepers in the house fall asleep. She loves him. I can't blame her, I love him, too.

Once when I was at the University of Idaho, I went to my first Theist vs. Atheist debate. I'd never seen a person declare himself an atheist in public. I was impressed with the atheist, he had all of these arguments and ideas that were hinted at like Occam's Razor and The Riddle of Epicurus. The entire debate finally came down to the theist saying that the atheist believed that all the people in the auditorium were just bubbling chemical reactions and that that was clearly false and probably crazy. The atheist seemed pretty comfortable with that idea and frankly so was I. I started wondering what is the

difference between a being that is imbued with the spirit of the heavenly father, that has an immortal soul or essence, and a being that is a system of chemical reactions interacting with the universe via electromagnetic, gravitic and other stimuli. I wondered how two different beings, one spiritual and one chemical might experience love. I decided after careful consideration that there could be no measurable difference. I have been periodically surprised when I've tried to explain this to other people and they look at me like I'm unbalanced.

If love were to be experienced by a system of membranes and organs, governed by hormones, triggered by chemical reactions caused by external stimuli such as light reflected from another system of membranes and organs and other olfactory and auditory stimuli, would the addition of an immortal soul make love any more wondrous? I don't know the answer, but I must ask the question. I do know that when I experience love I don't think about it in clinical or scientific terms. Do people who believe in a personal god perceive love through their belief in god? I'm not conscious of experiencing love through any particular lens, I just feel it.

Something I hear a lot when discussing atheism is, "you gotta believe in something!" And I do. As I said before, I believe in mystery, beauty, altruism, truth, love and I especially believe in the scientific method. I believe in gravity and evolution. I believe in every person's right to believe in what they wish. I think that atheists are often confused with antitheists. Antitheists are opposed to people believing in God and think that belief in God specifically and religion in general is bad for people. I personally feel like I want to respect and appreciate other people's beliefs (even antitheist ones), because I know I don't know everything. That's one of the reasons that I'm beginning to think of myself as a UU and as an atheist.

One of the main reasons why I like Channing is that there are quite a few atheists in the congregation and they have been verbal about their atheism. It made me feel welcome. I understand that as an atheist I am somewhat of an outsider in American culture. My belief system or lack thereof is substantially outside of the cultural norm even here in the liberal Northeast. In my meeting with Amy in the lead up to this talk she mentioned the existence of an out atheist congressman in California. I personally find it a little disconcerting that there is a belief system litmus test in order to hold high public office. I find it more than a little disconcerting that the act of professing faith imbues the professor with a mantle of truthfulness, goodness and nearly unimpeachable morality.

Hopefully, I have the wisdom not to exclude theists and other kinds of magical thinkers from my circle. This is what separates my belief system from an antitheist's. I like the idea of bringing religious ideas to the table, many religious traditions have wisdom that can allow members of our species an alternate perspective from which to examine reality. Examination of reality from multiple perspectives is important as it is a key to compassion and tolerance.

As an atheist I have been personally accused of being immoral or perhaps amoral. Some people who believe in god, seem to think that morality is a side effect of religion or theism. I believe that morality is based on reason. Immoral actions tend to have negative and uncomfortable outcomes, children and adults learn about the repercussions of

immorality, learn from mistakes and make adjustments.

Morality based on reason is nothing new, the Greeks were figuring that out more than 2000 years ago. Whether one tries to find the golden mean between extremes as Aristotle proposed, Utilitarianism as Mill proposed, a mind bending Kantian analysis, or simply "Do unto others," there are many paths to living what Socrates called the summum bonum. The summum bonum is the good ethical life for us as individuals. The summum bonum is achieved by self examination and is attained over a long span of years. Individual ethical behavior is important and necessary for a social species like ours; so that we can live together and pursue the good life, a pinnacle of individual ethical behavior.

As an atheist, I believe that we must be kind to each other, that we must love one another and that we must gently care for one another because this life that we share is all that there is. Our existence and consciousness is a mysterious gift, whether given by some otherworldly power or as I believe by the convergence of matter and energy according to simple rules over a long span of time into emergent complex systems. In either case, the universe perceives itself through our senses, through our consciousness and isn't that marvelous!

As a sentient species that is capable of reason, of rational thought, we strive to understand our place in this universe. I think we want to transcend individual morality and are working on achieving ethical behavior as a species. One of the most important aspects of the theory and fact of evolution is the similarity that can be drawn between the finite lifespan of human beings as individuals and the longer but still finite lifespan of our species. We must embrace the certainty of our extinction in the same way that we must face our individual mortality. Even stars die, we owe our existence to a massive star that died in this relative region of space about 5 billion years ago. The component atoms of our planet and our bodies were forged in that brilliantly blazing primordial progenitor. Shall we face our end with courage and humility as befits the sentient children of the universe or with denial and hubris? As an atheist, why do I care, doesn't my disbelief make my and everyone else's existence meaningless from my own empty perspective? I must say, certainly not! But why not is the obvious question . . . because we are all here with our fantastic consciousnesses sitting behind our eyes, experiencing each others joy and pain and the meaning of our existence springs from us in each successive moment.

What kinds of questions does a sentient species need to answer before it can claim to have lived an aggregate summum bonum? We are finite. That said, what will our legacy be? What will we leave to our progeny, whether they spring from our DNA or simply replace us, whether they achieve the same level of sentience that our species has or not... Will we leave a planet hollowed out of easily obtained minerals and fossil fuels? Will our greed and unsustainable overuse of natural resources make another species' civilization unlikely? Will we doom the last members of our own species to an existence that is unnecessarily "nasty, brutish and short" so that we can zoom around in an age of self-important wonder? I'm actually an optimist, but I have concerns that we are not behaving like a mature, responsible, collection of interdependent organisms. What kind of macro-ethics can guide our species to a better, less selfish existence? How can we join together to shape our collective existence into something that could be defined as good

and moral?

I racked my brain trying to think of a nice succinct phrase to name this species level ethos. Amusingly the answer was one word and was right in front of me the whole time. The word is simply religion. That is what gives me hope. There seems to be a drive for our species to solve these complex ethical problems and we seem to be working at it very diligently from many different perspectives. Look at the diversity of beliefs and disbeliefs. I think a time is coming when we will knit all of these disparate beliefs into something we can all believe in. I told you I was an optimist.

If you were to accept the thesis, that love, compassion and gentle caring are the key to an individual's attempt at attaining a good life, what might the corollary be for our species? The seven principles of the UUA seem pretty good from my perspective. To me the seven principles seem to say, "love one another; be kind to each other; and gently care for one another." I suppose what draws me to Channing and the UU flavor of religion is that it allows me to participate in the critical endeavor of making the world a better place. Besides, a religion that allows atheists to participate is paradigm shatteringly funny, who wouldn't want to be involved?

I am an atheist and I believe in religion as the critical pursuit of a species level ethos. I believe that our species can achieve a moral existence before our inevitable lapse into oblivion. Regardless, I am incalculably grateful for my existence and for the love I share with Kim (my wife), Gabe (my son) and all of you.

A reading from Albert Einstein's Science and Religion:

*"The more a man is imbued with the ordered regularity of all events the firmer becomes his conviction that there is no room left by the side of this ordered regularity for causes of a different nature. For him neither the rule of human nor the rule of divine will exists as an independent cause of natural events. To be sure, the doctrine of a personal God interfering with natural events could never be refuted, in the real sense, by science, for this doctrine can always take refuge in those domains in which scientific knowledge has not yet been able to set foot.*

*But I am persuaded that such behavior on the part of the representatives of religion would not only be unworthy but also fatal. For a doctrine which is able to maintain itself not in clear light but only in the dark, will of necessity lose its effect on mankind, with incalculable harm to human progress. 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. In their labors they will have to avail themselves of those forces which are capable of cultivating the Good, the True, and the Beautiful in humanity itself. This is, to be sure, a more difficult but an incomparably more worthy task."*

"nasty, brutish and short" attrib. to Hobbes in Leviathan  
Other references attributed in text of speech