
Atheism And Ethics: A Perspective By Charles Bukowski

“Love need not be a command nor faith a dictum. I am my own god. We are here to unlearn the teachings of the church, state, and our educational system. We are here to drink beer. We are here to kill war. We are here to laugh at the odds and live our lives so well that Death will tremble to take us.”

~ Charles Bukowski

Introduction

Even if the above quote appears to be quixotic in its treatment of what it means to live life without religion, or even overly pessimistic regarding what it means to live life with religion for that matter, it nevertheless makes an important point. Namely, Bukowski points out that atheism (or the completely disbelief in any god or form of deity) does not exclude goodness, ethics, and value from the world. Instead, atheism may actually free up humanity from dogma and doctrine. This allows men and women to instead pursue goodness in this life, rather than focusing on the afterlife. The amount of philosophical and sociological work that deals with atheism is unfathomable, but this short discussion assesses the writings of Ludwig Feuerbach, a German philosopher, atheist and materialist, and that of Fyodor Dostoyevsky in the classic *The Brothers Karamazov*. Both of these texts essentially argue that religion is an intimate, psychological experience rather than a social, empirical or objective one. In this way, both texts make the case for atheism by pointing out that atheism presents freedom from humanity's self-knowledge being bound by a deity. Neither text makes a vehement case against any particular form of religion, but instead simply points out that religion is a psychological or social construction at best.

The Case for Atheism

First of all, Feuerbach makes a psychological case for atheism, which is bordering on a sociological discussion of how humanity functions. Feuerbach's main point in the entire book is that the essence of Christianity is essentially social and psychological, rather than divine or theological. As the philosopher states, “The consciousness of the object can be distinguished from self-consciousness; but, in the case of the religious object, consciousness and self-consciousness directly coincide” (Feuerbach 109). In other words, the philosopher contends that when humans discuss religions objects or beliefs, it is impossible to separate personal beliefs, experiences, and faith from what individuals see as divine according to these positions.

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In this way, the philosopher holds to atheism because religious beliefs inherently cannot be objective because of their basis in human experience, human self-consciousness, and human psychology. Feuerbach goes on to state that because religion is based on the discrimination between the divine and the profane, “The object of man is nothing else than his objective being itself... As man thinks, as is his understanding of things, so is his God; so much worth as a man has, so much and no more has his God. The consciousness of God is the self-consciousness of man; the knowledge of God is the self-knowledge of man. Man’s notion of himself is his notion of God, just as his notion of God is his notion of himself – the two are identical” (Feuerbach 109). This quote, while lengthy, clearly exhibits the philosopher’s point of view on the social construction of religion. As the philosopher goes on to state, “That is why religion precedes philosophy everywhere, in the history of mankind as well as in the history of the individual. Man transposes his essential being outside himself before he finds it within himself” (Feuerbach 110). In other words, religion is not only socially constructed, but simply an extension of humanity’s self-consciousness. Atheism, then, allows humanity to move away from externalizing self-consciousness and instead focusing on humanity itself. I agree with this critique of religion and point of view on atheism, since Feuerbach presents a clear case for religion as a social construction. Such a view does not discount the value of religion, but instead places it on a spectrum of social evolution.

Ivan, one of the titular brothers in the classic novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, presents a similar view on religion and atheism in discussion with his religious brother. As the character states, “I think that if the devil does not exist, and man has therefore created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness” (Dostoyevsky 239). The brother then extends such a conception of the divine to God as well, essentially arguing that humanity has made up both their gods and their devils. This reflects the point of view of the philosopher above, as Ivan is not making a scientific argument against religion, but a philosophical one. However, perhaps the more important critique of religion found in this novel is when Ivan turns to how religion conceptualizes good and evil as directly related to their conception of god: he states that people say with god, “man could not even have lived on earth, for he would not have known good and evil. Who wants to know this damned good and evil at such a price?” (Dostoyevsky 242). Ivan’s disbelief in god, and acceptance of atheism, is based on his inability to comprehend the reality of a god that accepts the evil he has seen in the world. More than that, the brother cannot believe in a religion that holds to goodness as the opposite of evil. This, too, is an insightful critique of religion. It takes the classic question of a religious doubter (“How could a good god create such evil?”) a step farther by arguing that goodness must not be bound to evil by way of definition. Humanity itself has the potential for both good and evil, regardless of a spiritual realm. Like Feuerbach, this approach to atheism takes it a step beyond disbelief in a god, and instead forwards atheism as an alternative faith – a faith in humanity. Even if Ivan takes a more pessimistic view of humanity, he holds that atheism presents more hope than a fictional god. I also agree with this critique of religion, primarily because it shows how mankind can live without

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