

“I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar”

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I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar,” a line in a Walter Kaufmann translation of Nietzsche reads. My understanding of this sentence has been that belief in God is fundamentally belief that there is a logic to the universe and that this latter belief is also reflected in our attachment to lesser logics or organizing systems. Until we recognize the arbitrariness of grammar and the meaninglessness of its usefulness, we have not faced up to the arbitrariness and meaninglessness of existence. Or so Nietzsche proposed, with his signature combination of rage and playfulness.

Insofar as conceptions of God are culturally determined and each age has its ways of grappling with the tragedy and anxieties of existence, in New York City at the dawn of the twenty-first century God cannot be quite the same deity that Nietzsche, in Western Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, declared dead. And there is a sense too in which Nietzsche was often struggling to master his feelings about his own father having died when he was only 4. In my case, my father has remained present in body if not always in spirit, and I have myself become a father. I feel how fatherdom is both unforgivable and one of life’s greatest blessings.

Nietzsche’s father was a pastor. My father has been a sort of atheist pastor. A professor descended from New England Puritans, he has been obsessed with how people should behave, the most rational social policies. By virtuous comportment and gardening, woodworking, drawing, piano-playing he has striven relentlessly to prove that he for one is among the divinely elected. But he has had no use for the word God and has scorned organized religion, the Roman Catholic Church in particular. (Part of the last wave of the so-called Enlightenment, he would not have my sisters or I study Latin—the “dead language” of the Church.) My mother’s parents were Eastern European Jews who had themselves lost interest in God, and who since

coming to New York were trying even to detach themselves from their tribe, giving themselves over to the cult of America.

Like most every child I adopted my parents' perspectives. Thus I imagined myself part of the enlightened, progressive subculture whose members, thanks to their superior intelligence, recognized that God was a human invention born of superstition and ignorance and perverted by the corrupt and despotic forces of organized religion—a crutch or opiate for the poorer and the weaker. Like my parents I did not pay much attention to the idea that it might be harder to live in a Godless universe than a God-inhabited one. Buoyed by pride in our seeming intellectual rigor—and by Existentialism, twentieth century conveniences and unprecedented middle-class disposable income—we felt more than up to the secular humanist challenge.

Shortly before I began working on this essay I had the idea that my writing was an attempt to explore what it really means to be an atheist: to not simply scorn organized religion and God, but—in line with Nietzsche's exposure of the religion in grammar—to try to avoid replacing God with God-substitutes; to understand that faith in anyone or anything is a delusion (albeit an often necessary or pleasurable one); to feel the lack of foundation not only in every answer, but in every question. (The basis for formal logic is the law of non-contradiction. One way of stating my atheism would be to say that I strive—every now and again?—to hold my mind open to the possibility of an a-logos which has room for contradiction. A universe quite like our own, in which two plus two equals both four and anything else you really want it to.*)

I presume that this idea I had about my writing was either a backhanded way my subconscious found of expressing its desire for a God, or that, in line with Hegelian dialectic, it was an intermediate synthesis leading to a next antithesis. That is, once having been able to imagine passing from a tweed-jacketed atheism to a stark naked one, I was prepared to move beyond the limited conceptions of God that my parents, Nietzsche and other teachers had urged me to ignore or renounce. It is perhaps not coincidental that I began sitting in on a course on Plotinus around the same time.

Thus the following absurd proposal. Let us strive to release God from having anything to do with order, logic or to-do-ness. Edging towards Buddhism if unaware of its teachings, Plotinus advised that in trying to appreciate the One, after a person has set aside all things and left only God, he should *not* try to think of something—a descriptive word, say—for what

* Cf., George Orwell, "In Front of Your Nose": "When one is making out one's weekly budget, two and two invariably make four. Politics, on the other hand, is a sort of subatomic or non-Euclidean world where it is quite easy for the part to be greater than the whole or for two objects to be in the same place simultaneously."

remains, but rather see if there is something more in his mind that he might eliminate. But for me this does not go far enough. I would disconnect God from all ideas—of absolute unity, pure energy, the void, Cusanos' Not-other “which defines both itself and all”, or even nothingness (for all this last seems from whence the cosmos, order, matter, existence and human subjectivity must have come). Let God not be any such things and not *not* be any such things.

Let God, I propose, not be some phenomenon that human beings find it difficult or even impossible to conceive; let God not be reachable by the concepts of conceivability and inconceivability. (My Plotinus professor proposed trying to see without seeing anything or to think without thinking about anything. My addition: if you can manage this, pat yourself on the back and suppose that God has nothing to do with seeing or thinking.)

Put another way, God could be the wonder of impossibilities unrelated to sensation, perception, thought, language, order, logic, beginnings, nothingness, chaos, cause and effect, unity, absolutes. God could be the closest we can come to confronting our fear and astonishment that even the ungraspable is merely an outpost near a border of our understanding. Beyond which a non-terrain does not beckon.

For millennia the idea has been about that God is unnameable and ineffable, and there has been the idea that even if knowledge is the great goal of human beings, it is unattainable. The proposition here—which I do not imagine is original to me—is that there are no intermediate steps. Recognizing that wisdom may be unattainable does not make one any less or more ignorant. Saying God is unnameable—or beyond inconceivability—does not put us any closer to God (or to understanding God, or to naming God in an indirect way).

To say God is or might be dead or alive, that he might be worshipped or blasphemed, that the cosmos is a necessary outcome of God or transcendental forces, or a creation He, She, they or it continue to superintend—can our minds not stretch further than any of this? No? Then just a little further on is where intimations of godliness probably do not lie as if abandoned.

My ostensible goal here is not mysticism, religion or metaphysics. I am not trying to find a new way to get in touch with God, but trying to add weight to the case for humility. One might say that the justification for my proposition is pragmatic. Rather than, as in the past, imagining for God human capabilities such as logic, or trying to find non-rational means of communing with this great Otherness, it is now more useful, I propose, to leave God to God.

As if that were possible! One of the tasks we have long asked God to perform is to give us the occasional break from our solipsism. The fact that He or She is unable to—is this the cross we bear so giddily and precariously?

It seems well to also note here, in line with Nietzsche's comment about grammar, that while in our culture “usefulness” is an oft-invoked value, and one that most of us feel we understand and that most of us believe in to at least some extent, the term’s usefulness is rather limited. Above all the word signifies for those who employ it that they belong to a common culture, and one that is greatly attached to the idea that the problems posed by life can be solved, in particular by material attainments and materialist science, by reasoning and decision-making. A thing or body or idea is useful insofar as it contributes in a practical manner to “progress” in such spheres. But should one allow the least doubts about whether progress is thereby being achieved, or whether progress is all that it is cracked up to be, or whether definitions of “progress” have any lasting significance—the question “useful for what?” can find no satisfactory answer. And the pragmatism embodied in this idea of “usefulness” may come to seem a kind of escape or compulsive reaction. As my infant son in stressful social situations used to look for puzzles he could assemble, so adults try to be useful. We search for reasons not because it matters that a decision is made, nor because we have a way of knowing if it matters or why. It’s the reasons we need.

If, by contrast, God has any history or meaningful characteristics (to include a capacity to inspire humility), it is too easy to get our minds around God; it is too easy to appropriate God and to have the empowering feelings that come with appropriation. And empowering feelings, I feel, are exactly what human beings at the dawn of the twenty-first century do not need.

While a definable God—or a communable-withable God—may provide a useful crutch for many, we underestimate what an expensive one He or She is. It is not simply that such a God tempts us to engage in wishful thinking—goodness, meaning, heaven, mercy like so many Christmas presents. Such a God makes it that much more difficult for us to appreciate the limits of our understanding and imagination. It is not so much that the moment we seek to define God—as in this essay—we come up short; it is that in the process we reinforce fantasies regarding our intellectual and imaginative prowess.

“The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible,” our beloved Einstein said. He might as well have said, “The most incomprehensible thing about the internal combustion engine, or the diatonic scale, is that it is comprehensible.” Like Moses’, Paul’s, Plotinus’ or my own God, the universe is a human construction. We define it as simply or lyrically, as comprehensibly or incomprehensibly as we wish. We cannot help but do so.

This is not to argue against or for free will. It is not, more specifically, to ignore the extent to which our thoughts seem channeled if not dictated by larger forces—e.g., some combination of biological parameters and a seemingly more extensive noumenal realm. What seems most noteworthy as regards Einstein’s comment is how under the circumstances we persist in imagining the universe as a fantastical world of secrets, miraculous particles, forces and esoteric numerical relationships, and how we persist in inventing gods. To include ones like “rationality”, “genes” and so many others which we claim have nothing to do with religion.

I have wanted to say that the emotion underlying this piece is fear, that the underlying instinct is preservation of my species or kin—my son! I have wanted to say that what I am trying with my philosophizing to get out from under is the gathering destructiveness—to say nothing of the growing unpleasantness—of modern technology, particularly when it is combined with human nature, with our *hubris*.

I have come to feel, however, that this idea about instinct, about wishing to save humanity or some slice of it, is often a cover for the more fundamental, universal fear—of mortality and its spectre, powerlessness. Without wishing to turn mortality either into some sort of all-knowing God, I note that prominent among the non-terrains that do not beckon is death. And thus, we might say, Nietzsche’s rage and philosophizing, and the rage and anxiety that when we are very young we all express more evocatively in our screaming, tears, panic attacks.

A critic of postmodernist critics of science has written: “They believe that by denying the transcultural validity of scientific results, they will somehow undermine the power of transnational corporations and military alliances.” Of course from one perspective this is foolishness. That is, for example, since scientific questions do not have transcultural validity, neither can the answers/results. But in a larger sense the criticism is suggestive. For all of us, even military dictators and the CEOs of major corporations, larger powers are the problem. We all fantasize at times that a certain transcultural truth can be denied. We all imagine at times that we can get a hold of, or at least get our minds around, God. But we cannot.

The End.

Note on Sources:

- The quote from Nietzsche/Kaufmann is from *Die Götzen-Dämmerung / Twilight of the Idols*
- The quote from Cusanus appears in his dialogue “*De Li Non Aliud*”, as translated by Jasper Hopkins.
- The quote from Einstein appears in Banesh Hoffman with Helen Dukas, *Albert Einstein, Creator and Rebel*.
- The quote regarding postmodern critics of science is from Noretta Koertge, “Postmodernism and the Problem of Scientific Literacy”.