

Sample essay on religion and the meaning of life

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Since time immemorial, philosophers, scientists, theologians, and laypeople have inquired about the nature of " God" and the possibilities of a transcendent realm from both a scientific perspective as well as a religious perspective. Their answers are nebulous, as the lack of evidence of an Omniscient being, or a loving " Creator" can be construed as the absence of the ability to know this realm. Any knowledge of such a realm must be taken on faith alone, as it is not scientifically provable, which either proves that science has its limits, or that the knowledge of God operates beyond the realm of scientific empiricism -- and cannot be objectively proven. One of the questions that has beleaguered men -- and women -- of all eras is whether one can have a moral construct, or compass, without an attendant belief in a transcendent power, i. e. " God." Insofar as humans are able to make rational choices, and develop the framework and " game rules" for their own behavior, there is no question that morality can be practiced without a belief in a transcendent power, or Omniscient Being. In fact, it is incumbent on a person to exercise the responsibility of operating from within the guidelines of their own philosophic framework. Otherwise, the question is moot and its prerogatives do not belong within the realm of philosophic inquiry.

First, morality is a virtue that is practiced out of necessity. According to Nietzsche (1954), " A virtue must be our own invention, our most necessary self-expression and self-defense: any other kind of virtue is merely a danger." Nietzsche argued that true, virtuous behavior is a creative act that is necessary for our survival. He negated uninventive virtues, stating that such virtues were life-negating as opposed to life-affirming. From Nietzsche: " The fundamental laws of self-preservation and growth demand the opposite

-- that everyone invent his own virtue, his own categorical imperative" (Nietzsche, 1954). Thus, Nietzsche does not invoke a "higher power," one that demands a dutiful practitioner of dogmatic virtues. Instead, he contends that man -- as bestial as he is -- has the duty (or categorical imperative) to invent his own virtues.

However, one can counter with the argument that, without belief in religious values or a transcendent realm, men and women may err in their ways, inventing what they perceive as virtuous behavior in a relativistic sense -- as we are only human. For example, if a man has created a system of virtues for himself that allows him to carry out the most heinous crimes (murder, rape, robbery, etc.), then his morality is faulty, and can only result in negative consequences, such as retaliation, punishment, and death. Thus, there is no absolute good or bad. In such a world, universal ideals do not exist, and man is left free to operate whimsically, irresponsibly, and immorally -- in short, man may merrily make and follow his own rules without any thought of "God" or a transcendent power -- a power that can punish bad behavior or reward good behavior.

Again, Nietzsche argues that God is a projection of man's "will to power." As such, Nietzsche casts man into the mold of an animal who needs gods -- both good and bad -- to project the dynamics of his personality onto "higher" beings. Nietzsche labels the good, virtuous "God" as impotent, while he calls those who label themselves as "good" -- the worshippers of the good god -- weak. Thus, weak worshippers of the "good god" must, by definition, own a self-invented morality that is weak as well (Nietzsche, 1954).

Similar to Nietzsche, Freud reserves some of his harshest criticisms for

theologians who masquerade as philosophers, stating, " Where questions of religion are concerned, people are guilty of every sort of dishonesty and intellectual misdemeanour God is now nothing more than an insubstantial shadow and no longer the mighty personality of religious doctrines" (Freud, 1961). Freud continues by stating that all religion is illusory insofar as its beliefs can neither be proved or disproved. Instead, Freud states that religion is a projection of man's wish fulfillment, i. e. that there is a benevolent (preferably non-abusive) Father-figure who presides over all of Heaven and Earth. Such a framework, Freud states, also demands a system of justice and a type of immortality for man as a part of an illusory system based upon childish desires for wish-fulfillment. Similar to Nietzsche, Freud also pegs those who are our religious forebears as being " wretched, ignorant, and downtrodden" (Freud, 1961). Thus, Freud leaves it up to the individual to break free from illusion, and set his own course to follow, in terms of morality. Thus, morality is not only achievable without a concept of God; the concept of God is the illusion, as Nietzsche suggests, that prevents a true morality from being invented.

As James (1956) states, " Skepticism, then, is not avoidance of option; it is option of a certain particular kind of risk." James continues: " If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God and the future, no one can prevent him If a man thinks otherwise and acts as he thinks, I do not think anyone can prove that he is mistaken" (James, 1956). Thus, James allows the freedom of choice to believe or not believe in God, thereby leaving the question of what constitutes a moral life up to the individual. It is the individual, James asserts, who must choose between belief and non-belief. If

people universally held this position, they would quickly realize that all constructs of morality are then left to their stewardship, and choose moral behavior (at least, since immoral behavior has obvious negative consequences).

Man can live a virtuous life without the God-concept or the belief in a transcendent realm. It is not only possible, but is nearly a necessity in order for men to become responsible, as well as self-fulfilling. Without the comforts of belief, men are forced to examine their own constructs of morality and virtue. They are forced to mature, and finally grow up without the appeal to or intercession of a Divine father-figure (or mother-figure).

References

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