

An Agnostic Path toward Good Life
by Jennifer Ariadne Park
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Living "as if" allows agnostics to live Good Life promised by major religions.

Agnostics, broadly defined, believe that the divine or the spiritual is not known. There is a wide variety of beliefs among agnostics. Some believe that the divine/spiritual simply cannot be known, by anyone, at any time. Some, who would be better called "atheists", do not believe it exists at all. Some believe that it can be known, but that the versions that organized religions offer should be approached with healthy skepticism. Some, like me, just believe that it is not known to me, here and now, as far as I know. Who knows what will happen tomorrow?

This attitude toward the divine/spiritual is not unique to agnostics. Among believers of major religions are many who believe that the full and true nature of the divine or the spiritual cannot be understood by human intellect, and that we can only have partial, imperfect, and momentary glimpse into the divine/spiritual. So, some agnostics are seekers who live with the faith that they will some day find this glimpse, and some agnostics live with some awareness of the divine/spiritual, and are content with what they have found. Many agnostics regularly attend religious services, not for what one is supposed to get, but for what they know they already get, without full-heartedly committing to the religion.

For more "confirmed" agnostics like me, who neither has had even a glimpse of the divine/spiritual nor is actively seeking one, there is a central question of ethics that arises: how do we know the nature of good and evil without knowing the divine/spiritual? Is it possible for us to know how to live a good life without "knowing God" or "mitzvah" or "enlightenment"? And I don't mean a "good enough" life that most religions do allow for the gentiles. I mean a fully realized and fulfilled life, or Good Life, that is connected with the whole, with life itself, and with all that is promised to the believers: things like "bliss", "communion", "compassion", "peace", and "eternal life". Many agnostics would simply say "Who cares?" My usual dismissive response is a version of a familiar phrase: "I wouldn't want to spend an eternity with a god who wouldn't take someone who is good enough, like me."

Still, the question does deserve to be taken seriously. Ultimately, what non-agnostic faiths offer is something that cannot be achieved by human feat alone, something which only the access to the divine, or to an existence beyond the physical realm, can offer. One can honestly refuse such an offer only if it can be achieved somewhere else, like by communing with a "smile on a dog". And, for me, declining religion is not a matter of choice; as far as I can honestly say, the divine has not personally offered me anything, so I have nothing to decline. I *have to* figure out how to live Good Life in the obvious absence of the divine in my life.

Some of you may have noticed something here. Why do I "have to" do this? As a mental health professional, I often exhort my clients to never use such phrasing, because it hardly ever means what it says, and what I really mean here is that I *want to* live Good Life. There is something within me that craves this. This drive, some would say, is innate to humans, and is the basis for the argument that spirituality/religion is natural to humans. Can agnosticism meet this need?

In the absence of the divine, an agnostic is left only with the tools of human faculty: empathy, reason, and experience. Although these tools are not uniquely human, they are present in most human beings to a varying degree, and most religions deem them necessary for Good Life. For an agnostic to live Good Life, these tools also need to be sufficient; there is nothing else to rely on. And here comes the basic agnostic leap of faith: not only are empathy, reason, and experience

necessary for Good Life, but they are also sufficient. Good Life, achieved through human potential, ultimately is the same as that achieved through divine guidance. More precisely, I need to be able to live *as if* they are, because, ultimately, I don't know.

This attitude, too, is not unknown to major religions. For instance, Thomist Catholics, who follow the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas, believe that human beings are endowed by God with reason, which, used correctly, cannot contradict divine will. Otherwise, God would have created imperfection, and God does not do that. Although St. Thomas Aquinas would never argue that reason is sufficient for Good Life, it does follow that, in the absence of explicit revelation, reason does a good enough job that is acceptable to God.

So, much as I live *as if* the divine/spiritual does not exist, because I don't know if it exists, I can live *as if* human drive for Good Life, and human tools of reason, empathy, and experience, are necessary and sufficient for Good Life. And I do this not because I am hoping for acceptance by the divine or communion with the spiritual, but because I want to, and because I have faith that I can.