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On At-One-Ment

A treatise concerning religious atheism and radical humanism. Putting Erich Fromm to the test

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Some preliminary statements— an atheist in a complex world

Talking about atheism,¹ let alone being an atheist in our day and age, is still quite problematic and easier said than done. Looking at the list of recent publications on atheism and the philosophy of religion, this field of research seems very much alive: *Traité d'Athéologie: Physique de la Métaphysique* (2005) by Michel Onfray, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (2004) and *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006) by Sam Harris, *The God Delusion* (2006) by Richard Dawkins, *Breaking the Spell – Religion as Natural Phenomenon* (2006) by Daniel C. Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens' *God is not Great – How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007). Even so, some reactions to this current wave of atheism show a certain kind of antipathy towards these studies (and towards atheism in general).² In a world overflowing with reli-

gious violence, fundamentalist heads of state and the alarming uprise of creationism and intelligent design, the atheist seems to be the persona non grata. The aforementioned authors all share some similar concerns (see also Peterson, 2007, p. 803): religion was – and still is – used to oppress human beings; given certain circumstances, religion can become a source of violence, and so forth. So, where do I get the audacity to talk about something like *religious atheism*? If atheism is the denial of things, realms and beings of the divine and supernatural kind, how can it be combined with 'religion'? And next, one might wonder, how dare I add 'humanism' to this whole lot, when religion has proven to be – in the past, and unfortunately, in the present as well – a most important dehumanizing and inhibiting force? The question becomes more multifaceted when we look at some statements found in those recent atheistic publications. Richard Dawkins, for example, in *The God Delusion*, talks about certain indefinable feelings or experiences aroused by nature or the cosmos: "A quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among scientists and rationalists. It has no connection with supernatural

¹ This article is a translation and revision of an essay entitled: *De x-ervaring. Een analyse van de atheïstische religieuze ervaring*. See bibliography for full reference. New material has been added. I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Gily Coene (VUB) for giving me the opportunity to revise and republish this article. I would also like to thank Dr. Rainer Funk and the Internationale Erich Fromm Gesellschaft.

² John F. Haught, to quote just one example, in his article *Amateur Atheists: Why the New Atheism isn't Serious*. Alister McGrath wrote a book entitled *The*

Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine. Recently, McGrath and Daniel Dennett engaged in a fair discussion, now published as a book titled *The Future of Atheism: Alister McGrath and Daniel Dennett in Dialogue*.



belief” (Dawkins, 2007, p. 32). In *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*, one can establish that Sam Harris is looking towards Buddhism when he talks about an acceptable form of spirituality (Harris, 2004, pp. 204-221). If the reader permits me to add a small personal history, he will notice that the question I raise about religious atheism can become even more complex.

I was raised a Roman Catholic, though this religious education never tended towards a repetitive or violent indoctrination. On the contrary, when I reached a certain age, I was allowed to go my own way in order to search autonomously for possible answers to the great questions of life. This Promethean chapter in my life ended without having found any absolute or final answer, but all the same, I was convinced that God, religion or church were – to me – not even getting close to perhaps suggesting an answer. Over the course of the years I became an atheist – and I was satisfied; I felt appeased. At college, however, I started reading books by the Belgian philosopher, Leo Apostel. Many of his writings cover the topic of religious or spiritual atheism.³ All of a sudden, I experienced a new unease: how could an atheist be religious? How could an atheist engage in spiritual exercises like meditation (and not be a Buddhist at the same time)? If I am allowed to express myself quite frankly: I was staggered by all this. I had just gotten rid of this Christian splinter in my head, I had come to terms with my fully-fledged atheism, I had learned to answer some fundamental questions about God and religion (and some of the criticisms on atheism), and suddenly there was this uncomfortable expression, “religious atheism.” Even more intriguing were the references mentioned by Apostel to the writings of William James and Erich Fromm. In order to disentangle this knot, my doctoral research will explore the James-Fromm-Apostel “triangle” with the aim of raising some fundamental questions about religious atheism.

In this article, I would like to focus on Fromm’s analysis of religious experience and by this means I will ask – and hopefully answer – three major questions. First of all, why is God,

³ See bibliography for details.

according to Fromm, not a necessary element of religion or religious experience? In order to answer this question I must introduce two key terms, namely *substratum of experience* and *conceptualization* (and *concept-alienation*). Secondly, I will ask just what this so-called religious experience might be. Finally, I will try to explain how this can be integrated in a certain form of humanism. The careful reader will notice that, if I succeed in solving these problems, I will have answered the questions raised in the first paragraph.

With the intention of really making a point, I will put Fromm’s analysis to the test. Given the outcomes of his research, one might ask whether this is not just some abstract theory, whether or not it can be applied to a number of practical, “real life” examples. I will argue that this is possible, by submitting Richard Jefferies’ autobiographical writing *The Story of my Heart: My Autobiography* to the Frommian test, and thereby also testing Fromm’s findings.⁴

Substratum of experience and the alienation of concepts

When discussing religion in *You Shall be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and its Tradition*, one of Fromm’s main arguments seems to be an emphasis on *religious experience* as a pivotal point in the religious life of a human being. Before we can study this experience in a more meaningful way, it must be made clear why Fromm is convinced that “God” is not intrinsically present in those experiences that might be called religious. The key terms “substratum of experience” and “concept-alienation” will help us out: “Words and concepts referring to phenomena related to psychic or mental experience develop and grow – or deteriorate – with the person to whose experience they refer. They change as he changes; they have a life as he has a life” (Fromm, 1967a, p.

⁴ Richard Jefferies (1848-1887) was an English journalist and writer, known for his writings on nature and agricultural life. Though *The Story of my Heart* is not an autobiography in the very ordinary sense of the word, it is nonetheless an expression of his inner feelings and experiences.



17). Given Fromm's psychology and philosophy, a human being is not to be considered as a closed system, unchangeable and a priori fixed for all times. A human being, just as humanity as a whole, can grow, learn and change in the course of life. This is a central thesis in Fromm's humanism. For example, in the essay "Humanism as a Global Philosophy of Man,"⁵ he asks what the chief principles of such humanism might be. He answers: "[...] first, belief in the unity of the human race, that there is nothing human which is not found in every one of us; second, the emphasis on man's dignity; third, the emphasis on man's capacity to develop and perfect himself; and fourth, the emphasis on reason, objectivity and peace" (Fromm, 1984, p. 43). Man's aptitude to learn, grow, develop and perfect himself is clearly stressed; the only way to stimulate man's full development, is by cultivating our human feelings and desires (provided that development of the one does not harm that of the other). Taboos, regulations and rigid systems of prohibition obviously have negative effects (Fromm, 1984, p. 51) and tend to bind man, instead of offering him more freedom. As humans, we arrive in different situations on a daily basis; we learn, we get to know other points of view, in short, we experience new things. Given the first quotation, it is evident that the more we experience, the more new or preexisting concepts get branched out. This way, we broaden our horizon. An example given by Fromm himself is that of a young boy (a child) and the love he feels for his mother, expressed in a simple "I love you." The same boy, but a few years later, can utter the same words to his fiancée. The words (verbal concepts) stay the same, but the feelings he cherishes for his beloved girlfriend will – normally – not be the same as the feeling of love for his mother (Fromm, 1967a, pp. 17-18). In other words, the concepts "love," "to love" or "loving someone" have become wider, richer, and enhanced with more fine distinctions, because our young boy learns, grows and experiences new degrees of

⁵ In *On Disobedience and other Essays*. This article first appeared in *The New Humanist*, Yellow Springs, Ohio, 26, 1966, pp. 117-122, entitled "A Global Philosophy of Man."

loving throughout his life. It must be kept in mind however "[...] that concepts have their own lives, and that they grow, can be understood only if the concepts are not separated from the experience to which they give expression" (Fromm, 1967a, p. 18). This is where it might possibly go wrong. It is not impossible that concepts (words, representations, symbols) do *not* develop along with the human being or with a group of human beings. A concept can detach itself from the original experience, thus becoming unable to progress and grow. This process is known as the alienation of concepts or ideologization. "If the concept becomes alienated – that is, separated from the experience to which it refers – it loses its reality and is transformed into an artifact of man's mind. The fiction is thereby shaped that anyone who uses the *concept* is referring to the substratum of *experience* underlying it" (Fromm, 1967a, p. 18).

What is the mechanism, the motivating force, of this alienation of concepts? Three core motives can be discerned (Fromm, 1967a, p. 19-20). The first motive is the fact that human beings are afraid to completely give themselves over to experience. Completely losing yourself in experience equals losing rational (conscious) control. Next, Fromm explains that a concept can never fully cover the experience to which it points: "One person may refer to his experience by the concept *a*, or the symbol *x*; a group of persons may use the concept *a* or the symbol *x* to denote a common experience they share. In this case [...] the concept, or the symbol, is only an approximate expression of the experience" (Fromm, 1967a, p. 19). Finally, the third motive is to be found in the fact that our human thinking is and always will be incomplete and patchy. At the same time, we search to complete and stabilize this knowledge. Therefore, we start to "patch up" the blanks in our understanding in order to come to firm knowledge. As a consequence, those mended concepts acquire the status of entities that guarantee infallible certainty for each and every one of us. As said by Fromm, this is exactly what happened during the French Revolution, when the bourgeoisie was fighting for its own freedom, but pretended to be fighting for universal freedom (Fromm, 1967a, pp. 20-21).



God is/as a concept

These psychological and philosophical findings can also be projected in the sphere of man's religious life. In the history of religious concepts one can perceive this process of conceptual-alienation and ideologization.

Referring once again to Fromm's definition of humanism as a global philosophy of man, it is striking to see the importance he attaches to man's striving towards peace, love and unity amongst men. These are the most eminent human values. As he writes in *You shall be as Gods*, "'God' is one of many poetic expressions of the highest value in humanism, not a reality in itself" (Fromm, 1967a, pp. 18-19). God, or better said, the concept of "God," is a historically conditioned expression of certain inner experiences. At a given time during the maturing of mankind, man started to realize that he could solve the problems of human existence through the development of his own human capacities. He discovered, according to Fromm, that mankind could achieve harmony and peace through the *increase* of love and reason, not by excluding these faculties and "[...] he gave this new vision, this x, many names: Brahman, Tao, Nirvana, God. [...] The nature of these different concepts depended on the economic, social and political bases of the respective cultures and social classes, and on the patterns of thought arising from them" (Fromm, 1967a, p. 21). In his book, *The Art of Loving*, one finds this same train of thought, when Fromm talks about "the love of God": "Having spoken of the love of God, I want to make it clear that I myself do not think in terms of a theistic concept, and that to me the concept of God is only a historically conditioned one, in which man has expressed his experience of higher powers, his longing for truth and for unity at a given historical period" (Fromm, 1963, p. 55).

Given the abovementioned quotes, it must be clear that Fromm accepts the plurality and diversity of the great religious concepts, because they are conceptual expressions of human experiences that, according to time and place, may differ from one another. Furthermore, Fromm unambiguously states that names such as God, Tao and so forth do not constitute realities on

their own, but are concepts based on experience. Hubertus Mynarek confirms: "Für Fromm steht zweifelsfrei fest: Es gibt keinen Gott als eine von der menschlichen Psyche unabhängige, in und an sich existierende Wirklichkeit" ["For Fromm it is undoubtedly true: there is no God apart from a reality existing wholly in and of itself, independent of the human psyche."] (Mynarek, 1997, p. 79). Unfortunately, a systematic ideologization has sneaked in the religious life of man. This x, whatever its more concrete name might have been, gradually transformed into an absolute and the great system builders started doing what they do best: patching up the inner experiences with presuppositions and fictitious assumptions. To top it all off: "[...] this process is aided by the fact that as soon as the thought system becomes the nucleus of an organization, bureaucrats arise who, in order to keep power and control, wish to emphasize the differences rather than that which is shared, and who are therefore interested in making the fictitious additions as important, or more so, than the original fragments"⁶ (Fromm, 1967a, p. 21).

In *The Art of Loving* Fromm even takes this discussion one step further, to clarify the problems exhorted by this ideologization. Contrary to what most of our Western religious thoughts – say, your average orthodox theology, with an accent on fictitious additions to the God-concept – suggest, the mystical and Eastern traditions tend to highlight and cultivate a certain *attitude*, based on tolerance and an inner transformation of man and his actions (Fromm, 1963, p. 59). "In religious development this led to the formulation of dogmas, endless arguments about dogmatic formulations, and intolerance of the 'non-believer' or heretic. It furthermore led to the emphasis on 'believing in God' as the main aim of a religious attitude" (Fromm, 1963, p. 59). It is this mode of thinking Fromm wishes to put to discussion. For if the specific element of religiosity does not equal the acceptance of a god or any kind of supernatural transcendent reality, in other words, if religiosity is not fully and exclusively based on a specific concept that

⁶ How Fromm describes and explains the evolution of the God-concept in the Old Testament will not be discussed in this article.



is to be valid for the whole of mankind, then what exactly are the essential elements of religious experience? Hence, we arrive at a question of the utmost importance: is religious experience necessarily connected with a theistic concept? To this, Fromm says, “I believe not; one can describe a “religious” experience as a human experience which underlies, and is common to, certain types of theistic, as well as nontheistic, atheistic, or even antitheistic conceptualizations. What differs is the conceptualization of the experience, not the experiential substratum underlying various conceptualizations [...] If one analyses the experience rather than the conceptualization, therefore, one can speak of a *theistic as well as of a nontheistic religious experience*” (Fromm, 1967a, pp. 56-57).

This is a statement of paramount significance: religious experience is nothing more (or less) than a human experience, that can lead to various concepts, but not automatically (nor necessarily) to notions of a theistic kind.

Two new questions: phenomenological and epistemological

Thus far, I have achieved a few of my objectives: I managed to explain why Fromm does not treat religion and theism as indistinguishable. Furthermore, I gave a first explanation of Fromm’s humanistic perspective; that religious experience is unmistakably a human experience. Other aspects of his (radical) humanism will be revealed later on.

Having arrived at this point, we are confronted with two new questions: first, what *is* this religious experience? What is actually experienced? In other words, this is a phenomenological question. Secondly, there is an epistemological difficulty, suggested by Fromm himself, in view of the fact that the idiom “religious experience” – although we clearly proved that God is not an essential element of this experience – is tainted with a tinge of theism, due to our specific Western theological context and tradition. Hence, of course, the initial conceptual confusion when talking about religious atheism. Fromm therefore proposes to make use of the expression *x experience*, in order to avoid conceptual misunderstanding: “I think it is pref-

erable to speak, at least in this book, of the *x experience*, which is found in religious and in philosophical systems (such as that of Spinoza), regardless of whether they do or do not have a concept of God” (Fromm, 1967a, p. 57).

After having cleared these (possible) errors, Fromm continues his quest by going over the main points of this *x experience*. He restrains himself to the general characteristics, but at the same time encourages the development of an empirical, psychological anthropology, which is able to study *x* as well as non-*x* experiences, as mature human experiences (Fromm, 1967a, p. 61).⁷ Given this phenomenology of the *x experience*, I wonder whether we can distinguish those qualities in the autobiography of Richard Jefferies, thus confirming Fromm’s analysis.

A phenomenology of the *x experience*

The first characteristic element⁸ – and probably the most fundamental – of the *x experience* is *to experience life as a problem*, as a burning question from which one needs to be relieved (Fromm, 1967a, p. 58). “To experience life as a problem” should not be understood in terms of trivial problems (such as, for example, worrying about getting to work on time) but rather as an existential cry, a deep feeling of inner division. This specific human phenomenon is thoroughly explained in *Escape from Freedom* and its sequel, *Man for Himself: an Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*. In the latter, Fromm describes this inner split as “the essential dichotomies in Man,” thus revealing that it must be some kind of (inevitable) *condition humaine*, rooted in the evolutionary and biological history of man. Compared to animals, humans suffer from the relative absence of instinctive regulation in the process of adaptation to the surrounding world (Fromm, 1967b, p. 48). Animals are characterized by what is called autoplasmic adaptation; in other words, by being able to adapt to changing conditions in the environment. One might say that animals live in a certain harmony with

⁷ Obviously, this is one of the chief points I want to reach in my doctoral research.

⁸ I do not treat the various elements of the *x experience* in the same order as Fromm.



their environment – when the environment changes, they need to adapt or they face extinction. Harmony must be understood in specific terms: “[...] not in the sense of absence of struggle but in the sense that its inherited equipment makes it a fixed and unchanging part of its world; it either fits in or dies out” (Fromm, 1967b, p. 48). Instinctive adaptation in man, however, is at an exceptionally low level, which could be considered a weakness. On the other hand, it might also appear to be man’s strength: the instinctive adaptation may be low, but man’s brain capacity – and therefore the capability to learn – has increased. This is what gives man his specific human qualities: “The social history of man started with his emerging from a state of oneness with the natural world to an awareness of himself as an entity separate from surrounding nature and men” (Fromm, 1941, p. 24). For a long time, man continued to be closely tied to his natural world.⁹ Eventually, this process – the emergence from the original ties, also known as “the process of individuation” – reaches a climax (Fromm, 1941, p. 24). This individuation is at the same time a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing, because our original ties are in a way shackles that restrain our freedom, but those shackles offer a form of security, so that to be released from them might also be considered a curse – the curse of “growing aloneness”: “This separation from a world, which in comparison with one’s own individual existence is overwhelmingly strong and powerful, and often threatening and dangerous, creates a feeling of powerlessness and anxiety” (Fromm, 1941, p. 29). Initial harmony is cleaved when our human qualities (the awareness of ourselves as separate entities, and our ability to remember the past and imagine the future) develop more and more as a consequence of our biological evolution. Man is, in short, a living anomaly – he is a part of nature and submitted to natural laws that cannot be changed, yet he

⁹ In *The Art of Loving*, Fromm explains how this connection can still be found in primitive religions: “Many primitive religions bear witness to this stage of development. An animal is transformed into a totem; one wears animal masks in the most solemn religious act, or in war; one worships an animal as God” (Fromm, 1963, 49).

also transcends nature: “He is set apart while being a part; he is homeless, yet chained to the home he shares with all creatures” (Fromm, 1967b, p. 49). Man, through his specific human capacities, arrives in a state of permanent and unavoidable disequilibrium. In spite of – or perhaps, thanks to – this condition, he is forced to embark on a quest for solutions in order to try to balance out this situation. It is this permanent contradiction in our existence that becomes the mechanism of our future (self)development: “Having lost paradise, the unity with nature, he has become the eternal wanderer (Odysseus, Oedipus, Abraham, Faust); he is impelled to make the unknown known by filling in with answers the blank spaces of his knowledge. He must give account to himself of himself, and of the meaning of his existence” (Fromm, 1967b, p. 50).

To summarize: man “suffers” from a split vis-à-vis the larger whole, his initial natural surroundings, which, in turn, leads to (a feeling of) inner division in the individual. This division, this split, is what Fromm calls man’s existential dichotomies: “[...] they are contradictions which man cannot annul but to which he can react in various ways, relative to his character and his culture” (Fromm, 1967b, p. 50). One way to react to these contradictions is offered by the x experience. I must stress, as Fromm himself does too, that it is just a way to react, not *the* way. Although the inner split is a fundamental part of our human existence, some – perhaps even most – people are not haunted by it. Some people find fulfillment in their jobs, in fame or pleasure or in acting ethically and conscientiously and so forth. In other words, an x experience is a possibility, not a necessity. Nevertheless, one cannot exclude that some people, even atheists, do suffer from this dichotomy and passionately long to eliminate it. They strive to restore the lost harmony; they long for *at-one-ment*.

Now, putting this theoretical explanation to the test: are we able to find such an inner split in the autobiography of Richard Jefferies?¹⁰ Interestingly, it is the very starting point of his book: “In the glow of youth there were times every

¹⁰ To be clear, the examples given are just a small selection.



now and then when I felt the necessity of a strong inspiration of soulthought. My heart was dusty, parched for want of the rain of deep feeling; my mind arid and dry, for there is a dust which settles on the heart as well as that which falls on a ledge” (Jefferies, 2002, p. 17). He continues to say: “A species of thick clothing slowly grows about the mind, the pores are choked, little habits become a part of existence, and by degrees the mind is enclosed in a husk. When this began to form I felt eager to escape from it, to throw off the heavy clothing, to drink deeply once more at the fresh fountains of life” (Jefferies, 2002, p. 17). This last quotation undoubtedly suggests that Jefferies not only experiences a certain separation or split (cf. “a husk”), but his desire to readily overcome this situation is also clearly present. According to Fromm’s theory, the x experience might provide a way out. The following two characteristics provide more explanation.

The x experience is an experience of a *letting go of one’s “ego.”* As we have seen, this ego in its preliminary situation is torn, divided, infested by greed, loneliness and fear. In order to escape from this restlessness, one must be willing to let go of this old, infested ego, in order to once again get in deeper contact with the world, with the bigger whole (Fromm, 1967a, p. 69). In the case of Jefferies, nature and rural life are of tremendous significance to facilitate the “liberation” of his divided ego. By taking long walks, by meditating in the woods or by swimming in pools and rivers, Jefferies seems able to experience a renewed contact with the world, with nature. For example: “There is a hill to which I used to resort at such periods [...] On a warm summer day the slow continued rise required continual effort, which carried away the sense of oppression” (Jefferies, 2002, p. 17).

Consequently, the dichotomy is slowly overcome, which leads us to another distinctive element of the x experience, namely *transcendence*. One must keep in mind the specific use of the word “transcendence”: “‘Transcendence’ is conventionally used in the sense of God’s transcendence. But as a human phenomenon we deal with transcending the ego, leaving the prison of one’s selfishness and separateness; whether we conceive of this transcendence as

one towards God is a matter of conceptualization” (Fromm, 1967a, p. 60). As I already explained, nature is of considerable importance in Jefferies’ experiences, so, transcendence in his case will take a direction towards nature: “There was a deeper meaning everywhere. The sun burned with it, the broad front of morning beamed with it; a deep feeling entered me while gazing at the sky in the azure noon, and in the star-lit evening. I was sensitive to all things, to the earth under, and the starhollow round about; to the least blade of grass, to the largest oak. They seemed like exterior nerves and veins for the conveyance of feeling to me” (Jefferies, 2002, p. 122).

These experiences – though they may sound a bit odd to those who have not experienced them themselves – are not irrational or esoteric gibberish, but, on the contrary, lead towards further *self-development*,¹¹ an additional typical component of the x experience. As Fromm puts it: “The highest value is the optimal development of one’s own powers of reason, love, compassion, courage” (Fromm, 1967a, p. 58). In Jefferies’ words: “We must do for ourselves what superstition has hitherto supposed an intelligence to do for us [...] The first and strongest command (using the word to convey the idea only) that nature, the universe, our own bodies give, is to do everything for ourselves” (Jefferies, 2002, p. 96).

In the end, both transcendence and self-development will result in the fact that the individual ceases to *oppose* the world and becomes *absorbed in* it (thus completely surmounting the existential dichotomy): “Man is not a subject opposing the world in order to transform *it*; he is *in* the world making his being in the world the occasion for constant self-transformation. Hence the world (man and nature) is not an object standing opposite to him, but the medium in which he discovers his own reality and that of the world even more deeply” (Fromm, 1967a, p. 59). One who has experienced this, will become more human and other human beings will become ends to him, not means. This is also clearly the case in Jefferies’ autobiographical

¹¹ Formerly impossible due to the fact that one suffered from a split-up ego.



writings: “I hope succeeding generations will be able to be idle. I hope that nine-tenths of their time will be leisure; that they may enjoy their days, and the earth, and the beauty of this beautiful world [...] I will work towards that end with all my heart” (Jefferies, 2002, pp. 111-112). As a result we can see how the subject of Frommian radical humanism is interweaved with religiosity (or, x-icity).

The Belgian philosopher Leo Apostel typifies Jefferies’ thoughts and experiences as an atheistic, non-pantheistic spirituality of nature (Apostel, 1998, p. 108). Reading Jefferies, there are without a doubt many indications that the God of orthodox religion is excluded. And indeed, one might want to argue that perhaps he tends to a kind of pantheism, because of his strong emphasis on nature. The following statement should annul this interpretation: “There is no god in nature, nor in any matter anywhere, either in the clods on the earth or in the composition of the stars” (Jefferies, 2002, p. 53). He goes on to say: “I cease, therefore, to look for traces of the deity in life, because no such traces exist” (Jefferies, 2002, p. 55). How does one explain Jefferies’ ambiguous phrasings and the frequent use of words and expressions referring to conventional religion (such as soul, soulthought, spirit or even prayer...)? One should not forget the fact that Jefferies in a way tries to translate deep emotions and experiences, and often these experiences go beyond the usual vocabulary.¹² So the use of “traditional” religious expressions should be seen as an attempt to get as close to the experience, without having to invent a whole new terminology that, in the end, might not be understood by its readers. Interpreting Jefferies’ thought is subject to discussion, yet I feel confident that this autobiography can at the very least suggest that atheists can have x experiences. If nature is so important to Jefferies, then what

¹² This is a problem we find in many religious (and mystical) discourses, known as the problem of “ineffability.” Jeremy Hooker writes: “Jefferies was acutely aware of his ‘lack of words to express ideas,’ because he had to use words with traditional meanings, such as ‘soul,’ ‘prayer,’ and ‘immortal,’ for his essentially iconoclastic purposes” (in Jefferies, 2002, p. 5).

can one think of the fact that Jefferies concludes that “no deity has anything to do with nature” (Jefferies, 2002, p. 53)? Although he occasionally mentions that he searches for something more, something else and greater than the deity,¹³ one is not obliged to follow Jefferies’ continuous longings for “more.” Jeremy Hooker, the author of the Introduction to the 2002-edition of *The Story of my Heart*, has correctly understood this: “Jefferies would have been the first to agree that his words were ‘fumbling,’ but it does him no service to assume that what he was fumbling towards was any form of traditional religious belief. Jefferies was – the residual Platonism apart – an almost total iconoclast” (in Jefferies, 2002, p. 8).

Religious atheism as a possibility

Whether or not one is attracted by Richard Jefferies’ rhapsodies, is not relevant to the central question of this essay. His autobiography and the account of his experiences serve as an example, nothing more.

In the Frommian analysis of religion (or, religiosity), an x experience is merely a *human* experience, which drives the individual towards further self-development. These reflections are sufficient enough to take a serious interest in these kinds of experiences. Within the x experience, “God” is not a *necessary* component but rather a *possible* concept. Viewed as such, religiosity can exist, without referring to God – which, in turn, makes it possible to talk about religious atheism or atheistic religiosity.

I have clearly stated, but wish to emphasize once more, that this is just a *possibility*. Given the fact that the x experience starts with the craving to overcome the existential dichotomies of man, it is clear to Fromm that not every man – and therefore not every atheist – suffers from this dichotomy or the yearning to overcome it. An atheist can simply remain, for example, an ethical man (or woman, of course). Atheists *do not have to be* religious, but they

¹³ This does not contradict with atheism per se: first of all, it is not said that this “more,” this “something else” should be a new kind of deity and secondly, the experiences of nature can suffice.



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Atheism is, in the broadest sense, the absence of belief in the existence of deities. Less broadly, atheism is the rejection of belief that any deities exist. In an even narrower sense, atheism is specifically the position that there are no deities. Atheism is contrasted with theism, which, in its most general form, is the belief that at least one deity exists.