

Jason Limbaugh January 4, 2011

ANSWERING ATHEISM ON THE QUESTION OF MEANING

I recently listened to a debate regarding whether or not the universe has a purpose. Two heavy-hitting thinkers in fields of theism and atheism argued over whether or not real meaning and purpose is possible apart from the existence of God.

The theist argued that apart from God, the universe (and, thus, our individual lives) has no real purpose or meaning. His argument followed this line of reasoning: the universe is spending all its energy. One day, even though it might be in the distant, distant future, the universe will lie utterly cold, void of any activity, and utterly lifeless. Therefore, if there is no God, and if our lives here on earth do not follow into eternity, there can be no real meaning in life.

The atheist argued that theists (particularly Christians) do not have a monopoly on meaning and purpose. His position asserted that charity and living for something bigger than oneself seem to be universal principles for creating a sense of meaning. That meaning can be felt and experienced apart from God. So, while the universe itself is blindly material and doesn't have a discernible purpose, human life can and does.

In response, the theist sought to clarify his position by differentiating between objective meaning and subjective meaning. He agreed that we can all create a feeling of meaning for ourselves subjectively, but this does not equal objective meaning. As a result, these subjective feelings of meaning are just illusions.

My opinion is that this final statement in rebuttal from the theist was a misstep, and the atheist capitalized on it to thunderous applause. He returned volley by asking, "Well, is my love for my wife and children just an illusion then? Are you saying it isn't real? Are you saying that unless God exists, these emotions that bring great meaning into my life and the lives of my family are just subjectively conjured and therefore illusory?"

Two common mistakes are being made here.

First, in the realm of debate, theists can tend to a) overstate while b) not sufficiently clarifying their terms. Atheists, on the other hand, still don't seem to know the meaning of the terms objective and subjective when it comes to the question of meaning and purpose, and they certainly do not follow the question of objective meaning to a logical end consistent with their philosophy.

The answer to the atheist's question is, "Yes, your feelings of selfless affection (love) for your family ARE truly meaningful, but only because God actually does exist to give those emotions meaning." So calling any experience of meaning for an atheist "illusory" is certainly not accurate. Atheists can experience real and objective meaning. What must be shown is that those experiences of meaning are, in fact, tremendous evidence for God's existence.

If the final reality of things is that the universe eventually burns out, transformed into a cold, lifeless void, then all human achievement and all human suffering (along with all joy) is without meaning objectively.

Let me explain. What if the atheist loves his family? What if he abuses and neglects them? At the end of all things, what does either ultimately matter? Will he be there to feel the satisfaction of a life well lived for his family? Or will he be there to experience the regret of having lived selfishly or cruelly? Will any of them be there to feel gratitude for his self-sacrifice or hate him for his sadism? No. If the atheist is correct, there will be no conscious experience of remembrance beyond the grave. Once we are all dead and gone and the universe has met its demise, it will be just as if none of us had ever lived at all.

Will the great feats of human ingenuity remain or be recorded for the sake of appreciation by anything or

anyone? No. Will human suffering find an end in justice and relief? No. Will all the time, money, and effort spent to understand and better the existence of our species ripple into the future of a world without end to be enjoyed and added to by endless future generations? No.

If God does not exist, whatever experience of meaning we might feel is, in fact, created subjectively and has no objective meaning or purpose in the grand construct of reality. Only in a reality in which the actions committed in the material world carry over...only in a reality in which each human soul has an eternal destiny...do any of these things have any consequence whatsoever. And without consequence, there is no meaning. (It is worth noting that a listener in the audience later noted and commented on the contradiction and inconsistency of the atheist's position that his life has meaning and purpose, but that the universe in which his purposeful life is contained conveniently does not.)

We concede that the atheist's experience of meaning is valid and real. We do not provoke consideration of the eternal by trying to invalidate the atheist's experience of meaning. Rather, we take advantage of the experience of meaning and purpose by illustrating why and how it points to the existence of God.