

An Atheist's Meanderings about the Nature of God

By

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I did not grow up in a churchgoing family. My mother seemed to have an aversion to religion, and my father, who was a nut, had some nutty ideas about it. Yet, just hearing him sometimes speak of God led me to believe such a being exists. There was little more theological context than this, but I somehow got the idea that God exists everywhere in nature and the Universe and sees everything. From this I imagined a gigantic being sitting in empty space, with a tall body that looked like a tree with arms and legs and long, pointed, branch-like fingers. Its head was the Milky Way, because what images I'd seen of it reminded me of an enormous all-seeing eye. That was my first idea of god—a giant galaxy-headed tree.

I was thirteen when the movie *Oh, God!* was released, in which there was a scene that made a significant impression on me. God, played by George Burns, and his chosen prophet, played by John Denver, are in a hotel room answering a list of questions they'd been sent by a group of religious authorities, including the question, "Is Jesus Christ the son of God?"

"Jesus was my son," God responds, "Buddha was my son. Mohammed, Moses, you, the man who said there was no room at the inn was my son. And so is the one who charges eleven dollars for steak in this one. Let's march on." I didn't know much about Christianity, or any religion at the time, but I liked the tolerance and openness of these words.

Alas, only a year later I became a Born-Again Christian and very quickly learned there is only one way to salvation, which included one right way to think about God. The decade I then spent as a Christian wasn't all bad. I was involved with many goodhearted people who taught me how to be with others in a caring and respectful community. But remaining accepted as part of such a community also meant that I had to shut down my own mind, believe what I was taught, and not ask serious questions. These years culminated with me attending a Southern Baptist college, earning a degree in philosophy from the Bible Department, which was a ministerial track, and even being ordained as a Southern Baptist minister.

But I only lasted a semester at the Baptist seminary, where I went after college to complete my studies. I quit upon realizing I simply didn't and couldn't believe any of it anymore. I attribute this awakening to my excellent college professors, all of whom were Baptist ministers themselves, yet who taught me *how* to think, and wonder, and doubt. Were it not for them, I might very well be a Baptist to this day. I'm not sure my departure from Christianity was the outcome any of them had intended, but I remain deeply grateful to all of them and continue to have much love for these good men who gave me the intellectual skills I needed to more fully unfold as an individual and as a human being.

If I were to single out just one of them as the most important, it would easily be my philosophy professor, Dr. Wallace Roark. Although I am not a "believer" anymore, his theology has had a lasting impact on my thinking. He often summarized his in the phrase,

“God is relative.” In 2013, he finally wrote a book about what he’d been teaching his students for decades, in which he says:

God is relative; there are no absolutes; and that is the good news. The bad news is that so few are ready to think this through and to believe that this is good news. We have been misled by nearly two thousand years of absolutist interpretations of the good news, the Christian gospel. We have been easy to mislead because there is not much in this threatening world of flux that we desire more than certainty and security. We crave absolutes.¹

Although Dr. Roark is still a Southern Baptist and a believer, at least in a God who is relative, and I am not, those familiar with my sermons may hear in his words the continuing influence he has on my thinking. Without going into what he specifically means by “God is relative,” for me it is best reflected in a verse from the *Gospel of Matthew*, “where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”² The idea here is not that Jesus is physically and literally present, not even as an unseen ghost, but that he becomes practically present when we relate to one another in the ways he taught, by demonstrating the kind of care, compassion, and acceptance he had for others. So, even though I am an atheist in the sense that I don’t believe in a personal god—in a person named “God”—I still agree with Dr. Roark, that God is relative, meaning we can make, and can only make, our values real through our relationships, in the ways we treat others, other people, other creatures, and the environment: all our relations.

For a long time I called myself an “atheistic mystic,” a term I borrowed from social psychologist Erich Fromm. He used it to describe himself because he didn’t believe in a personal god either and felt that any attempts to define God could only lead to error. Rather, he believed we must come to understand that God represents our own principles and highest aspirations—the best version of ourselves. At the highest level of theological maturation, Fromm says God is transformed “from the figure of a father into the symbol of his principles, those of justice, truth and love. God *is* justice, truth and love³ ... In this development God ceases to be a person, a man, a father; he becomes a symbol of the principle of unity behind the manifoldness of phenomena⁴ ... God cannot have a name. A name always denotes a thing, or a person, something finite. How can God have a name, if he is not a person, not a thing.”⁵

I agree with Fromm and don’t believe it’s rational or productive to speak of a personal god, which is what most people using the term are referring to. But if one wishes to theologize about the values and principles I do believe in, defining God as the equivalent of love, or truth, or justice, or mercy, or brotherhood and sisterhood, or reason, or freedom, or tolerance, and so forth, then I would have to say that I do believe in God, since I believe in these principles; remaining clear, however, that God is but a symbol of my principles, not a person or being of any kind. In this way, God can only exist in our relationships, where two or more are gathered and demonstrating these principles amongst themselves. Whether this is entirely what Dr. Roark means by it or not, it is what his phrase “God is relative” has

come to mean to me, and is why I often say, “Just because I’m an atheist doesn’t mean I don’t believe in God.”

As rational as this view may sound, it should not be taken to mean I don’t deeply appreciate the great mystery of our existence, nor that my life isn’t often filled with awe and wonder and the recognition that there is infinitely more to be known than can ever be known. As Dr. Roark taught me about everything, not just theology, “there are no absolutes” and “that is the good news.” It doesn’t always feel like good news because humanity, like all creatures, have evolved to be cautious, to stick with the behaviors that haven’t gotten us killed so far, the tried and the true, which is why we “crave absolutes.”

But once we accept that there aren’t any real absolutes and come to accept the uncertainty of our existence—the uncertainty of our beliefs, and ways, and future—something marvelous begins to happen; we come to enjoy life far better than was possible when we deceived ourselves with false certainties. This is so because the experience of awe and wonder is immensely more profound and desirable than the anxious and unfulfilled lives we live in pursuit of unobtainable certainties, no matter how certain we may feel. This is what Fromm meant by “atheistic mysticism.” The root of the word *mysticism* is “mist,” the same as in *mystery*. Mystics live in the mist. It is the place they most enjoy and feel most at home. They are comfortable with doubt, uncertainty, and sometimes being completely dumbfounded. For such states, which can truly leave us speechless, dumb, with our mouths dropped open, are the precursors of higher states of profound awe and wonder.

So, the mystic delights in seeking answers to the unknown, for that is where the mystery exists, but is also fine with discovering nothing but more questions. Therefore, the mystic isn’t skeptical or pessimistic but open and optimistic. Mystics may not find the answers they seek, but they do not mistake this to mean there are no answers; and, so, they remain in the mist, the mystery, the uncertainty, groping in the “darkness” that poet Rainer Marie Rilke said he loved “more than all the fires of the world.” To put it simply, trying to solve mysteries is fun!

One mystery that I’ve not been able to solve is the phenomenon psychologist Carl Jung referred to as *synchronicity*, which he defined as an “uncanny, acausal connecting principle.” Some would dismiss such events as mere coincidence, and that may be all they are. But all of us have them, and sometimes they are simply too weird to easily dismiss as such. They make us feel as if there may be some invisible power guiding us or watching out for us. When we are caught up in the immediate and inexplicable experience of such synchronicity—the alignment of all our stars—it’s easy to feel this way. But once we begin to consider all the misery and suffering in the world, innocent children dying in Gaza, people’s homes and communities being demolished in Ukraine, militant gangs controlling the streets of Haiti, school shootings, and so on, it’s difficult to conclude that a few inexplicable events that are relative only to our own lives indicate “there a reason for everything,” as some say, let alone that there is an intelligent, omnipotent, and loving god in control.

I cannot explain why, in our personal lives, synchronicities sometimes happen that are strange enough to make us believe something mysterious has happened, but I believe they do. Nor can I explain why, if such meaningful events occur on such a small scale, they do not occur on a larger scale, but I believe this is also the case. Yet, in my attempt to understand this mystery, I have begun to wonder if synchronicity, to use Jung's term, is akin to the weakest of the four fundamental forces of physics—gravity. (This gets confusing because one of those forces is called the "weak force," which refers to electrons so loosely bound to an atom that they can cause it decay. Yet the weakest of the four fundamental forces, weaker than the "weak force," is gravity.)

To call it weak, however, is tremendously overstated. Gravity, after all, is the force that holds our planet, as well as our entire solar system, and galaxy in place. In a world where there is often so much suffering, perhaps similarly, there's just enough synchronicity to hold us together, even amidst all the uncertainty and pain; just as there seems to be just enough gravity to hold the stars in place amidst the cold, dark, emptiness of space. Gravity exists in just the right balance. If it were too strong a force everything would be crushed and compressed into a singularity too tightly bound to establish the diversity of elements necessary to create stars and planets, let alone life. And if it were any weaker, nothing would bond or pair, leaving us in the same situation, with a dead universe.

If, as Jesus taught, God is love; and if *love* is just another word for "allurement" or "attraction," then, perhaps, God is gravity, the weakest of all forces, yet enough of a force to bring us together and hold us together amidst all the other forces working to crush us or tear us apart. As Cosmologist Brian Swimme says, "Nothing in all science has been established with greater attention and detail than this primary attraction of each part of the universe for every other part."⁶

Newton may have been the first to realize such a force must exist in order to explain the synchronist movements of the objects on Earth with those in the heavens, but he did not understand how it worked; how it was possible for bodies to attract each other from such vast distances with nothing but empty space between them. Like Jung's *synchronicity*, it had to be true in order to explain these seemingly acausal connections, but it still seemed uncanny and mysterious. This is not unlike what Einstein must have felt when he used the phrase "spooky action at a distance" when referring to the immediate connection between paired particles separated across vast distances. But the answer became easy to understand once we better understood the nature of the Universe, thanks to the 19th century physicist, James Faraday who realized space is not empty by filled with electromagnetic forces, another of the four fundamental forces. This is what enables things that seem separate to act upon each other, because they are connected by this mediating force that touches and connects everything, like what happens to a person sitting on a trampoline when somebody else suddenly jumps on it from the other end.

This may be akin to what's happening when we experience uncanny coincidences. They seem uncanny and acausal because we can't see the connections between them occurring in

spacetime, the term Einstein used when he realized space and time are not separate events though they appear to be. In our case, we can't see the cosmic trampoline we're sitting on because our senses have not evolved to perceive it, but we now know it's there, that space is not empty, and that everything, including time and space, is tied together with what have aptly become known as Faraday strings, strings woven into the electromagnetic field connecting everything that is.

That's a lot of physics, even more than I understand, but simply put, if space and time are connected, if they are really one thing—spacetime—and there's a connection between quantum particles that may be separated by vast differences, it may explain the occasional and seemingly acausal coincidences in our lives. They seem uncanny, weird, spooky to us, just as physics seemed to the likes of Newton and Einstein who couldn't fully understand how their own theories worked. Similarly, because we are unable to see the connections between synchronistic events, we may, like our primitive ancestors, conclude some magical god must be responsible, or some version of God, like a benevolent Universe or providence.

To realize such connections, invisible and inexplicable as they are, might sometimes lead to positive coincidences in our lives, and may astonish us, but we must recall that whatever these forces are such outcomes are not ubiquitous and do not justify believing that "all is good" or that everything is always going to work out for the best. At best, like gravity, it means there is a force that pulls us together in difficult times so that we have the support necessary to get through whatever difficulties we face. So that's another potential definition of God, close to Dr. Roark's "God is relative," but better stated here as, "God is relativity." It's another theological idea of mine that I've only just begun developing and, for now, prefer to summarize by saying, "God is a weak force."

But my favorite non-personified definition of God is summarized by the phrase, "God is reality." I came up with this as a consequence of researching and writing my dissertation on the psychology of religion. It was an overview of what classical, developmental, and some modern psychologists say about religion. Some of them believe it could be a positive force in our lives, and others a destructive force. What I came to realize from this effort is that it can be both. We can use religion productively to help us better cope with the harsh realities of life or use it to deny these realities and drive us deeper into our delusions. These are the purposes of religion as far as I can tell, to help us deal with reality or deny it. However we use it—to guide us toward sanity or away from it—the focus us on reality.

This is why, shifting from psychology back to theology, I also like to say that "God is reality." So much of what theologians say about God, whom I don't believe exists, is true of reality, which I not only believe exists but believe is the only thing that does exist and can exist. Reality is everywhere and in everything because all that exists must be real. As the Gnostic gospels say of the Kingdom of God, reality is "in you and all around you."⁷ And, what the priests and preachers of most religions say about God is true of reality, that we should spend our lives seeking it. We must not turn away from reality. Alas, like Moses seeing only a part of God's backside, our human minds cannot comprehend the whole of reality, but

when we do sometimes catch glimpses of what is real, we are awestruck and our lives and societies are transformed by the encounter. What we know of reality should be our guide. We should devote our minds and hearts to reality, and our lives to its pursuit.

So, much of what people say about God, so many of the praises they sing, can be said and sung about reality, and should be, because god doesn't exist, and reality does. So, even though I wouldn't say "God is real," I'm happy to say, "God is reality." This is why the very last sentence of my dissertation says, "reality is at once the most abundant resource in the Universe and its rarest gem." It is abundant because reality is the only thing there is. It is its rarest gem because it is so hard to grasp and impossible for us to ever fully understand.

So, these are some of my theological meanderings leading me to believe that God represents our values and fullest potential, God is incarnated in our just and compassionate relationships with one another, God is a weak force that draws and holds us together, God is in you and all around you and is the only thing that is because God is reality. Then again, what do I know? I'm only an atheist.

¹ Roark, Wallace. *God: a Copernican Revolution: God is relative; there are no absolutes; and that is the good news.* (p. 28). Unknown. Kindle Edition.

² Matthew 18:20

³ Fromm, Erich, see, *The Art of Loving*, "About the Author," Harper Perennial, Modern Classics addition, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1956, 2006, p. 58.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Swimme, Brian, *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, Bear & Company, Santa Fe, NM, 1984, p. 43.

⁷ *The Gospel of Thomas #3.*