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## Introduction

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Nontheistic reverence for life remains to be cultivated.

—William Connolly (1991)

This book was conceived and largely developed from a totally secular perspective. It will explore the idea that secularism is a positive, not a negative, condition, not a denial of the world of spirit and of religion, but an affirmation of the world we're living in now; that building our world on a foundation of the secular is essential to our contemporary well-being; and that such a world is capable of bringing us to the condition of "fullness" that religion has always promised.<sup>1</sup> The premise of the book as a whole, and probably of all the contributors (but it's important that even that question be left at least slightly ajar), is that the world is to be understood and explained—as far as it is possible to explain it—in natural terms; it works always and everywhere without miracles or supernatural interventions. Despite possible disagreements by some of the contributors, the book is concerned with ideas that follow from this premise, and the central problem is to understand and imagine what it means to occupy a world of this kind. Through explorations of this problem, I want to establish an affectively and intellectually powerful case that a secular world is not only worth it—that life is indeed worth living—but that with all the inevitable pains and losses, it can be wonderful, indeed, at times joyous, and that a sense of that wonder enhances the possibilities of improving it.

Philip Kitcher, a distinguished philosopher of science, sets the tone for the book, opening the discussion with a secular vision, confronting the challenges to it, but finally arguing that "an adequate response to these challenges requires moving beyond secularism as a merely negative doctrine, and offering something to replace the functional aspects of traditional religions." "Functional" may sound to nonphilosophical ears a little too businesslike for the achievement of "fullness," but in replacing

the “functional aspects” of religion, one needs to achieve as well the kinds of emotional, personal, and cultural satisfactions that religion has traditionally been conceived to provide. It’s for this reason that I (like several of the contributors) have hung on to the rather problematic but often extremely useful word “enchantment.” If we take that word carefully—with the qualifications implied by the rest of this introduction and perhaps with some of the reservations of Bruce Robbins in his essay here—there are ways in which the secular world can be experienced as “enchanted” and remain absolutely of this time, of this place.

A book about ideas, about science, ethics, history, and art, this volume nevertheless aims also at being a book about living: how does it *feel* or how *might it feel* to be entirely secular? how can we, as Paolo Costa asks, feel ourselves at home in a world that allows for nothing transcendent? how can one come at things, understand them on their earthly terms, and think about them, experience them as value laden and “meaningful”? I have undertaken this volume to explore these questions because it is a matter not *only* of ideas, but also of experience, and because by learning to be at home in this secular world, we can feel more intensely the urgency and understand more fully the possibilities of making it better.

There is, then, real practical urgency in what, to some, might seem rather arcane struggles over a theory of a sociologist, Max Weber, who died eighty-nine years ago: “the fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world.’”<sup>2</sup> Science will figure importantly in the arguments that follow because it is our best instrument for discovering how the world works; and knowing as much as we can about how the world works is a condition for improving as much as possible our human condition. Yet the Weberian story is that science “disenchants” the world, takes the “meaning” out of it—and it does so not so much by fully explaining it, but by making it seem as though it *might* be fully explained without recourse to the invocation of transcendental powers. But while Copernicus’s famed decentering of the world and thus of the human was the beginning of a long history of decentering that has played itself out in physics, in many important psychological theories, and in Darwin’s theory and the evolutionary biology that grew from it, the argument here—all the contributors seem to agree—will be that the news science brings is not in the end anything like the spiritually devastating news that Weber’s story of disenchantment seems to imply.

Behind these arguments about “knowing” and “feeling” and “ethics” and “enchantment” is a conviction that secularity is not an option but

a necessity, an absolute condition for a democratic society and a democratic world. Competing forces, competing religions, make claims for ultimate authority not only over the life of the spirit, but over the conduct of our lives in this world. The moral and spiritual authority that religion inevitably claims *must* imply universality, and this has to mean in all consistency that each religion must demand moral and spiritual control over lay society as well. Clearly, many religions, or many religious people, have backed off the universalizing claims that religion as a whole seems to imply, and agree to respect alternative ways of believing. But the examples of conflicting claims are everywhere, and for survival—and, certainly, for any condition richer than mere survival—nations internally and in their relations with others must allow some authority *other than* the factious ones that competing religions represent. Nobody can sanely assume that secular societies are, in contrast, always cozy and harmonious (a little Stalinism, a little Hitlerism, a little Maoism will blast that absurd notion out of the water), but it makes sense to believe that for a democratic civilization to survive, there must be some authority granted (by all the contenders for the “true” truth and the ethical best) that is enfranchised to limit their power to impose on others. Whether that is ultimately possible and sustainable is an entirely unsettled question. But that ultimate authority—the democratic state—must not be defined as belonging to any of the contenders.<sup>3</sup>

On this account, a truly democratic state can't be Christian (or any of the Christian subsets or alternatives, like Roman Catholic, or Jewish, or Islamic), but must be ready to allow Christianity, or Judaism, or Islam, its space within the community. There must be what Charles Taylor calls a “theory of social order . . . that transforms our social imaginary.”<sup>4</sup> Which is to say that a truly democratic state must be secular, whatever any individual inside the state believes about the transcendent and its relation to our ordinary lives.

This book, then, with whatever individual qualifications any of the contributors might make, is after something like what Taylor describes in his essay “Modes of Secularism.”<sup>5</sup> There, Taylor—a believing Roman Catholic—sees secularism as a kind of moral imperative in the modern world, one that allows for the extraordinary range of beliefs among people and that makes democracy at least possible. What is required is a social and political organization that is not governed by any one of those myriad beliefs but is willing to acquiesce, in order to make civilized life possible, in an “overlapping consensus” on culturewide decisions about the particulars of ordinary and social life, on the law, and on the rules of social behavior.<sup>6</sup>

In order to arrive at such a development devoutly (well, yes, devoutly) to be wished, it is necessary to reimagine secularism, recognize in it all of the ethical, spiritually satisfying, and deeply felt (not merely dispassionately held) elements that have traditionally been allied with religion, but without the magic, and without the sectarianism. A tall task, perhaps an unworkable one. But it is a task more than worth the effort. To that end I invited a broad range of thinkers, among the most distinguished on such subjects in the world, and I asked them, “Would you think about the possibility of ‘Secular Enchantment’?”—that is, about a “positive” secularity that might satisfy those crucially important feelings and spiritual needs that it would be self-destructive and self-deceptive for secularists simply to deny. Obviously, I asked writers whom I thought of as more or less secularist in orientation but, most importantly, writers who had clearly thought hard about these problems. I did not know what they would want to say, only that what they would say had to be considered seriously. My own object, whatever the authors themselves would decide, was to disentangle morality and “fullness” from the transcendent, to shift attention and emotional investment from the *aldilà* to the here and now. Any large movement toward a democratic secularity requires that we beat that “disenchantment” story and allow ourselves to feel deep in our bones the compatibility between profound attention to the details of this world (which are so often for so many so preponderantly painful) and a sense not only of material but of what we call spiritual satisfaction.

It will be no surprise, then, that I invited William Connolly to write for the book, since in an early essay, which in fact provides the epigraph here, he had made a powerful case for such a project. In his “Letter to St. Augustine,” Connolly movingly engages with Augustine, considers his arguments, and complains: “The more one looks into the depths of the human condition—and you peer more deeply into this abyss than anyone before and most after—the more it becomes clear how much must be divested from human life and invested in divinity if the very possibility of salvation by a sovereign god is itself to be made secure.”<sup>7</sup> This book’s aspiration to imagine a positive and satisfying secularism is directed against such a divestment. Isn’t there something of a paradox implicit in the idea that in order to achieve satisfaction of the kind that Taylor describes as “fullness” (or the salvation Augustine desires) we need to seek explanation outside the world that inspires the satisfaction in the first place, and detach ourselves from our own world, devalue it, or even deny it, turning what common sense suggests is reality into a mere illusory passage into the real reality? That, at least, is what I was thinking when I undertook

to put this book together. The writers on the whole have independently worked out approaches to the problem that I have found compatible with my initiating idea, although often complexly different as well.

Together, they seem to me to provide a rich and exciting set of arguments about the possibility and necessity of imagining a positive, if often dangerous, secularism and finally living full lives within it. And for the rest of the introduction I will be talking about this possibility with rather less philosophic precision and rather more sentiment than do several of the contributors, trying to read the contributors' essays as they reflect on the possibility of such secularism, while trying also to suggest in my own terms what it might mean to live a satisfying secular life.

## 2

Darwin once wrote that he wondered sometimes why everyone didn't want to become an ornithologist. Well, I do. I love to watch birds. I love birds. And I continue to be astonished by their variety, their intelligence, their beauty, their (alas, decreasing) ubiquity, and, in all that, their difference from me. Somehow they manage in the depth of urban jungles as in jungles proper. Rain forests pulsate with them and reverberate with their calls. The Ramble in Central Park fills with them in the spring. But the streets of New York (and Los Angeles, and Chicago) also sustain them—pigeons, house sparrows, starlings, house finches, mallards, crows, red-tailed hawks, herring gulls, now again peregrine falcons, and even communities of descendants of escaped parrots. I might even say it's a kind of miracle, this vitality and adaptiveness and variety. All one has to do is look and there they are. We imagine some great distance between our urban selves and nature, but the birds remind us that we're part of each other, depend on each other.

Thinking what the experience means can belie the intensity of the perception and response. It's better for me at first to say "wow" than to puzzle about where they come from, how they sustain themselves, how they resist the murderous or indifferent presence of millions of humans and their machines. It's better for me to notice what their commonness can easily disguise, that these birds are beautifully feathered, prolific, graceful, quick, and clever and find the resources they need in garbage, crumbs, manure, the leavings of human excess. They get so common one sometimes wishes them away, but who has not been awed by the astonishing performance of those pesky, inextinguishable starlings as they swoop in clouds synchronized but irregular.

And the feeling, the deep, let's call it "natural," satisfaction of recognizing so many varieties of life independent of us and yet so clearly related, feeds that sense of "fullness" that gives to our lives a "richness," makes it feel "deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be."<sup>8</sup> For Taylor, such moments point upward, toward something outside this secular world that provoked it. For me it has been different. It points me—let me follow the metaphor—downward, or up only so far as the birds fly. This world seems to me, amid the urban noises, the garbage, and the disasters that announce themselves regularly in the papers and on TV, very beautiful and adequate to itself. The earth is room enough—or should be. So that those moments of fullness with which my life has been so fortunately enriched are deeply, even passionately, secular moments. "Wow." What a world!

And yet of course, in the long curve of the experience of Western culture, and perhaps of all cultures (I'm no expert), there has pervaded a sense that the very value I experience watching those pigeons and hawks and ducks, and the ethical and aesthetic values that give our lives fullness and sustain our societies and our culture, are somehow indissolubly involved in the experience of another world, the *aldilà*, the world that religion represents for so many cultures. Against the secular imagination of the world that I feel to my fingertips, there emerged right from the start, through the very heart, for instance, of nineteenth-century culture where secular talk was getting so much greater play, intense counterarguments: the world without religion couldn't account for it, and was simply dog-eat-dog, amoral, violent, and without sanction for the ethical. We are familiar with the powerful Dostoyevskian sense that there is no meaning in a world without God. Similarly if less powerfully imagined, this view held among most Victorians. W. H. Mallock published a book called *Is Life Worth Living?* (1879), and, echoing that, William James published an essay of the same title (1896). It was a real question: if one removes God from the world, can there be any meaning, any value, any morality? Is there any point in being alive in such a world, just one damned thing after another? (Perhaps the word "damned" here has more force than is usually registered in the colloquialism.) For Mallock, the answer was no; and, in a different register, and in a more complicated way, so it was for James. And as I watch, with awe and delight, the red-tailed hawk swoop down to the apartment house just across the street from Central Park, I occasionally ask myself, why should that be so? Isn't this, right here, worth it, after all?

It's a serious question, obviously. The answer I propose by putting together this book is "of course," and it is driven by a powerful desire to make that "of course" simple common sense for as many people as possible. At first, I want to insist, one doesn't have to think about it. There's the bird. Not that all the contributors agree with me, or even consider the question immediately in such absolute terms; but I want to link together that immediate almost mindless experience of the wonder of the ordinary (at the same time, profoundly Darwinian)<sup>9</sup> with the larger question "Is Life Worth Living?" which I might translate into: can the world perceived as entirely secular, explicable exclusively in naturalist terms, with no recourse to what Daniel Dennett contemptuously calls "sky hooks"—can it provide the kinds of "fullness," the kinds of moral, aesthetic, and spiritual satisfactions that have traditionally been linked exclusively to religion? "Of course" may seem too easy, and the writers for this volume explore this idea from many vantage points, sometimes with great complexity and sometimes with implicit disagreement, but wherever they end up going, I—as editor with only personal authority—want to insist on the "of course," on the fundamental ground of feeling for secular experience of value.

The problems with my happily middle-class and intellectual enthusiasm leap immediately to mind. James's essay begins by invoking a joke he says made the rounds after Mallock's book asked the question "Is Life Worth Living?"—"it all depends on the liver." The joke is, in the end, no joke at all. It would be absurd for an academic bird-watcher, in the midst of a fairly healthy and comfortable life, to claim for a world full of madness, suffering, starvation, predation, Ponzi schemes, drug cartels, disease, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, and genocides to claim, with the complacency of good luck, that everyone should just sit back and smile at how wonderful the world is—just appreciate it! James wonderfully insists that there are some people—he invokes, for example, Walt Whitman—who have "instinctive springs of vitality" and are unreflectingly and temperamentally upbeat, people for whom the world can be wonderful, the blade of grass a miracle to stagger sextillions of infidels. But there are others, perhaps with deficient livers, for whom, even if their lives *are* otherwise comfortable, the temperament points downward to darkness. "We of the nineteenth century," says James, "with our evolutionary theories and our mechanical philosophies, already know too impartially and too well to worship unreservedly any God of whose character [nature] can be seen as an adequate expression."<sup>10</sup>

In this volume, Adam Phillips discusses the Freudian perception that we are all born into “helplessness,” a permanent human condition. We come into the world utterly dependent, and the helplessness does not abate but transforms as we grow. The condition ensures that the world is not likely to be a lot of fun, not, certainly, for long; it is overpowering and scary; and humans simply don’t have the resources to resist its forces. We are helpless. Facing that helplessness, on Phillips’s account of Freud, is what we all must do, short, I suppose, of the suicide that both Mallock and James discuss as the logical response to the godless human position. Ironically, as Phillips sees it, the attempt to find a helper—and the most potent final helper would be God—is a way to disguise the reality that James, too, had confronted. James’s answer, in the plea for “help” that his essay might be taken to be, was to translate longing for God into the reality of God. (And this leads us, as do several of the essays in this volume—particularly David Sloan Wilson’s—to a question not only about what constitutes the truth in our descriptions of this world, but whether truth, in our rationalist/scientific mode, is what will help us best.) Freud sees such a move as a surrender, a retreat from reality, and, perhaps ironically, a disguise of real (I might say, secular) desire. And, Phillips’s essay implies, it is only satisfaction of that earthly, secular desire, which can come in moments as we live in the here and now, that in the end makes life worth living. So the best thing to do, ironically enough, is to surrender to the inescapable fact of our helplessness, and find then the sporadic satisfactions of worldly desire, lost in the help-seeking flight to God.

It gets complicated. There are lots of ways to read the conditions of secularity, and when I invoke Taylor’s idea of “fullness,” it is in part because I understand “fullness” to be not an unequivocally happy state, but a condition, sometimes painful or worse, that allows us nevertheless an ultimate sense of the value of things and of ourselves. So in this book I want to tangle with the complications and preserve my “wow” after all. Can we allow that we are “helpless” and yet experience “fullness” in the secular condition? “Of course.”

Although I am deeply tempted by a rhetoric of heroic facing of the truth and have been in sympathy with the “freethinkers” who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries largely invented it—writers like T. H. Huxley and Karl Pearson and Leslie Stephen and Bertrand Russell—I realize that there are problems with its ultimate dramatic complacency, and perhaps even with its epistemological assumptions. Holding tight to inconvenient truths, we somehow portray ourselves as intellectually and morally superior to the rest of the “big children”—Max



Weber's words<sup>11</sup>—who imagine that the truths of science are compatible with religious faith. On this side, there is the inescapable if constantly self-correcting truth of science, teaching us how to maneuver in this world; on the other, there is religion—teaching us how to maneuver in the other world, and, as a route to that other world, policing us in our behavior in this one.

Unlike others, like the late Stephen Jay Gould and so many excellent scientists who believe that there is nothing incompatible between science and religion—nonoverlapping magisteria, Gould somewhat bloatedly calls them—this book will make no such case. Eschewing the triumphalist rhetoric of brilliant writers like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, I nevertheless accept by and large Weber's, shall we call it, somewhat snotty division between the two. The point of this book is not to try to reconcile science and religion—some people might be able to bring it off, others certainly not, and I don't really believe in it; it is, rather, to imagine a satisfying secularity, a secularity with which “fullness”—not traditional religion—is compatible.

The rhetorical problems, meanwhile, are substantive ones as well, for the argument from a strict scientific rationality assumes that once, within the epistemological framework of the modern West, one finds “evidence” and the logical relations among ideas and things, the case is closed, and this despite the fact that nobody except the previously unconverted is persuaded by the unexceptionable reasoning. The rhetoric that follows tends, I fear, to be triumphalist and pretty intolerant of anyone who either denies or questions the “evidence,” or anyone for whom the assumptions about the priority of “reason” over “faith” are in question. Yet there is a strong philosophical case to be made that scientific reason, too, is based on a kind of faith of the sort that Hume discussed centuries ago.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, the deep modern confidence in science's absolute authority has not always succeeded in achieving the kind of intellectual or moral effect toward which it has always been directed: those who “cannot bear the fate of the times like a man,” as Weber put it,<sup>13</sup> make a terrible “intellectual sacrifice” in their refusal to accept inconvenient truths. I confess to having bought in pretty thoroughly to this way of thinking, and in my recent anger and dismay at fundamentalist responses to fundamentalist attacks, I have found it a deliciously tempting option to join militant atheist rhetoricians.

But one way to get at what I am after in this book without mounting a moral and intellectual high horse was articulated in a recent *New Yorker* article by James Woods. “What is needed,” he writes, “is neither

the overweening rationalist atheism of a Dawkins nor the rarefied religious belief of an Eagleton, but a theologically engaged atheism that resembles disappointed belief. Such atheism, only a semitone from faith, would be, like musical dissonance, the more acute for its proximity. It would give a brother's account of belief, rather than treat it as some unwanted impoverished relative."<sup>14</sup> But the problem is not only a matter of avoiding triumphalist rhetoric while at the same time avoiding belief in the improbable. Woods's excellent and sensitive formulation falls just a semitone short of what I am after.

From my perspective, in seeking an engaged atheism, Woods puts slightly too much pressure on the *disappointed* nature of the belief. It is easy to recognize where that comes from, although I don't think that I personally have ever been disappointed in that way. I want, rather, as the old song suggests, to "accentuate the positive." The story of secularism, even (or particularly) the brilliant and almost exhaustive one told by Charles Taylor, is for my taste and beliefs too ridden with "nostalgia." And that, of course, means homesickness. How lovely it was to believe! Home is where we were, not where we are! And thus the disappointment implies that we want to go home again but can't: just exactly, for my purpose, the wrong way to look at the world. This *is* our home. So all of this kind of thinking and feeling makes a version of the narrative of disenchantment that any discussion of secularism these days must confront. It was better in the old days when there was magic everywhere, and where religious and secular authority were joined—in some rather brutal structures of social hierarchy. If nostalgia for a lost and lovely religion in which we can no longer believe leaves us forlorn, then I choose here to refuse nostalgia and the sense of loss, and I want this book, if with sympathy for those who feel the loss, to take me in another direction.

Woods's formulation admirably entails a respectful nostalgia, but Philip Kitcher, in his essay here as in his recent book, *Living with Darwin*, gets to where I think we should be going.<sup>15</sup> Against the triumphalist rationalist rhetoric, as against the "intellectual sacrifice," Kitcher recognizes that secularism requires something other than the denial of the transcendent, and something better than the lament for lost improbability. I quote again his formulation of the crucial project: "An adequate response . . . requires moving beyond secularism as a merely negative doctrine, and offering something to replace the functional aspects of traditional religions. Secularism needs to become secular *humanism*."

All of which suggests that there is indeed a way, as fundamentalist critics of secularism angrily insist, that secularism is *only* a kind of alternative

religion—but a worse one, and of course, as such, it is subject to the same critiques it levels at religion itself. Even if one is determined not to allow “secularism” to be understood as a negative of religion (as atheism is properly defined as the negative of belief in God), there seems to be no way to escape the shadow of history, and therefore of religion, which emerges from the deep and long continuing past. Since it is normal in our history to associate religion with the quest for meaning and the possibilities of fullness, secularism as (and if) it grows will certainly owe something—as Taylor argues in *A Secular Age*—to religious traditions, and thus Woods’s formulation, accepting that, moves in the right direction. Offering something to replace the “functional aspects of traditional religions,” including, I would add, the experience of “fullness” with which this introduction began, entails an inevitable even if unwilling paralleling. In his essay, Kitcher claims that to produce an adequate secularism there must be a detailed understanding of what it is that religion supplies. And we have already a significant tradition of secular study of religion in this direction, the work of Durkheim, for example, and the more recent work of David Sloan Wilson,<sup>16</sup> that emphasizes, among other things, the indispensable role religion has played in the binding of communities.

But this absolutely must not mean “religion” as we are used to thinking about it; it must mean *displacing* traditional religion from areas properly and significantly belonging to the secular world. It must not mean, to take the most extreme example, producing the imitation religion of nineteenth-century Comtean Positivism, with its chapels, churches, brevieries, and the like. Facing in an earlier phase the intellectual and spiritual crises with which this book is engaged, the Positivists, in some ways quite sensibly, made up a church and worked up a list of rationalist saints. The absurdity of the effort was clear almost from the outset—what we do *not* need are artificial rituals, imitation catechisms, formal Sunday meetings and “lay sermons,” rationalist confessionals, and the rest.<sup>17</sup> All of these are confessions of loss and in imitation are inevitably weak and even comic versions of a historically dense and impressive tradition. What we do need is an understanding that the most important provinces claimed by religion—the provinces of ethics and art and daily life—are provinces that secularity has a powerful right to reclaim. Kitcher and Woods share a tendency toward turning secularism into an alternative religion because they understand—as does Connolly in his superb book, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (though he is)—that rationality constitutes only a small part of the human experience and is helpless against the urgencies of feeling. The important thing is to find a way to conjoin the worlds of feeling with the

worlds of reason, and one must do it with another kind of rhetoric (rhetoric itself being defined as just such a combination), and another way of living. What we seek, as David Sloan Wilson puts it here, is “a cultural system that delivers the best of what religion has to offer while respecting factual reality.” Yes, as Kitcher says, “secular humanism”: but not a religion, rather a way of being that occupies ground too often claimed as exclusively the province of religion.<sup>18</sup>

The point—and it’s perhaps the unreflective point from which I started—is not that secularism is a falling away, a necessary loss—but that (and I’ll sneak that word in again) it’s a damned good thing. As Bruce Robbins wants to insist in his essay here (in which he takes on the whole tradition of what he certainly thinks of as false and obscuring nostalgia), secularism *should* be seen as “an improvement story.” To suggest something like progress, in the current intellectual culture that refuses the idea of progress even to Darwin, is actually quite daring, although scientific/rationalist thinkers will have little trouble with it. To resist the idea that the world gets better and better and will eventually achieve through technology and human inventiveness a kind of utopian future seems to me to be crucially important. Buying into that version of the progress story means buying into a whole bunch of political and economic narratives that need to be challenged; it turns the “reenchantment” story into a *secretively* political program, decried on the one hand by Eagleton, who leans against it back toward the traditional religious position, and on the other by Robbins in this volume, who does more than lean away both from the enchantment narrative *and* from the traditional religious position.

But, even in the light of many intellectuals’ deep disappointment with the exploitation of scientific ideals of progress in the development of vast industrial, technological, and financial systems that have moved Western culture to the edge of catastrophe, it makes important sense to recognize developments in scientific thinking as at least epistemological “progress.” (And that progress, as I will be arguing, can be linked crucially to ethical “progress” as well, though the matter is much more tricky and difficult there.) We do know more about how the world works; we are busy, self-consciously, finding out how much more we can know and whether material processes can serve as explanation and then as help (it’s dangerous but irresistible) in what we have traditionally taken as the province of the spirit and of the deeply private spaces of our selves. The problem of “reductionism” rears its head here: can we reduce everything to some fundamental material condition? Certainly, what I would call premature

“materialism,” as I think of it, produces some awful stuff: books that prove that men are naturally rapists, pills that “cure” everything from homosexuality to spiritual darkness. But I still want to know, as Frans de Waal tries to teach us, something about the potentiality for morality in primates; I want to know, as David Sloan Wilson tries to discover, how much aspects of human behavior, like our rituals and attitudes, have almost unbeknownst to us served adaptive causes. I want to know if there are elements in the brain that are automatically, physiologically “sympathetic.” I want to know a lot, and to be free to investigate “scientifically” spaces previously closed off by our notion of the sacred. “There is nothing specifically religious about the concept of the sacred,” says Wilson.<sup>19</sup> Knowing more about the way things are is a condition, as almost all the essays in this book imply or argue, for doing anything valuable to them or with them.

At the end of her essay for this volume, with an appropriateness I could only have wished for, Rebecca Stott cites Amy Clampitt’s poem, “The Sun Underfoot Among the Sundews.” Its last extraordinary image captures richly the conception of secularism I am trying to get at all too prosaically: “There is so much light / in that cup that, looking, / you start to fall upward.” The echo of religious language—“the fall,” most obviously, and the “light,” traditionally its antithesis—leaves the world we occupy upside down. Stott’s analysis gets it right, Darwinianly right. In a secular world the “fall,” which is literal, displaces the upward movement of salvation in the religious world, and puts us among very beautiful things and among dangerous ones. One falls upward into the gorgeous predatory, insect-devouring sundews. While they are gorgeous, it is impossible to forget that those flowers are “devourers,” that they exist in a bog, and that they provide no consolation but their own dangerous beauty.

This is where the secularism I am imagining for this book will take you, with the hope that the “fall” will be recognized as upward, rather in the way, although in so different a form, the accession to “helplessness” in Phillips’s essay is paradoxically an invitation to the morally and aesthetically satisfying life—to the possibility of “fullness.” Simple atheism is, Philip Kitcher reminds us, a fundamentally negative position—it is a “denial” of the existence of something, God, for which it cannot find, within its own canons of proof, any evidence. But such epistemological (and metaphysical) assertions are beside the point of our current religious/secular stalemates, and often deadly wars. Following Clampitt’s poem into the brilliant bog, we come to the position—metaphorically speaking, of course—of treating secularism as Kitcher argues it must be treated if

it is to have any purchase on the real life of our time (or any time). That is, it must be articulated “as a set of positive responses” to the losses incurred when one surrenders the positive ways religion enters people’s lives—through felt inspirations to generosity and moral behavior and to the building of community, for example. Somehow, that is to say, secularism must make not the epistemological but the social and cultural appeal that religion has long been understood to make. Falling up into the sundews is what we want to be able to do. Much of the energy for the writing of this book comes from a deep faith—yes, the word is necessary, though I think there are tons of evidence to help justify it—that secularism is a “falling upward,” and that such secular appeals are possible.

Taylor, Robbins, and Robert J. Richards remind us that Max Weber’s word, normally translated as “disenchantment,” is actually *Entzauberung*, the removal of magic; and the move from magic to science is critical in what amounts to a struggle between traditional improbable if lovely stories and modern probable ones to determine, as Weber did, that the probable ones are better (I want to insist that they can be lovely, too, though that hard sell is part of the work of this introduction, and of the book as a whole). And they are better not only because they are more likely to be true. The whole question of the difference between truths that are useful—or adaptive or pragmatic—and those that are objectively or scientifically true is central to the question of secularity and is at least partly treated here in Wilson’s essay. But the bias of this book, or at least of this introduction, is that “true” truths as opposed to adaptive or pragmatic truths are likely, in the end, also to be more adaptive and pragmatic too. It is humanly better, suggests Phillips, to acquiesce in the reality of our helplessness. It is ethically more efficient to find out whether, as some have claimed, altruism is incompatible with our lives as organisms governed by the processes of natural selection than to assume a transcendental insertion of altruism into our nasty secular bones. The narrative of secularism I mean to imply in this book is, then, an improvement narrative, one that winds through the extraordinary difficulties and complexities of humans’ understanding of what it means for a thing to be true to an understanding of truth that allows the inconvenient truths their space and opens the way, nevertheless, to the satisfactions that religion was the only institution to supply when such truths were scarcer.

It sounds, even as I write it, a bit callow and presumptuous, but think of it as a fall upward into the sundew. There it is. Secularism is to be understood or felt not as a necessary loss, a heroic counterstory to a religion that couldn’t, alas, fulfill its promises, but as a recognition of the brilliant

sunlight down in the bog, and thus a profoundly positive affirmation. Yes here. Yes now.

The enchantment narrative against which Robbins writes with such intensity does tend to imply the superiority of the “then,” even if we know that the “then” has to be left behind. It implies, as does so much of Taylor’s wonderfully comprehensive *A Secular Age*, even with its remarkable understanding of the spiritual attractions and possibilities of secularism, a nostalgia for the lost enchantment, the lost magic. It is a long and moving story, but, as I am arguing here, it tends, however wisely, to turn the magical world into home. Against that imagination, or perhaps it would be better to call it implicit feeling, one might consider the conditions possible in a magical world.

I recall some descriptions of a culture in the very heart of Central Africa as a French friend experienced it only a few years ago. She spent a long time living among the natives of that area, and entirely on her own. In her early weeks there she was fully accepted by the community and felt no fear. She had long conversations with the witch doctor, was befriended by men and women and children, and learned as much as she could about the culture of the community. She reported to me, however, that the natives—like other peoples living all around them—believe in a mind-full, intentional world, a world that Daniel Dennett might say is built on “sky hooks.” Everything that happens in that world is “intentional.” There is a mind at work always, and what we call magic they take as the quite reasonable norm of everyday life. What for us is irrational is for them precisely the reverse; and I’m sure vice versa. Among those peoples there are pretty heavy penalties when the “mind” behind the accident is identified. An accident doesn’t happen. Someone is responsible and must pay.

So there are no accidents. There is a reason for everything. One may not see it, but mind is everywhere at work, and these natives seem *always* to have a feeling the equivalent of what many people in Western cultures often claim when they survive a crash in which most other people have been killed and wounded: “There must have been a reason I was spared. Thank God for saving me” (which of course implies that there was a good reason that all of the others should be dead).

It is, then, a world guided by magic. Magic makes the common sense. If someone stubs his toe or falls or dies, it is important to find the person responsible. The witch doctor finally determines who is the culprit (not *whether* there is in fact a culprit), and consequently there are more than often enough quite terrible punishments meted out. My friend claimed that she had seen the very gentle and friendly people she had come to know

execute violent punishment, even kill, because someone had drowned or had fallen accidentally to his death. Someone was at fault, was guilty, and had to pay. The decision was absolute, and its seriousness was played out in the degrees of punishment inflicted. “La mort est partout,” my friend said. When she herself ran into some little trouble because of her encounter with another witch doctor, her comfort with the lovely people turned into a frightening sense of vulnerability, and she pretty much stopped going out. Her life, too, might have been in danger, and one of the witch doctors might easily have rendered a negative judgment about her. The last relevant part of this story is my friend’s conviction that magic and witch doctors would almost certainly have disappeared from the culture had there been a decent hospital.

In my perhaps hopelessly Western reading, the culture my friend entered was “enchanted,” was full of magic, and made complete sense while in a space of total mystery. That is, while things made sense because the world was governed by mind, what exactly that mind was thinking or would do remained mysterious. It is almost the reverse of Westerners’ view of the world: natural selection is mindless and its processes are without moral responsibility. We may be horrified by the destruction, but we understand what Dennett would call the “algorithm” of its working. The mindlessness science identifies opens up the possibilities of understanding. The world of natural selection is “disenchanted,” but the consequence is that we know more about the world than do those who believe that all life is governed by mind and intention. The very rational, mind-filled existence of these African natives produces just the conditions implied by “enchantment.”

The religious worlds of the West enact a similar story: terrible things happen, but surely they are part of God’s plan. In an enchanted world, as Weber emphasizes, there is always mystery, something one doesn’t understand working importantly through life, but the culture my friend described to me is one in which there is meaning saturating all things in nature even if it works like magic and is in most respects a mystery. The ultimate reasons remain a mystery, but we know there is a mind that makes sense of them—a mind out of nature. The joy of enchantment—like Don Quixote’s translation of all he sees into intentional, meaningful action—is just that it provides the satisfaction of some ultimate moral and even rational frame (even if we are too small and humble to know what it is). This kind of mind-filled world is, in its detailed processes, magical. *Mais la mort est partout.*



Looked at from this perspective, enchantment loses a lot of its charm and nostalgia comes less easily. As it did my friend, it can leave you right in the center of the magic, but unpredictably vulnerable and not at home at all. From my perhaps shallowly secular perspective the “mindless” world of natural selection seems a considerable and much more comprehensible improvement: we can understand the processes of natural selection without feeling the necessity of punishing it (or any of its henchmen). What has happened in that change from magic to natural processes is something like what Taylor describes in his essay here.

On Taylor’s account, then, secularity is marked by the fact that—to borrow a formulation from a novelist rather than a philosopher—all the action is thrown inside. Value exists not in the things, in the stones or in my birds, but in “what we call minds,” and “the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans.”<sup>20</sup> In the “enchanted” world, matter was inhabited by spirit; value existed outside my perception of it. Darwin’s imagination, as Dennett often all too gleefully puts it, is of a world initiated out of mindlessness and developed mindlessly.<sup>21</sup>

But if I want to think of this view as an improvement, I must also come to terms with the problem Taylor presents: when I want, from the “disenchanted” secular condition, to make the argument that the world *is* wonderful, or beautiful, or to argue for some ethical imperative, I am in a pickle. If I want to claim back for *this* world, as I do, those qualities of fullness and richness that, supposedly, were present in the enchanted world, say, of the pre-Renaissance West, or of my friend’s Africa, I will need to make those value arguments stick. It is not that the world is beautiful just for me, but that it is, simply, beautiful—even, say, mosquitoes. Following this kind of argument, in order to find meaning in the world, I would somehow have to make universal claims.

I have to believe, as Taylor so carefully puts it, that a “strong evaluation” implicit in this kind of claim will not allow us to release ourselves from it; even for secularists who deny external sanctions, any attempt to do so—say, to violate one of the commandments or concede the relativity of value (how about “Thou shalt not kill?”)—“reflects negatively on us.” And even my sense of wonder at that stooping falcon, diving at speeds that make its prey quite literally explode on contact, is a “strong evaluation.” It *is* wonderful (and that includes the destruction of the pigeon, another being). It is for me, as Taylor says, “the truth of the matter,” and that, given the perspectival relativism still latent in such strong judgments, contradicts itself. This unsteadiness of meaning is often

countered, in current discussions of ethics and morality and religion (as in the Durkheimian position espoused by Wilson about the adaptiveness of religious belief) by a move to an extratranscendental explanation of matters ethical, in biology. De Waal shows us here that some primates tend toward altruism (at least in certain situations). In another register, Richards, with the most careful textual and historical analysis, shows that the determinedly naturalistic Darwin “provides the grounds . . . for an ethics that meets the standards for a normative system.” That is, there are strong arguments (much contested, of course) that one can move from naturalism to ethics, or at least find the grounds for strong moral judgments in natural processes.

But here Taylor points to another problem in my little battle to insist on the possibility of fullness and ethical urgency inside the secular. That is, that what we have meant by altruism in the long history of Western and Christian culture exceeds the biological explanation—there is a sense that “admiring altruism is not just finding this pattern of action useful [or, in perhaps more sophisticated evolutionary terms, serving without any selfish motivation but merely instinctively, to be useful to the group]; it is also holding that the motivation which powers it is in some ways higher, more noble, more admirable.” Taylor allows secularism to do a lot of work, but he digs in his heels at a position that offers quite mundane and pragmatic explanations of spiritual conditions of the sort, you-scratch-my-back-and-I’ll-scratch-yours.

I want to agree with Taylor’s implicit point, that a full secularism leaves us in a very weak position for formulating a universal value imperative. I want, however, tentatively though it must be, but in the company of others of the contributors to this volume, to settle for something less than the “strong” imperative, and to recognize Darwinianly (as certainly Taylor does far better than I) that there are gradings and differentiations, and to turn my universal imperative into a demonstration of possibility. It is not as though those who believe that ethical assertions are universally valid actually, in practice, agree about what the ethical universals are. I find no reason to deny the kind of ethics and experience Taylor describes while at the same time moving to what might be seen as a reductionist historical explanation, one of the sort that Kitcher tries in his essay here, and that certainly is part of Wilson’s imagination of religion and enchantment. Wilson and De Waal certainly, Costa and Richards also, though they go very different ways, seem to me to share this broad sense of possibility.

Like Taylor in his characterization of the secular position, though coming from a very different and quite Kantian direction, Richards argues

that it is the human mind that “formulates the theories that articulate and characterize nature.” And he reminds us that when “the human mind disappears,” so do all of nature’s “variegated colors, sounds, tactile feelings,” and the wonder and splendor of my red-tailed hawk in Central Park. All of which, for Richards, leaves the world enchanted after all, just because “at a very deep level” the human mind serves as a “template for understanding nature,” though the enchantment resides not strictly in the world outside mind; the source of enchantment is ultimately the human mind that makes sense of nature in the first place. To put it in other terms, those, for example, set by Paolo Costa in his reading of Heideggerian thought on these matters, it is a mistake to think that the issue can be understood entirely in the movement from inner to outer, mind to nature. Feelings themselves, “moods,” Costa claims, are conditions for “having a world” at all.

I don’t want here to engage readers or the other contributors in such complex philosophical arguments. They are important, and I’m hoping that readers will work through these essays and their arguments as they refuse simplifications, even perhaps the unwitting simplifications I must be making here. The detailed arguments and contentions, the tests of my ideas, and the interaction and conflict of others are what will make this book worth the trouble. But it seems to me essential to recognize that Taylor’s argument about secularism’s relation to a new subjectivity about the source of value is implicitly confirmed in many of these essays and is critical for our sense of the value of “this world,” as I keep insisting on calling it. Did Darwin, for example, really love his mindless world? Well, I believe he did, but Richards shows that part of the reason for this may be that the world for Darwin wasn’t really mindless after all; it is the contemporary mind that finally and fully evacuates mind from natural selection. But that mindless meaning is, ironically, entirely mind-made and thus may not be what the nostalgic yearner’s return to the fullness of enchanted cultures requires; it does, however, suggest that the urgent requirement for a universal and objective set of strong imperatives and values is not necessarily the way to go as we wrestle with the question of value’s place in a secular world. I would, for example, point to Taylor’s formulation of the idea of “overlapping consensus,” in his earlier essay on secularism. There is no way, even in a secular democracy, to make all the factions agree. The unity of a democratic culture, however, depends on an “overlapping consensus,” places where each of the very different sects, factions, religions, social groups will agree, and thus places where the secular authority that binds them can find secure support.

This is, as I claim at the start, a secular book. Its aim is to move toward a rethinking and refeeling of secularism, repudiating the supernatural, and it works from a position that I was delighted to see formulated by Kitcher: “departures from naturalism are both unconvincing and antithetical,” while at the same time—as certainly Taylor would agree—“naturalistic explanations of ethical practice are inadequate and fallacious.” But much of what I have been saying here, even invoking Robbins’s progress narrative and Wilson’s distinction between pragmatic and true truth, implies a commitment to the moral importance of that “true” truth. As Kitcher, again, puts it, “the transmission of ethical precepts depends on the ability of the recipient to have confidence that the source of the precepts is good, and that already presupposes a capacity for independent—secular—judgment of the good.” And that in turn implies some canon of reasoning and of evidential proof that will allow the identification of what’s reliable. In other words, put simply, before appropriate action can be taken, one needs to know what’s what—and here, I affirm once more, scientific canons of proof become essential.

This holds true at the higher levels of the question, whether, for example, humans can be imagined as “altruistic,” and as ethical beings. Is morality an entirely human invention? We have seen that Frans de Waal, working with primates, helps me toward the answer I have been seeking. If it is true that we are creatures intrinsically incapable of real morality, the ethical questions I think we all need to raise become irrelevant. So, as with any good secular writing, it’s necessary to get as close as we can to the fact of the matter. In this respect, ethics and science, the “ought” and the “is,” are directly related to each other, at least in that ethics would not make any sense at all if nature makes us intrinsically incapable of moral principles and behavior. But all of us, even the most cynical, have evidence that we are not incapable, and thus the explanation must come either in reference to the supernatural, a more traditional response that even Alfred Russel Wallace, the codiscoverer of natural selection, came to accept in relation to the presence of human consciousness and spirit; or there is something in the nature of natural processes that, without transcendental assistance, makes the ethical possible. We know where Darwin stood on this. De Waal makes a firm case that study of primates provides unequivocal evidence that the ethical is built into the evolutionary process. It is certainly built into the nature of primates. Nature, it seems, is not only, not merely, red in tooth and claw even as—so Richard Dawkins enjoys reminding us—in the very instant in which you are reading this, millions of creatures are being pursued, devoured, destroyed, and brutalized.

That it is mind that, in a certain sense, creates the world (half perceived, half created), or at least creates all value, ought not to be an impediment to the development of ethical canons. Kitcher makes a strong case for considering the evolution of ethics because he sees ethical imperatives as a product of history. This surely will run into some trouble, in part because one might encounter conflicting versions of history (Kitcher's sketch of that history—but he sees it only as a sketch—sounds rather like the standard one developed by evolutionary thinkers in our own day, and one that could seem reductionist in just the way Taylor does not accept).

But he is surely right that “[e]thical practice . . . has a long history,” and that one needs, as a secularist committed to the deep significance of ethical theory and practice, to use the perspective developed from historical study to “determine [ethical practice’s] ability to yield objective claims.” So for Kitcher, one begins by trying “to understand ethical practice, as one understands religious belief, as a historical phenomenon, to consider its evolution.” Where Taylor turns away, Kitcher is ready, as he claims, in the light of possible evolutionary and adaptationist history of ethics, to see ethics as “a form of *social technology*.” Again, not a charming or enchanting formulation, but one that it might be possible to work with. Where Taylor is understandably uneasy about *reducing* ethics to so pragmatic a matter, Kitcher, insisting on history, is ready to watch ethics grow, and I would say detach from its history in the sense that while it may in fact have developed in consonance with religion, there is no particular reason why it must be seen as indissolubly involved in it. To make a parallel argument: the development of Darwin’s theory was certainly partly spurred by his reading of Malthus, and thus it was certainly comfortable for Darwin at least partly because, as Adrian Desmond and James Moore,<sup>22</sup> among others, point out, his theory was so much like the *laissez-faire* economics in which he participated cozily. Yet the theory surely does not now depend on the validity of Malthus’s theory nor on the workings of capitalism. Evolutionary science has taken the theory a long way forward and recontextualized it. It remains enormously useful, but you don’t have to be a capitalist to believe it. You don’t have to be religious to accept ethical imperatives.

One won’t, then, get to Taylor’s universal and objective imperative (the imperative that inevitably, on his account, contradicts the mind-centered condition of secular value). But one might approach (asymptotically, I think, is the word, implying a “progressive” but never completed narrative) a working and utterly necessary ethics. And along the way, there would never be an invocation of the witch doctor’s judgment.

So secularism isn't easy, and the danger of slipping into triumphalist rhetoric, instead of Woods's fraternal and sympathetic recognition of a religious alternative, is great. I would like to think that none of the contributors here indulge that rhetoric. All of them recognize, in the quest for a fully satisfying secularism, how deep in our moral and aesthetic traditions religion lies, but all of them are driven, as well, by a profound sense of the necessity of facing—and I use the word, if nervously, again—the truth. Take a full look at the worst, said Thomas Hardy, for that is a condition for getting it right and maneuvering this difficult, terrifying, and wonderful world humanely if not (certainly not always) successfully.

## 2

It has been striking to me in reading the very various essays written for this volume that almost all of them arrive at points where the strong latent feeling surfaces—not that necessary impersonality toward which Weber wants science to aspire in his “Science as a Vocation,” but an excited affirmation of things of this world, a feeling for them. And this feeling isn't for my all too symbolic but very real birds, of course (that's my eccentric problem), but for what Paolo Costa here describes as the world's startling, wonderful ordinariness, for the necessary generosity entailed in thinking about things shared and needed here and now. I don't want to force the contributors here to be saying my “yes,” but I do want to call attention to the fact that these questions of “secularism” and “enchantment” are not *merely* philosophical, not *merely* theoretical, not *merely* historical.

The “care for being” that Connolly arrives at in his imagination of secular enchantment is one that, he says, “can be joined to political militance,” but that will also “be affected by the sensibility infusing it.” It's a “practical wisdom” Connolly seeks in his argument with Augustine as in his essay here. And it is a practical wisdom that I hope lies behind all these secular arguments for caring directly and primarily for the things of this world. “Life,” Connolly points out, “need not be devalued because it has evolved from nonlife and is now irreducible to it,” and so, too, “the human species need not be devalued because it has evolved from other species.” Part of the point of this book is to insist that however we read the narrative of disenchantment, in this secular world there is no necessary devaluing of life only because in most cultures, ethics and art and value itself had been so integrally related to religion.

These historical, philosophical, and theoretical questions that play around the idea of secular enchantment are thus always also implicitly political. In requiring attention to conditions here and now, they give philosophy, theory, and history a practical and political and deeply ethical life—they are questions that matter to us now as we engage this world that (perhaps) we never made, or that we have made too fatally. They have as much political as religious significance, and that generic distinction within secularism must Darwinianly fade. (It is no accident that, in very different ways, the essays of Kitcher, Robbins, Connolly, and Wilson become concerned, as they make their secular cases, with questions of justice and equity and freedom.) Is life worth living? Of course. These questions matter to us now and should be felt on the fingertips just as I feel the thrill and importance of that Central Park hawk or the stooping peregrine falcon, or the shame of the scandal of the homeless on the streets of New York, or of the misery and starvation and abuse of large portions of the population, signs of which I can see right in the Central Park Ramble that yields me so much pleasure and such a deep sense of fullness every spring migration, or of the disasters everywhere that somehow, luckily, haven't hit me. It's only luck, but that's okay too.

But is life worth living? You bet! The sheer joy of life, perhaps all too aesthetic and insufficiently other-directed,<sup>23</sup> that those birds offer me can manifest itself in many ways, but beyond such vital experience, perhaps growing from it, there are even more generous possibilities. In a personal note, Bruce Robbins summarized for me just the arguments I have been hoping to build to here: "Life is worth living because we have reason to think we have treated each other relatively well in the past, in spite of everything," and it is worth living "because we believe we can learn to treat each other better in the future, that doing so will not violate or contradict our inmost nature, that the move away from supernatural/enchantment will help us do this." The world counts first and we can take advantage of our luck to watch the stooping hawk and the flocking starlings as we learn more about it and make it better.