

## We Are Not the Measure of All Things

It has long struck me as rather peculiar that public surveys consistently find that more Americans believe in life after death than in the existence of God. It's not at all clear how life after death is supposed to work if God does not exist (or even if God does), but I suspect that is beside the point.

Could it be that most people find the finality of death less acceptable than that of a world without God? Much as I love living, and would like to think that death may not be the final chapter of my life, the thought of a world without God is far more problematic. Much as I might prefer it to be otherwise, I know that my existence is not all about me, and I have no claim on eternity. But without God how can anything be of enduring consequence?

The atheist philosopher, Bertrand Russell, expressed this eloquently when he wrote about the meaninglessness of the world he believed to be entailed by modern science:

That Man is the product of causes that had no precision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noon day brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins - all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand.

While I disagree with Russell's judgment that no philosophy "can hope to stand" if it rejects this scenario, I think it possible to do so only if one believes there is a dimension of Spirit that infuses the cosmos and that endures beyond all that perishes. Otherwise, Russell is right. Apart from the existence of what we, with our partial apprehension of ultimate things, call God, there is no ground for claiming meaningfulness either in our individual lives or in the cosmos.

And as for life after death, a matter concerning which I profess to have little knowledge, without God it is surely nothing but wishful thinking.

I don't wish to be argumentative here. I wish to invite deeper reflection regarding the grounds we have for ordering our lives and spending them as we do. Surely it is not enough to say that we do what we do because it makes us feel good, or because it feeds our egos, or because it gives us reasons to get up in the morning. In short, surely it is not all about us!

Our age is one marked by aversion to the deeper questions that philosophers and theologians have addressed throughout the centuries, questions about the ultimate nature of things, about the fundamental constitution of the world, about realities that endure. Sometimes this aversion expresses itself in claims that we construct our own societies, which we do. But it often then devolves to the creation of our own meanings, the deciding of our own truths, the marshaling of our own facts.

Making ourselves the measure of all things greatly diminishes our world and impoverishes our existence. If there is no dimension of Spirit that infuses the world and transcends our existence, we are a pitiable species indeed.

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