

The Absurdity of Life Without God (Craig, Tolstoy)

1. Life Without God: William Lane Craig argues that, if there is no God, then life itself lacks meaning, value, and purpose.

Why? Well, without God, there is no immortality. And, without immortality, then each and every one of us is doomed to die. Life, Craig says, is merely a brief transition out of oblivion and back into oblivion.

Even worse, the entire human race—indeed, the entire *universe*—is doomed to die. In 5 billion years, the Sun will engulf the Earth in a fiery death. Billions of years after that, the entire universe, as it expands and cools, will one day be nothing but a litter of dead, cold stars, forever getting further and further from one another, travelling forever into the dark recesses of dead, cold, lifeless space.

(1) Life is Meaningless: Craig suggests that, if we are all doomed to die, then nothing really matters. No one's life has any ULTIMATE significance. Our advancements to expand human knowledge, to alleviate human suffering, to learn to live in peace will all eventually amount to nothing. Astronomically speaking, Craig says, we are no more significant than a "swarm of mosquitos"; and man, "because he ends in nothing, he IS nothing". Tolstoy echoes this sentiment, writing,

"If not today, then tomorrow sickness and death will come (indeed, they were already approaching) to everyone, to me, and nothing will remain except the stench and the worms. My deeds, whatever they may be, will be forgotten sooner or later, and I myself will be no more. Why, then, do anything? How can anyone fail to see this and live?"

But, Craig adds, even if we lived forever, life would still be meaningless without God. It is not MERE eternity that gives life meaning. There must be something that GIVES it meaning. Without God, Craig says, an eternal life would just be a big "SO WHAT?", where each of us spends life eternally waiting—waiting for what? Nothing at all.

(2) Life Has No Value: If there is no God, says Craig, then there is no morality. "Right" and "wrong" would merely be human constructs, or else biological dispositions resulting from unguided evolution. If we all eventually end up in the same place (buried in the ground), then what difference does it make if one is a Hitler or an Abe Lincoln? Without an afterlife, there is no accountability.

Without God, or morality, the only reasons we have to do anything are PRAGMATIC ones rather than moral ones. If this life is all we have, then why would we waste our time trying to help others? We ought, rather, to "live it up" and enjoy our few moments seeking selfish pleasures before we go back into the dirt, and oblivion.

- (3) **Life is Purposeless:** If the universe just ends in a cold oblivion, and we have no Creator, then there is no great end that we are all working toward. It is GUARANTEED that there is no point in the future where "it all works out in the end". Rather, if we could peer into the future, what we would see is a cold, dead, lifeless universe. But, then, there is no goal, no purpose to life. Any supposed "successes" that we achieve in our lives, or for mankind, are just fleeting, and doomed to be undone in the end. The universe is governed by purposeless chance, and we are the product of that universe. Thus, our lives are also ungoverned and purposeless.

This would be true even if we could somehow live forever. Without God, we'd still just be an unintended accident of nature, a product of blind chance, rather than a Creator with purpose. As such, there could be no REASON why we're here at all.

2. Existential Crisis: With the rise of atheism, a philosophy called "Existentialism" was born (in the 1800's). Suddenly faced with the absurdity of life without God, many found themselves in crisis. Simply put, if there is no God, then life is absolutely **absurd**. Now faced with an existence lacking meaning, purpose, or value, existence became a horror.

Tolstoy describes this horror in his heartbreakingly beautiful work, *A Confession*. Borrowing a fable from Eastern philosophers, he describes existence as being akin to clinging to a branch, struggling not to fall into the mouth of a dragon who waits below.

"I cling to the branch of life, knowing that inevitably the dragon of death is waiting, ready to tear me to pieces; and I cannot understand why this torment has befallen me. I try to suck the honey that once consoled me, but the honey is no longer sweet. Day and night the black mouse and the white mouse gnaw at the branch to which I cling. I clearly see the dragon, and the honey has lost all its sweetness. I see only the inescapable dragon and the mice, and I cannot turn my eyes from them. ... No matter how sweet the honey, it could not be sweet to me, for I saw the dragon and the mice gnawing away at my support."

He finds himself hiding his rope, and his gun, for fear of killing himself. Faced with the horror of life without God, Tolstoy offers us the following four options:

- (1) **Ignorance:** Live in ignorance, completely oblivious to life's meaninglessness.

Unfortunately, once Tolstoy becomes aware of life's meaninglessness, this is no longer an option for him.

- (2) **Epicureanism:** Reveling in base pleasure, "living it up" until we die.

Essentially, "lick the honey". Enjoy yourself while you can. Unfortunately, Tolstoy feels the meaninglessness of it all so viscerally, he cannot seem to find joy in anything any longer. All he can think about is the dragon's maw. Indeed, he is baffled as to how

anyone can enjoy themselves knowing that we are slowly falling apart, and marching to our graves, and that everything in our lives will ultimately come to nothing.

- (3) **Suicide:** Courageously ending the horror.

Unfortunately, Tolstoy cannot seem to bring himself to do what he knows he ought to do. He believes that this is the correct option, the bravest decision. But he is a coward.

- (4) **Cowardice:** Continuing on through the horror, without purpose, without joy.

THIS is the option that Tolstoy finds himself taking. He continues on, though he has no idea why. Existence is a horror, and yet he keeps going...

3. Embracing the Absurdity: According to Craig, the atheist's best option is to simply embrace the absurdity. Just admit that life is absurd and carry on. In the short while that we have, perhaps we can nevertheless find our OWN meaning, value, and purpose in life, and the world. (This seems closest to Tolstoy's "Epicurean" option.)

- (1) Finding Meaning: Even if there is no OBJECTIVE meaning in life, we can nevertheless place our OWN meaning on it. Human beings engage in tasks that are doomed to be destroyed eventually all the time. They might say, "Sure, it's not very meaningful I guess, but it's meaningful TO ME." And this sort of *subjective* meaning is enough.

Reply: Craig accuses this way of thought of being an "exercise in self-delusion". It is as if this person is just PRETENDING that there is objective meaning in the world, and carrying on as if this is true. SAYING that something has meaning to you doesn't make it ACTUALLY have meaning (in the real, or objective sense). (*Do you agree?*)

- (2) Finding Value: Even if there is no OBJECTIVE right and wrong, we may still live our lives according to certain "moral" norms. For, it certainly still FEELS like many actions are morally repugnant. Sawing a child in half may not be wrong in some ULTIMATE sense, but it still offends our senses, and therefore provides us with reasons to avoid or condemn such actions.

Reply: But, the suggestion here is (again) merely that we should live AS IF there is morality. Again, this is self-delusion, says Craig. Strictly speaking, if there is no objective morality, one must admit that sawing a child in half is NOT wrong—but rather just "not fashionable" or "not admired" by most others. But, on a subjective view, this could change. If someday society's moral preferences changed, then one day sawing children into pieces COULD be fashionable. And, if there is no God, it would not be wrong—in fact, humanity would even deem it to be permissible in that case, since (in that future society) most people approve of it. But, that is absurd.

Furthermore, most prominent atheists and existentialists have actually CONDEMNED terrible actions. For example, they condemned the atrocities of World War II, and anti-Semitism, and social injustices, claiming that human beings were creatures of value, who deserved respect and fair treatment, not torture and suffering. Craig thinks this is hypocrisy. On what grounds can they condemn such actions? Because they personally FEEL repulsed by them? Ultimately, if there is no objective morality, there are no grounds upon which to morally condemn the actions of others.

- (3) Finding Purpose: We might (again) propose that we find our OWN purpose in life. While it is true that we weren't "placed here" with a direction or purpose, with our short lives we find things that WE want to pursue, and THAT becomes our purpose. While it may not be true in some OBJECTIVE sense that these things just ARE our purpose, we can nevertheless give life purpose and direction with our choices.

Reply: Again, says Craig, this is merely the suggestion that we "make up" our own purpose. But, something "made up" is imaginary. It is not real. Even the imagined "purpose" of evolution that atheists often speak of is not a real one. Sure, it SELECTS for organisms that are better at surviving and procreating, but survival of the human race is not our "purpose". Evolution is purposeless, as is the universe. The fact remains that, without God, anyone's self-imagined "purpose" would be just as good as anyone else's. Hitler's self-created "purpose" was to "purify" the human race by killing everyone except blonde, fair-skinned people. A terrorist's is to destroy those whom s/he disagrees with politically or religiously. But, then, without God, these people are just doing what the atheist thinks we should ALL be doing: Finding our own mission and pursuing it; and no one's is better or worse than anyone else's!

4. Conclusion: God and Meaning: Craig concludes that the atheist who claims that we CAN find value, meaning, and purpose is living a lie, a contradiction. He paints a picture of a two-story universe. In the lower tier, there is no God and all is meaningless. In the upper tier, there is a God, and life has meaning. What the atheists are suggesting is that we climb from the first story to the second and sort of "steal fire from the Gods", taking things for ourselves which we have absolutely no right to—indeed, which don't even EXIST if there is no God. Such an exercise is the greatest kind of self-delusion.

So the atheist (says Craig) is left with only two options (essentially Tolstoy's #2 and #4):

- (a) **Happy, But Inconsistent:** Deny the absurdity, claiming that there is meaning, value, and purpose in life even in the absence of God, finding happiness perhaps, but living the rest of life in a self-deluded, self-contradictory lie.
- (b) **Consistent, But Unhappy:** Admit life's absurdity, and live the rest of it profoundly unhappy.

By contrast, theism offers a reconciliation of these two options. For, with theism, one can have both happiness AND consistency, or truth:

- (c) Believe in God, who gives meaning, value, and purpose to life, and live happily without living a lie, or a delusion.

Tolstoy, like Craig, eventually discovers this option. He finds that the millions of religious masses are neither ignorant, nor “living it up”; and nor do they live on out of cowardice. Rather, they seem to have found TRUE fulfilment, meaning, and purpose in life – with God. Tolstoy’s crisis finally comes to an end when he embraces religion.

Afterthought: In a way, we might view Craig’s paper as an argument for God’s existence, based on our very strong intuition that life is not meaningless. Something like this:

1. If God does not exist, then life is meaningless.
2. But, life IS NOT meaningless.
3. Therefore, God exists.

[Side note: Craig seems to be assuming a view of morality known as **Divine Command Theory**. This is the view that actions are right or wrong because God says that they are right or wrong. One objection to this view is that, on this view, if God commanded horrific acts such as slavery and torture, then these things would BECOME morally right. That seems mistaken. The alternative is to admit that there exists some moral standard independent of God’s will – though theists frequently reject this option since it seems to make God BEHOLDEN to morality. Not to mention, since these truths are independent of God, they’d still exist even if God did not; yet, Craig clearly rejects the idea that there could exist objective moral truths without God.]