

CHALLENGES FOR SECULARISM¹

Philip Kitcher

Columbia University

I

Secularism², as I shall understand it, claims that there are no supernatural entities, nothing that fits the admittedly vague characterization of “the transcendent” to which William James reluctantly appealed in his effort to “circumscribe the topic” of religion.³ More straightforwardly, secularists doubt the existence of the deities, divinities, spirits, ghosts, ancestors, the *sacredness* of specific places and the supernatural forces to which the world’s various religions, past and present, make their varied appeals. For the past two centuries, a combination of scholars, working in many different disciplines, have articulated the challenge of secularism, a sustained argument, rarely presented as a whole, that makes belief in supernatural beings untenable. Although I shall start with a précis of this line of reasoning, my principal interest will lie in understanding the challenges for secularism. An adequate response to these challenges requires moving beyond secularism as a merely negative doctrine, and offering something to replace the

¹ Many thanks to Taylor Carman, Roger Cooke, Wayne Proudfoot, Bruce Robbins and especially George Levine for comments, discussion, and suggestions. I have amended the original version by correcting a piece of sloppy usage: as Terry Eagleton pointed out in a review, I employed ‘transcendental’ where ‘transcendent’ would have been more appropriate.

² A.C. Grayling has questioned my use of the word ‘secularism’, on the grounds that secularism is a view about the relationship between religion and the state. My choice is based on the need for some term that will cover the views of those who do not believe in transcendent entities. ‘Atheism’ will not do, since it restricts the class of supernatural entities (not all supposed supernatural beings are gods) and also requires denial rather than simple absence of belief (some secularists are agnostics). ‘Secular humanism’ will not do, since many prominent contemporary atheists are, as this essay suggests, light on the humanism. Moreover my use of the term is hardly idiosyncratic: to cite just one example, in her magisterial biography of Charles Darwin, Janet Browne writes of “Josiah Wedgwood’s gradual drift away from the orthodox church towards secularism” (*Charles Darwin: Voyaging*, Princeton University Press, 1996).

³ William James *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (in William James *Writings 1902-1910*, New York: Library of America, 1987) Lecture II.

functional aspects of traditional religions. Secularism needs to become secular *humanism*.

Despite the contemporary attention given to religious belief, both by militant assailants – “Darwinian atheists” as I shall call them⁴ – and by defenders who want to claim the consistency of belief in the supernatural with everything we know, the state of the controversy strikes me as quite unsatisfactory. Darwinian atheists, among whom I include Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, neither offer the best arguments against belief in the supernatural nor pay much attention to the challenges *for* secularism: it is enough for them to demolish, and they pay too little attention to questions that might arise for erstwhile believers after the demolition is done.⁵ On the other hand, the would-be reconcilers do not face up to the most serious reasons for doubt about their favored transcendent being – typically, the Christian God – rebutting the over-simplifications of Darwinian atheism instead of addressing the challenge of secularism. Even the most subtle and many-sided attempt at reconciliation, offered in a long historical study by Charles Taylor, explains the displacement of religious belief by complex cultural processes that contrast with relatively simplistic accounts about the growth of rationality.⁶ Taylor’s discussion will be particularly important for me because of his sensitivity to the challenges *for* secularism, and his clear

⁴ I use this term not to impute any particular stance on religion to Darwin (his attitudes to religion are matters of scholarly debate), but to emphasize that many of those who currently campaign for atheism owe and express a debt to Darwin. There are, of course, staunch Darwinians who profess religious faith.

⁵ See Dawkins *The God Delusion* (New York: Mariner Books, 2008), Harris *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Vintage, 2008), Hitchens *God is not Great* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007); these books, especially Dawkins’, make some valuable points about forms of religion prevalent in the United States, but, to my mind, suffer from a narrow, and historically uninformed, conception of religion. Dan Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell* (New York: Penguin, 2006) is the most sophisticated work in this genre, although it is (in my judgment) insensitive to some important issues. I detail my agreements and disagreements with Dawkins and Dennett in “Militant Modern Atheism” (Chapter 12).

⁶ Charles Taylor *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

articulation of them. Before his concerns can be stated and taken up, however, there is significant ground-clearing – Lockean under-laborer work – to be done.

II

Many people have no difficulty in reconciling their religious commitments with the picture of the natural world disclosed by the natural sciences. Faced with evidence, available since the early nineteenth century, to the effect that the fossil record of life on earth is incompatible with the creation stories told in *Genesis*, they declare that these parts of the scriptures are myths, whose significance is moral and spiritual, not cosmological. Presented with a Darwinian account of the history of terrestrial life, they acknowledge the suffering and the wastage, but insist that it is not the place of finite creatures to assess the purposes of the Almighty. Confronted with “philosophical” objections to traditional “proofs” of the existence of God, they explain that their own beliefs never rested on sophisticated (possibly sophistical) forms of reasoning. More ambitiously, they may also gesture towards the writings of other – Christian – philosophers who chop the logic with even more skill than the critics, and who allegedly show that the supposed objections are not decisive.

All this is beside the central point. It is a sideshow to the many-sided challenge of secularism, developed from the eighteenth century to the present (although there are earlier roots in thinkers like Hobbes and Spinoza).⁷ The challenge starts from the question of what the basis for religious belief might be. One obvious possibility is that religious belief is acquired as people grow up within particular cultural milieux, typically

⁷ What I designate here as “the challenge of secularism” is what I previously called “the Enlightenment case against Supernaturalism”. See the final chapter of *Living with Darwin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

absorbed from parents and teachers, occasionally (and only in relatively recent epochs) adopted more self-consciously by acquaintance with some other movement present in the social surroundings. Although this is not the only possibility to be considered, it is common enough to make an appropriate starting point.

The core challenge of secularism is an argument from symmetry. Variation in religious doctrine is enormous, and central themes in the world's religions are massively inconsistent with one another. Defenders of supernatural beings can sometimes conceal the difficulty from themselves by focusing on a few religions with shared central doctrines inherited from a common origin – as, for example, when religious diversity is conceived in terms of the differences among the three Abrahamic monotheisms. More radical problems emerge once one recognizes the possibilities of polytheism, of spirit worship, of the devotion to ancestors that pervades some African religions, of the sacred spaces of aboriginal Australians, of the *mana* introduced in Polynesian and Melanesian societies. Adherents of these rival views of the supernatural realm come to believe in just the same ways as their Abrahamic counterparts. They too stand in a long tradition that reaches back into the distant past, originating, so they are told, in wonderful events and special revelations. Plainly, if the doctrines about the supernatural favored by the Christian – and also by Jews and Muslims – are correct, then these alternative societies are terribly deceived. Their members have been victims of an entirely false mythology, instead of the correct revelation lavished on the spiritual descendants of Abraham. What feature of the Christian's acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior distinguishes that commitment as privileged, marks it off from the (tragic) errors of the world's benighted peoples?

Nothing. Most Christians have adopted their doctrines much as the polytheists and the ancestor-worshippers have acquired theirs, through early teaching and socialization. Had the Christians been born among the aboriginal Australians, they would believe, in just the same ways, on just the same bases, and with just the same convictions, doctrines about the Dreamtime instead of about the Resurrection. The symmetry is complete. *None* of the processes of socialization, *none* of the chains of transmission of sacred lore across the generations, has any special justificatory force. Because of the widespread inconsistency in religious doctrine, it is clear that not all of these traditions can yield true beliefs about the supernatural. Given that they are all on a par, we should trust none of them.⁸

Two centuries of research in the textual analysis of scriptures (particularly the Hebrew Bible, and the Christian Old and New Testaments), in the historical understanding of the formation of religious canons, in the historical study of the political contexts in which religions have evolved, and in the sociological investigation of the growth and spread of religions, have deepened the symmetry argument. Scholars in these areas, many of them devout, have offered rigorous studies that combine to show how the processes through which religions evolve, decline and grow are not at all conducive to the acquisition, refinement and accumulation of truth. From the very beginning, Christianity has struggled to elaborate a single uncontested account of the events of the life of its nominal founder – the opening of Luke’s gospel tells us as much. The gospels we have are often inconsistent with one another, and the incompatibilities are

⁸ The symmetry argument outlined here is sometimes deployed by sociologists of knowledge to cast doubt on the credibility of scientific claims. See for example David Bloor *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (second edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). I have tried to argue, at length, that the symmetry can be broken in this instance. See *The Advancement of Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

plainly the result of decisions that attempt to include various early Christian communities, devoted to alternative scriptural stories.⁹ We also know of far more radical departures from the standard gospels, accepted by other first-century movements that have been written out of the canon. Historical knowledge of some of the people who figure in Jesus' life – Pontius Pilate, for example – enables us to recognize as fiction some famous episodes: the invention of the idea of a Jewish mob that called out for Christ to be given a *Roman* punishment.¹⁰ Sociologists have explored how religions appeal by offering to meet the psychological and social needs of converts – and how successful religions adapt by adjusting doctrines to meet these needs. There is no doubt that the traditions through which religious ideas come down to the contemporary world show an evolution of those ideas, and that the processes through which that cultural evolution goes forward are completely unreliable with respect to generating and spreading truth. Hence, it is not simply that the ways through which religious people come to their commitments are equivalent across massive inconsistencies in claims about the supernatural, but the ways themselves, when scrutinized, turn out to be quite unconnected with the generation of true belief. Some religions succeed at propagating themselves across the centuries, but success has nothing to do with the determination of what any supernatural world is like – religions do not have to be correct to be widely believed.

⁹ Theologians and historians of religion often suppose that the inconsistencies indicate that the scriptural stories were never supposed to be read literally. Hence they are unmoved when militant atheists harp on the incompatibility of various gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, contending that critiques of this sort only apply to a form of fundamentalism that is historically recent. See, for example, Karen Armstrong *The Case for God* (New York: Knopf, 2009).

¹⁰ Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar *The Acts of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998) 153.

A natural response to the challenge, as so far articulated, would be to maintain that the believer has been portrayed as far too passive, a mere recipient of the commitments that some surrounding culture impresses on its children. Some people, of course, change their religions, coming to accept as adults doctrines quite different from those they heard from their teachers and parents. Many, perhaps all, of these cases involve experiences that the subjects would describe as religious. Strange things are seen, voices are heard, there is a sense of some presence beyond that of the everyday world. In the most dramatic forms – Saul on the road to Damascus, for example – there is a sudden, violently produced, change of perspective. Other devout people would describe very different experiences, the constant awareness of their god (or God) as they engage in particular activities, prayer or ritual devotion, for example. Religious experience provides an independent route to religious conviction, one that sometimes generates something radically new, sometimes confirms the faith acquired early in life.

Unlike other modes of perception, including the special capacities of the hearer with absolute pitch or the accomplished wine-taster, religious experience cannot be assessed for its reliability through checking that it indeed does provide information about the entities to which it is supposed to give access. It is invoked precisely because there is no independent way of finding out about those entities. Some things about religious experience are, however, very evident. First, the statistics of reported religious experiences are highly variable across groups and across periods of time. Second, these experiences are more frequent when people have ingested substances that we do not normally regard as increasing their epistemic competence. Third, in their dramatic forms, they occur disproportionately among those who are anxious, fearful, disturbed and

distraught – again prior states not usually viewed as ideal for observation. Most important, however, is the fact that any religious experience has to be *characterized*. The categories in which a religious experience is framed typically are those of the religion to which the subject is already committed: it is no accident that Christians feel the presence of Jesus, while ancestor-worshippers sense the proximity of their forebears; Catholics see the Virgin in a window in Brooklyn, but Protestants do not. Moreover, in all instances, the experience is classified in religious terms that are already familiar. Instead of being an independent check on the doctrines transmitted by tradition, religious experiences already *presuppose* the legitimacy of some traditional doctrines.

Even when the obvious worries about their genesis are ignored, religious experiences cannot break the symmetry among rival traditions. Reading the New Testament, the Christian claims to sense the divinity of Jesus. Equally, in the sacred places, the Australian feels the reverberations of the Dreamtime, and the Hindu at prayer has an awareness of some particular deity. The difficulties of escaping the hold of tradition are most evident on those occasions when a visionary claims to report something genuinely new. Religious traditions themselves have to grapple with the distinction between real insight into the supernatural realm and deceptive experiences that potentially corrupt the person and the religion itself. No wonder that many traditions have elaborate procedures for certifying those who would claim to have recurrent visions – as, for example, in the medieval processes for deciding whether the claims made by a would-be anchorite are genuine. How is the risk of possible heresy to be met? Only by insisting on conformity to the orthodox doctrines, as they have been passed down and recognized by those who are most qualified: the anchorite-to-be must

submit to the judgment of priest and bishop, ultimately to the hallowed wisdom of the Church itself.

A second way of attempting to evade the challenge would be to abandon the attempt to defend some particular religious view of the supernatural, in favor of a weaker commitment. Perhaps the pervasiveness of religion among human societies can be seen as evidence for the existence of *some* supernatural entity (or entities). This approach would seek the shared content of all the world's religions, the lowest common denominator, as it were. Radical differences in accounts of the supernatural force agnosticism about specific doctrines: it is impossible to warrant the existence of the Christian God, or of Allah, or of the pantheon of Hindu deities, or of the Dreamtime, but, in their various ways, all religious people are on to something. Religion in general may be sustained, even though all the specific religions fail.

Reflection on the unreliability of the processes through which religions grow and flourish should already induce worries about this line of reasoning. From what we know of the evolution of religions, there is an obvious alternative to the hypothesis that the various religions have, in their different and differently inadequate ways, grasped a core insight. Successful religions meet psychological and social needs, responding to human anxieties and yearnings, binding people together (one popular etymology links 'religion' to '*religare*', *to bind together*). Members of societies without religion are likely to be converted to religious belief, and those societies are likely to be less cohesive and vulnerable to invasion. Religion would thus be prevalent because cultures that lack it or lose it tend to disappear, not in virtue of the fact that most people share a human ability to obtain a dim grasp of the supernatural realm.

The cultural evolutionary hypothesis just sketched needs far more careful elaboration and confrontation with historical and sociological evidence if it is to earn our assent. Nevertheless, it reminds us that the substantive doctrines of the various religions are extensive myths, made up to answer to psychological and social purposes. Once that is admitted, as it is indeed conceded by the aspiring champion of the-supernatural-in-general, we must ask what core insight can be retained. Secularism does not suppose that our current scientific understanding of the world should be certified as complete. The history of the natural sciences has been full of surprises, and later researchers have had to introduce types of things very different from those hitherto recognized (think of the development of ideas about matter, as atoms give way to electrons and protons, to a host of fundamental particles, to quarks, and possibly to strings, branes and higher-dimensional spaces). Perhaps, at some period in the future, inquiry will disclose novel entities that our descendants can recognize as satisfying whatever marks were previously supposed to distinguish the transcendent. Perhaps. It is not an option that can be ruled out, although one may wonder how large a probability we should assign to it. Secularism is atheistic about the substantive claims concerning the supernatural offered by all the religions ever devised by human beings, but it should be agnostic about the claim that something legitimately characterized as “transcendent” or “supernatural” exists.

Given the argument from symmetry, it would be premature to label the potential supernatural entity as “god” or “spirit” or “force” – or, indeed, as “mind” or “creator” or “intelligence”, even, perhaps, to understand the transcendent realm in terms of “entities”

at all.¹¹ Once religion is seen as the lowest common denominator of the various substantive faiths, there is nothing that can be deployed to describe the supernatural. Even if it exists, it is “something we know not what,” and we delude ourselves by grasping at familiar concepts – those of our historically generated myths – to cover our ignorance.

In formulating this conclusion, I have introduced a word whose absence in previous discussions may appear to undermine the challenge of secularism. To think of religions as faiths might be to separate them from systems of belief that aspire to be counted as knowledge.¹² If religion is a matter of faith, then the question from which secularism starts can, it seems, be repudiated. Asking after the grounds of contemporary religious belief, and embarrassing the believer by demonstrating that the processes that underlie it are unreliable tries to confine devout people in places where they do not belong. Lack of epistemically secure grounds can simply be conceded. No champion of any religion should be perturbed by the thought that he or she cannot provide marks that distinguish the preferred beliefs about the supernatural from those offered in rival traditions, or worried by the fact that religious traditions evolve in ways that have nothing to do with truth. To be sure, if religion were a form of knowledge, these considerations might be unnerving. That, however, is to mistake the character of religious acceptance. Properly understood it is a matter of faith.

¹¹ Here again I have changed the original version in response to a criticism made by Eagleton; the modification makes my view more explicit.

¹² The separation can be made in either of two distinct ways. One can take faith to be a legitimate mode of grounding belief, even though the doctrines accepted do not count as items of knowledge. Or one can think of faith as a form of commitment, not expressed in beliefs at all. In this section, I interpret the appeal to faith in the former way. The second approach is implicit in positions I consider in later sections. See also Chapter 12.

To retreat in this way can be very tempting for the beleaguered believer. Yet it is important to understand what has been given up. To begin with, believers in each tradition must recognize that the same ungrounded commitments are available to their rivals – and, while each may believe that the others are in radical error, there are no evidential grounds to support that verdict. Ungrounded acceptance of supernatural entities, indeed of a rich body of lore about such entities, is simply legitimate for anyone, and even the lucky ones with the correct faith will have no justification for thinking that they are right. How will their bold acts of faith affect their lives, and the lives of others? Perhaps they will be cautious, not permitting the particular doctrines to which they have committed themselves to have any impact on their decisions, intentions, and actions. If that is so, then the commitments themselves amount to no more than a motion of the lips, an affirmation that plays no role in the life of the “believer”. If, however, more force is given to those commitments, if they are allowed to shape the decisions that are made, for the religious person and for others too, then the stance is morally dubious. Responsible action cannot proceed from beliefs that are adopted groundlessly, through wishful thinking, arbitrary choice, or through a “leap of faith.” Christians who turn to their Bible for guidance and support take their reading to improve their moral deliberations, precisely because they have been given God’s Word, but, by hypothesis, that is an article of blind faith. The moral doctrines of their favored text may be excellent (or they may not), but the crucial point is that blind believers have no basis for attributing any authority to them. If others turn to different texts, actual books like the *Qu’ran* or the *Bhagavad Gita*, they may do so with equal legitimacy. Even someone who makes a “leap of faith,” and takes *Mein Kampf* or *The 120 Days of Sodom* to be divinely inspired, is

equally warranted in basing his decisions and actions upon them. When this point is appreciated, the danger of substantive commitments without evidence becomes obvious. For a religious believer to be morally justified in adopting doctrines on blind faith, the claims accepted must be so tightly circumscribed, so carefully sealed off from any role in practical affairs that the commitments themselves dwindle into meaninglessness. Like the Cheshire Cat's smile, they linger even after the beast itself is gone.¹³

III

From my brief précis of the challenge *of* secularism, I turn now to the challenges *for* secularism. Darwinian atheists think that once the case against the supernatural has been made, their work is done (and, of course, they think that the case is made rather differently from the way in which I have presented it). People should simply stop believing the myths about the supernatural with which human beings have consoled themselves, and in whose name they have done a wide variety of hideous things to one another.¹⁴ Some Darwinian atheists even seem to believe that, if they ridicule the myths sufficiently loudly and sufficiently often, erstwhile religious people will be shamed into behaving like grown-ups, throwing away their faulty crutches and signing on to the great scientific adventure. Current evidence does not support that hope. In my English

¹³ The discussion of the possibilities of defending against secularism by appealing to blind faith is developed at greater length in my essay "A Pragmatist's Progress: The Varieties of James' Strategies for Defending Religion"(Chapter 10).

¹⁴ Darwinian atheists exult in the ferocity of religious wars, the willingness to torture in the name of the deity (or deities), the intolerant persecution of forms of behavior that are now accepted, and so forth. They pay much less attention to the positive ways in which religion has entered many areas of individual and collective life. Nor do they take seriously enough the enormities inflicted upon the world by various aggressively secular regimes. A sober evaluation would recognize that the moral track record of secularism, like the moral track record of religious life, is *thoroughly mixed* – that good and bad people have been formed and have acted under both denominations. Perhaps a fine-grained counting could disclose some serious difference, but there are obvious questions about just how the sampling of cases is to be done.

youth, nobody made much fuss about Darwinism or the theory of evolution – only a few eccentric extremists were prepared to suggest that the orthodoxy about the history of life was mistaken. According to the latest surveys, however, around half the British population now harbors doubts about Darwin. By the same token, God's stock seems to be rising. Yet these trends are occurring in the homeland of the most eloquent (and biologically well-informed) of all Darwinian atheists.

Religion will not go away simply because people are told – very firmly – that Proper Adults should have no truck with supernaturalist myths. Darwinian atheism accepts, and reinforces, a common assumption about religion, to wit that being a religious person or living a religious life is primarily a matter of believing particular doctrines. Sophisticated thinkers about religion have, for a very long time now, taken a rather different view. Central to the religions of the world are many other things: complexes of psychological attitudes (aspirations, intentions, and emotions) among their adherents, forms of social organization, rituals and forms of joint behavior. Within contemporary religions (and, for citizens of the affluent nations, most prominent in Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity) there are movements that emancipate themselves from doctrine entirely: these forms of religion are simply not in the (literal) belief business. In their recitals of ancient texts, they recognize valuable stories, not to be understood as literally true but important because of their orientation of the psychological life, the pointing of desire in the right directions, the raising of some emotions and the calming of others. One might even conjecture that the social and affective aspects of religion were, somewhere in pre-history, the ur-phenomena of religion, that religious life begins with particular emotions (awe, joyful acceptance) and with shared forms of ritualized behavior, and that the stories

Darwinian atheists wish to debunk are later supplements, devised to bind the earlier practices together.¹⁵

It is now possible to see how the assaults of Darwinian atheists can be ineffective, even counter-productive. They sing beautifully to the choir. Those who have already learned how to integrate their aspirations, intentions and actions with a disenchanting¹⁶ view of the world will be pleased to think of themselves as behaving like Proper Adults, but most of those who have not taken this step will wonder how they are to live once the supposed “myths” they have adopted have been repudiated. Where will they find another form of association that brings them together with their fellows in ventures they can accept as important? How will the hopes that are currently bound up with their benighted supernaturalist doctrines be sustained once the connecting framework of belief is excised? Darwinian atheists overlook the fact that religions serve psychological and social functions, *even though on the explanation of the prevalence of religion offered by the challenge of §II this fact is central to the growth and spread of religions.*

To acknowledge the many-sided character of religious life, and to appreciate the ways that simply removing religious belief can disrupt people’s lives, is not to fall into the trap of supposing that it would be better for “the masses” to retain their comforting illusions. Secularists should not patronize others by supposing that the bracing repudiation of the supernatural is only for the brave few – among whom they can, fortunately, count themselves. The important point is to appreciate the problem, to

¹⁵ John Dewey *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934) 59. My debt to Dewey in general, and to this short book in particular, is very large, and, in the rest of this essay, I shall be attempting to renew some important Deweyan themes.

¹⁶ By this I mean a view of the world that dispenses with supernatural entities. As I shall argue in section IV, accepting a view that is disenchanting in this relatively weak sense does not entail the stronger claim that there is no place for talk of values.

understand the ways in which, for many thoughtful devout people, the subtraction of literal belief about supernatural beings comes as a deep threat. Once that problem has been recognized, once it has been studied and its dimensions mapped, then secularism can evolve, as religions have evolved, to adapt to human needs. Simply condoning the old myths is by no means the only way to undertake that task. Another approach would be to inquire into the character of the perceived threat, into what exactly the believer thinks would be lost in abandoning belief, and to articulate secularism as a set of positive responses to those potential losses. To follow that path would be to transmute secularism (as blunt denial) into secular *humanism*.

The challenges *for* secularism arise initially from skepticism that anything can make good the losses it entails. It is insufficient to declare, as Darwinian atheists sometimes do, that the skepticism is groundless. “Look around”, they exhort, “and you will see plenty of contented thoroughly secular people, living lives that satisfy them, joined in functioning and peaceful communities.” (You will see this especially clearly, it is suggested, if you spend time in Scandinavia.)¹⁷ *Correct as these observations are, they do not yet explain to those who feel threatened just how the reintegration of life-after-myth is supposed to go.* Perhaps examination of the lives of contented non-believers will disclose patterns from which an elaboration of secular humanism may emerge. Until the construction has been done, however, simply gesturing at people who are reported to have come to terms with mythlessness is unconvincing. For the religious person may wonder how that allegedly happy state is to be achieved, or, indeed, whether the reports of its felicity are not greatly exaggerated.

¹⁷ See the informed account by Phil Zuckerman *Society Without God* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

The issues to be addressed in constructing secular humanism are partly social and partly matters of individual psychology. Because I take the latter to be the deeper sources of concern, most of the remainder of this essay will be directed at them. In the rest of this section, I shall look briefly at some social functions of religion.

Statistical analyses indicate that religious adherence and religious fervor are strongest in those societies (and among those groups within societies) that are most vulnerable to the vicissitudes of life.¹⁸ For people whose lives are going badly, or that are in constant danger of going badly, religion can provide important forms of security, sometimes hope that the reversals of this life will be compensated in the next, and opportunities for mutual consolation. Part of this promise (the idea that the bad things that actually occur will somehow be redeemed) is not easily replicable in a secular framework, and this is a point that will have to be addressed in the next section. Other aspects of religious reassurance to the endangered are, however, tractable through improvements in the social structures in which people are embedded. Some societies provide buffering against many of the major calamities of human existence, reducing the threat of sudden unemployment and penury, providing health care and support for the disabled, even taking steps to ensure that nobody is destitute and homeless. Humane social measures that take into account the needs of all citizens can easily substitute for the charity and material support provided by religious organizations.

Lack of assurance about one's continued ability to satisfy physical needs is only the simplest type of condition to which religions may be perceived as making a welcome social response. For people who are marginalized in society, who recognize that the

¹⁸ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart *Sacred and Secular* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

existing secular institutions treat them unjustly, participation in religion may be bound up with a struggle to obtain the rights currently denied to them. Religious communities have often played an important role in bringing the powerless together, in combining their voices so that they can at last be heard, in providing a sustaining sense of solidarity that is expressed in courage and determination. Famously, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s was grounded in the churches, and led by eloquent preachers who could galvanize their congregations. Less evident to many (although not to those who live in the Northern parts of Manhattan) is the social role that churches continue to play in the lives of poor Americans belonging to ethnic groups that cope with the problems of long-permitted urban decay.¹⁹ Religious communities continue to provide resources for families who struggle to create better opportunities for their children in environments where the secular institutions (schools, job-training programs, clinics) are frequently inadequate, and where the temptation to acquiesce in hopelessness is omnipresent.

It does not have to be that way. Secular society could in principle respond to the problems of social and economic injustice, so that the felt need for collective action or for a system of support, currently provided by the religious community, would already be met, as it is for more fortunate citizens. As a matter of fact, however, no response on any appropriate scale has as yet been given, and even when steps in the direction of greater socio-economic justice are proposed, they are resisted by affluent legislators (who typically identify themselves as Christians). If secular humanism is to emerge from secularism, then one principal element in its positive position must be a firm commitment to increased socio-economic justice, both within nation-states and across the entire

¹⁹ This is not, of course, to deny that some churches (and their equivalents for other religions) often block movements that aim at social justice. My point is simply that, for a significant number of oppressed people, religious institutions have offered a route to greater justice and freedom.

human species, a commitment that is not simply a declaration of abstract rights but embodied in the sharing of the world's resources and opportunities in accordance with egalitarian ideals.

So far, the social achievements of religions have been considered merely as means, ways of providing for needy people things that secular institutions fail to supply. Thinking about religious communities in this relatively shallow instrumental fashion fails to identify their primary significance. Religious institutions connect their members, providing a sense of belonging and of being together with others, of sharing problems and of working cooperatively to find solutions. For many people, religious involvement does not merely provide occasions for talk about important issues – although that itself is valuable to them – but also for conjoint action. Religious communities can come to agree on goals, not necessarily centered on the liberation or socioeconomic progress of the members, and can advance broader projects that are to be collectively pursued.

Again, religion does not have to be the main vehicle of community life.

Thoroughly secular societies can have community structures that enable people to enter into sympathetic relations with one another, to achieve solidarity with their fellows, to exchange views about topics that matter most to them, to raise questions about what should be done, and to work together towards goals that have been collectively determined. Very probably, many of the authors of secularist manifestoes are embedded in community structures of this sort – and perhaps the apparent naturalness of the social relations they enjoy hides from them the fact that similar *secular* structures are not available to others. For many Americans, however, there are no serious opportunities – outside of churches, mosques and synagogues – for fellowship with all

the dimensions just discerned. Perhaps, in groups of friends, there are occasional opportunities for more serious discussion, for self-revelation and confession of doubts, for exploration of what is valuable and what is to be done. Or, perhaps, in secular settings, that would simply be embarrassing, and so the necessary words are unspoken, the spread of sympathy into the lives of others is limited, goals are decided and pursued largely alone. A secular world would thus appear to lack the most significant parts of community life.

Secular humanism needs a diagnosis of the human need for community that is far more sophisticated than that sketched in the last paragraph. For an adequate rebuilding of satisfying community structure in a secular society will depend on charting all the various functions that religious communities, at their best, currently discharge. It has been plain for decades – possibly for centuries – that maintaining a sense of community in a large, diverse society, especially one dedicated to economic and social competition, is very hard.²⁰ It is a significant fact that some of the most successful American ways of building secular community structures open to all – Unitarian churches, the Society for Ethical Culture, Jewish Community Centers – have imitated features of religious life and practice.²¹

IV

²⁰ John Dewey *The Public and its Problems* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 1980; reprint of a work originally published in 1927). Even earlier Tocqueville had emphasized the importance of community structures in North America, and had suggested that there might be difficulties in maintaining them (see *Democracy in America*).

²¹ As I shall eventually maintain, efforts at imitation may initially be pallid. Scientists understand the importance of sustained efforts if experiments are to be made to work. By the same token, we should not be surprised if early attempts to create secular community seem less rich than those that religious groups have developed over centuries, or even millennia.

A familiar feature of those groups of people who are often charged with practicing pseudo-science is the zeal with which they wrap themselves in the social trappings of the prestigious natural sciences – forming “Institutes”, holding “conferences,” setting up “peer-reviewed journals,” and the like. Critics contend that these activities are mere gestures, that the ardent imitators may talk the talk but that they avoid what is really central to scientific practice. By the same token, those who feel secularism as a threat are likely to wonder if the social surrogates just discussed really address the losses that the repudiation of religious doctrine would entail. Like the constructions of the pseudo-scientists, the secular social substitutes are hollow, offering the *form* of community and of conjoint ethical action, but lacking the substance. Reactions of this sort rest on the thought that, while material benefits may be offered, deep psychological needs are not to be satisfied in these godless ways. Without the acceptance of “transcendent” entities, people will never achieve genuine community with others, never penetrate to the really important issues that concern them, never have the possibility of combined ethical action. The worries that underlie this reaction are sufficiently varied that any essay-sized response cannot do more than indicate ways of addressing the major points of anxiety. In this section, I shall try, relatively schematically, to take up three of these. The final section will be devoted to a further issue, extensively discussed by Charles Taylor, whose focusing of the point will enable me to be more thorough in canvassing the success of secular surrogates.²²

Begin with the thought that there is something special, and irreplaceable, about the forms of community produced by shared religious doctrine. Without the common acceptance of some transcendent entity, in whose worship we are joined, the bonds of

²² Charles Taylor *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

fellowship are, allegedly, weakened. Why exactly should that be so? Can't people find connection with one another through their mutual sympathies, or through the sharing of a cause or an ideal? What exactly does the invocation of some supernatural being add?

One answer to these questions, natural for those who accept one of the Abrahamic religions, is that belief in a divine creator introduces a special form of fraternity. We are joined in brotherhood – or, better, linked as siblings – because we are all children of the same God. Although it is not immediately evident how this conception of shared parentage is manifested in the religious communities actually formed – since these groups are typically far narrower than the entire species, or even those members of it that acknowledge the same deity – that is not the principal difficulty with the proposal. Rather, a secularist can reasonably respond, the closest relationships people, whether religious or secular, enjoy with one another are grounded in complex forms of mutual sympathy. Why isn't the sympathy that leads one person to feel another's projects as her own, to modify her own plans and behavior to accommodate what the other person wants, to share in joys and sorrows, a sufficient basis for community, independently of any special type of common belief? Perhaps people who can form communities do need to reach agreement on some things, even on the most fundamental things, but there is no clear justification for supposing that that agreement has to take the very particular form of acknowledging a supernatural being.

Reply: the thought of a common relation to a transcendent entity, as in the idea that we are both (or all) the Children of God, goes beyond the mere accidents of human sympathy to endorse the special value that each individual has; in a religious community,

you don't just see your fellow members as people with whom you happen to have sympathetic connections, dependent on the vagaries of your particular beliefs and wishes, but as loci of *real value*. So, for the devout, fellows in religion are not simply joined in mutual sympathy, but see one another as *worthy of that sympathy*. This response does add something that appears to distinguish the special quality of religious community from the secular approach offered in the last paragraph, but its success depends on whether secularists can find a counterpart for the extra ingredient. The crucial question, then, is whether people who deny all supernatural beings are able to judge that some of their fellows are worthy of their sympathy and support.

If the considerations just adduced are correct, then suspicion about the possibilities for secular community rests on the supposition that certain kinds of value judgments are not available to non-believers. It is, of course, a common prejudice that repudiation of religion deprives one of any grounds for determining that anything is right or wrong, good or bad, valuable or worthless. Since I see no plausible thesis that would concede to secularists the possibility of making and defending judgments of value but deny the capacity for the assessments that figure in genuine community, I suppose that any denial that unbelievers can find their fellows worthy of sympathy and support would rest on the general complaint that, without deities (and the like), ethical claims become meaningless or unjustifiable.

Secular humanism should address that complaint in two ways. First, it should recall the point, familiar since Plato, that attempts at a religious foundation for ethics fail completely. Second, it should show how ethical practice, and judgments that certain things are worthwhile, can be understood in a thoroughly naturalistic fashion.

Religion may be thought to undergird ethics in either of two forms. First, as Euthyphro incautiously told Socrates, what is good may be *defined* as what the deities have willed.²³ Less ambitiously, one may propose not that goodness is stamped on some things by acts of divine will, but that a supernatural being *reveals* to us the independent character of what is good, thus supplying knowledge we would be unable to obtain in any other way.

Neither of these suggestions is defensible. The first encounters the dilemma Plato formulated. If the divine will is grounded in some apprehension of an independent standard of goodness, then that will is not the source of goodness. If, however, the divine will is not grounded in any such apprehension the proclamation that certain things are good and others not is arbitrary *fiat*, and there is no basis for appraising the quality of the choices the deity makes.²⁴ In praising the deity, religious believers think of themselves as saying something substantial in extolling the goodness of God, not as simply asserting the consistency of the divine will.

The problem can be deepened by considering the weaker suggestion that the divine role in ethics is one of transmitting to human beings the independent standards of goodness, standards that God can recognize but that are beyond our powers of apprehension. This approach opts for the limb of the dilemma that recognizes an independent source of value, but still finds a privileged role for the favored supernatural entity. Assume, then, that there has been some divine revelation, and that a particular group of people has been favored with God's commandments. If this transmission is to

²³ Plato *Euthyphro*. In the dialogue, of course, the central terms are different: Euthyphro declares that the pious is what is pleasing to the gods. The modification does not affect the points I make below.

²⁴ Kant recapitulated the point in the *Groundwork*, noting that the idea of arbitrary willing that certain entities are good makes a mockery of the thought that "the Holy One of Israel" is good.

play a role in their ethical life, then they must view it as supplying reasons for doing the things commanded. They feel the obligation to accord with the commandments because a particular being has issued the commands. After the events of the twentieth century, and our familiarity with people who attempted to excuse the hideous things they did by declaring that they were following orders, we should be wary of the thought that, *all by itself*, an order can supply appropriate grounds for action. Is it appropriate for someone to follow any command from an outside source about what is to be done? The obvious answer, of course, is that it is sometimes proper to defer to others when one supposes that they are likely to command the *right* things. In the case of the deity, the commander can perhaps be recognized as having special attributes: this being is very powerful, knowledgeable about things to which lesser beings are blind, and so forth. Despite these impressive qualities, something crucial is lacking. Power and knowledge alone do not provide the kind of authority at stake here. Many of the underlings who were questioned about the atrocities they performed could point to the power and knowledge of their superiors. Their misdeeds stemmed from their willingness to follow commands from sources they could not justifiably think of as good (and, in most cases, should have judged to be profoundly bad). Deference thus depends on a capacity to recognize the source of the commands as good, and that requires just that ability to assess the deity, independently of his pronouncements, that the religious account denies. In short, 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.

It is now possible to see more clearly what goes wrong on the other limb of the dilemma, that is, if one supposes that the divine will *makes* some things good and others bad. Imagine that you are the recipient of the commandments, and that you know this fact about their production. You might follow the decrees, perhaps out of fear of the power of the divine commander, but your following them could not amount to any form of *ethical* life. Your attitude would be one of constraint, like that of a subordinate more thoroughly controlled than those who served the twentieth century regimes of terror. The pursuit of *goodness* would have nothing to do with it, for any such concept would be inapplicable to your immensely powerful boss, and, in consequence, inapplicable to the edicts that he has issued.

Ethics is commonly embedded in religion because many people do not see how there could be any secular basis for judgments of value. Despite the fact that, under scrutiny, religion cannot provide any basis for ethical practice, the prejudice that it can endure, in part because of the implausibility of available philosophical accounts. Secularism is likely to remain suspect so long as no convincing explanation of ethical practice has been given.

Hence secular humanism should contain an extended answer to questions about our practices of making judgments of value, so as to show what these judgments amount to and how they are possible. In repudiating supernatural beings, it should be equally skeptical about the nebulous entities and processes – far stranger to ordinary folk than the traditional divinities – invoked by the philosophers: non-natural properties, faculties of moral perception or ethical intuition, commands of pure practical reason and the like. Yet efforts to locate sources of value in the natural world typically founder, committing

familiar fallacies or making crude identifications of what is good with what promotes evolutionary advantage.²⁵ It seems, then, that secularists face a dilemma of their own: departures from naturalism are both unconvincing and antithetical to the line of reasoning that repudiates the supernatural, while naturalistic explanations of ethical practice are inadequate and fallacious.

The way out is to emulate the strategy that figured in the argument against supernaturalism, to understand ethical practice, as one understands religious belief, as a historical phenomenon, to consider its evolution, and to use the resulting perspective to determine its ability to yield objective claims. Here, I can only indicate briefly how this approach might be pursued.²⁶ Ethical practice, I propose, has a long history, possibly a history as long as that of our species. It began when our ancestors, living in small mixed groups of the sorts found today among chimpanzees and bonobos, became able to go beyond the tense and fragile social lives of such bands by acquiring a capacity for *normative guidance*. That capacity consisted in a new ability to formulate rules for their own conduct, and to inhibit forms of behavior that would lead to social disruption (as well as trouble for themselves). At an early stage of *human* life, probably at least 50,000 years ago, normative guidance became socially embedded, through the discussion and formulation of rules among the mature members of the social unit. Out of that primitive rule-setting practice came a variety of “experiments of living” (in Mill’s famous phrase), that have been in cultural competition with one another. The ethical practices

²⁵ For the pitfalls of programs of this sort, see the final chapter of my book *Vaulting Ambition: Sociobiology and the Quest for Human Nature* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1985).

²⁶ My version of the naturalistic program is presented, fragmentarily and schematically, in a sequence of essays published over the past two decades. The shape of the account is most easily visible in “Naturalistic Ethics without Fallacies” (Chapter 14). A full version appears in *The Ethical Project*.

of today are the remote descendants of earlier efforts that were successful in this competition.

At the dawn of human history, with the invention of writing, we can begin to observe the precepts according to which societies were organized, and the fragmentary nature of the early legal codes makes it apparent that they are the heirs to systems of rules that had been developed much earlier – rules that had originally made the expansion of human social groups possible. For the past 5,000 years, it is possible to recognize, still only incompletely, the further evolution of ethical practices. During this period, we can identify, if only occasionally, episodes of what seem like ethical advance: slavery is repudiated, women are given greater opportunities, people are no longer condemned for having sexual tastes that differ from those of the majority. By examining the processes through which transitions that appear progressive are effected, it is possible to investigate issues of ethical truth and ethical knowledge. If ethics is about anything, then clues to its content ought to be found at those moments where ethical advances are made.

On the account I propose, ethics is a form of *social technology*, originally introduced to address the fragility and instability of chimpanzee-bonobo-hominid social life. In its initial form, ethical practice was surely crude and simple, but 45,000 years of experimentation have accumulated solutions to the original difficulties, new problems posed by those first solutions, secondary solutions to those unanticipated problems followed by yet further challenges, and so on and on and on. Progress is to be understood in terms of the *evolution from* the initial state, not as *steps towards* some final ethical system. In this way, I believe, one can make sense of the human practices of valuation, of the traditions in which they are embedded, and of the hold they exert upon

us. Like earlier pragmatists, particularly Dewey, I suppose that ethical practice is grounded in very basic human desires and in features of the human condition (specifically the forms of social life to which our pre-human ancestors were already adapted). Ethics is something *we make* but we do not make it arbitrarily, for the conditions under which our ancestors made it and under which we continue to make it are determined by the species of animal to which we belong.²⁷

If a naturalistic approach akin to the one just sketched can be given²⁸, then the double-sided case against the necessity of religious foundations for ethics is completed. Secular humanism can thus draw on the negative arguments offered by Plato and his successors, without invoking a surrogate that is equally nebulous and far less appealing than the traditional connection of the ethical life to the dicta of the deity. It can thus turn back the challenge that genuine community and conjoint ethical action are quite impossible, once religion has been abandoned. Moreover, it can address a second issue often raised by religious people: the suspicion that lives without God (or gods) are deprived of purpose and significance.

There is an obvious sense in which secularism excludes purpose. If you suppose that the universe has been created according to a plan, then you can think of its history as unfolding that plan, as realizing the goals that the creator had in mind from the beginning (if, that is, such temporal language even makes sense in application to a supernatural

²⁷ For Dewey's approach, see *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Holt, 1922; reprint Prometheus Books 2002) and Dewey and James Tufts *Ethics* (Second edition, New York: Holt, 1932). The last two pages of Section II of the latter book (a section authored by Dewey alone) are particularly important in outlining his stance. *The Ethical Project*, attempts a full development of that stance.

²⁸ Besides my own efforts in this direction, related attempts have been made by Robert Richards *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), Marc Hauser *Moral Minds* ((Harper Collins, 2006), Frans De Waal *Primates and Philosophers* (Princeton University Press, 2007), and David Sloan Wilson *Darwin's Cathedral* (University of Chicago Press, 2002).

being). Contemporary cosmology, and, even more evidently, the Darwinian account of the history of life, does not indicate any such purposive development – as we saw earlier (at the beginning of §II) recognizing life as evolving for close to 4 billion years, with natural selection as the main agent of evolutionary change, exacerbates traditional worries about the contrast between the divine perfections and the messiness of the world we inhabit. To say, however, that the secularist perspective eliminates purpose *tout court* would be a mistake, for, as with ethics, we can think of attributions of purpose as something human beings do. Purpose is not imposed on our world from the outside, by divine *fiat*, but *purposes* are made up by us. Purpose-making is part of the human practice of valuing, a practice that has been with us for most of our history as a species.

The sweeping claim that secularism removes purpose from the universe is mistaken, but the claim seems unnerving because of a very specific corollary. If there is no purpose (period) there can be no purpose to a human life – our existences become pointless. If that corollary is accepted, then religious people wonder, quite reasonably, whether the forms of community envisaged by secularists can ever touch the “really deep issues.” Central to the questions they label in this way is the query, posed by almost all of us at some especially reflective moment, of what our lives are about, what gives them some sort of “meaning.” However they fashion their communities, secularists (so the story goes) can find nothing to say in response to the query – or in response to it in its “deepest” form – because any adequate treatment of it would require there to be purpose, and purpose has been eliminated from the start. Secularist conversations, however hard they may strive to cope with the most intimate concerns, are forever precluded from supplying what the services and discussions among the faithful regularly sustain.

Again, secular humanism should address this challenge in both negative and positive ways. Can the external imposition of purpose on human lives actually achieve what the religious believer usually attributes to it? Is the human activity of making purposes for ourselves, of giving point and direction to our lives, somehow inadequate, missing some important feature that the religious versions of the significance of human existence supply? I shall try to show, as before, that the *human* practice of valuation is actually critical to our finding genuine meaning in our lives.

As already noted, secularism removes purpose from the cosmos, by denying that there is an unfolding plan, envisaged by a divine creator. The removal renders impossible a particular way of conceiving the significance of human lives. You can no longer think of your life as directed towards filling some small (probably infinitesimally tiny) part of the divine scheme of things. What is lost here is the thought that a specific task – perhaps that of recognizing the greatness of God and working to bring about his will on Earth, as is best in your particular situation – has been assigned to you, and that this assignment provides your life with direction and meaning. A first secularist response would deny that this is any loss at all, and would assert that, on the contrary, we *gain* significance for ourselves once we recognize the importance of choosing our own pattern and our own projects. The response opposes to the religious conception a vision of human individuality that sees the imposition of a particular role upon us as a denial of what is most important, namely our capacity for choice for ourselves. In this juxtaposition of perspectives, two very different ideals of being human clash with one another: secularist emphasis on autonomy and self-choice contends with a religious ideal of humility and self-abnegation, submission to something far larger than oneself.

Sincerely religious people may even decry the emphasis on autonomy as a form of arrogance, and the emphasis upon it as expressing the corruption of values in the transition to the Enlightenment (and post-Enlightenment) perspective.

It might appear that there is an inevitable standoff here, with each side committed to different views of what it means to be human, so that the debate about purpose and significance can never be resolved. On closer examination, however, the religious conception of how human lives obtain purpose tacitly presupposes that form of valuation on which secularists insist. For the considerations that undercut the idea of religious foundations for ethics arise here in a new guise. Believers do not think that the act of self-abnegation and submission to the will of the deity is *compelled* – and if they did they would probably not view it as giving to a human life the significance they try to explain – but rather as issuing from the choice of the person who submits. A human life takes on its meaning because someone consciously identifies with the divine purposes, even when those are opaque. That identification must itself spring from an act of evaluation, a recognition not only of the power of the deity but of the *value* of serving a broader purpose accepted as *good*. Without such acts of evaluation, religious submission to the deity is far too close to the acceptance of those who commit themselves to serving the powerful agencies of the everyday world, who acquiesce in the commands of dictators, even when those dictators order the performance of atrocities. Religious people suppose that they can distinguish service to their deity (or deities) from the disturbing modes of blind self-abasement, and that power to distinguish already concedes the possibility of basing one's life on an act of evaluation. The difference between the two ways in which purpose is found does not therefore lie in the fact that the believer gives total priority to

submission and humility over autonomous choice, but rather that *in an autonomous choice* the believer resolves to abdicate autonomy in order to serve what the autonomous assessment has already recognized as good. At bottom, both parties must accept the thesis that identifying purpose in one's life requires an initial decision to value one particular course, an act of validation made by an individual. The difference is that, on the religious account, the appropriate valuation is to embrace a purpose set down externally, one larger than that of any finite being, so that, at the first step, further autonomous decision is given up, whereas, according to the secularist, the purposes are thoroughly constituted by acts of human valuation. (There are, after all, no larger purposes to be embraced.)

Hence the religious challenge cannot be directed at the misguidedly presumptuous activity of human attempts to decide what is valuable, but must suppose that there is some quality of the purposes embraced by the believer that sets those apart from the projects that people can conceive for themselves. The language of the last paragraph already suggests what that quality is likely to be: divine purposes are cosmic, far larger than those human beings can set for themselves. Identification with God's will can be viewed as important *sub specie aeternitatis*. Not even the most ambitious secular projects that give shape to our lives can aspire to anything similar.

The question of what makes for a worthwhile life is as old as philosophy, and is, arguably, the central question of philosophy. Yet for a long period in western thought, the period in which Christianity dominated, it hardly figures at all. Only in the late eighteenth century, as religion begins to confront the challenge *of* secularism, does the issue come, once again, to the fore. In ancient thought, accounts of the good life are

often uncontaminated by any conception that a necessary condition for significant existence is some eternal contribution to the cosmos.²⁹ In the wake of Christianity, however, it is easy to be haunted by the thought that nothing less than a permanent imprint on the universe is enough. That thought combines easily with a view already prominent in the ancient treatments, the supposition that the good life is only for the few. Hence it is easy to conclude that worthwhile secular lives, even if possible at all, must be *exceptional*. Secularism thus falls radically short of the Christian promise, which effectively answers the question of the valuable life by declaring that it consists in service to God and the promotion of the divine purposes, and consequently takes significant lives to be available to all, even to people who suffer terribly.

Secular humanism should reject both the demand that genuine human purposes must connect to cosmic purpose and the exceptionalism that pervades ancient treatments of the good life. Individuals give their lives purpose and meaning by defining for themselves what matters most, shaping those lives around projects and relationships. If worthwhile lives are hard to achieve, that is not because people lack the opportunity to shake the universe, but because they are constrained in their choices – sometimes by the prejudice that what they must aspire to do is to “shake the universe” – or cut off from the opportunities that would be most fulfilling for them. Nevertheless, there are numerous lives, secular as well as religious, that find meaning in service to other people, in sustaining a family or a community, in working for the relief of the sick and the suffering, or in providing things that bring to others security or joy. Those who touch other lives

²⁹ Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, perhaps the most systematic ancient treatment of the topic, is devoid of any hankering for permanence. In Plato, however, there are hints of the desire that one’s doings achieve a kind of immortality: see, for example, the discussion of two forms of reproduction (those of parents and those of philosophers/educators) in the *Symposium* (207a-d).

most deeply may wonder if they have done enough, but their sensitivity to what further things might be achieved only testifies to the great value of what they have already done. To wish that one had done more is tacitly to endorse the value of the efforts seen as partial.

The dedicated nurse, the devoted family member who nurtures relatives, the indefatigable sustainer of some necessary public good, all these people, and many more, contribute to lives that extend beyond their own. Others reach further, making discoveries or creating works of music, art, and literature that bring inspiration, awe and delight to many succeeding generations. Yet all these effects are thoroughly finite. There will come a time in the history of the cosmos at which all those immediately affected are dead, when the contributions are long forgotten, when the human species itself is extinct. So, a religious believer may maintain, these secular purposes fall short; in contrast to the larger purposes of the divine plan, they prove ephemeral.

That the effects of what we do are transient should be acknowledged. Is it, however, something that should be mourned? Is it a defect so decisive that it undermines any attribution of purpose to human lives? Secular humanism needs an articulated perspective that supports negative answers. Although I cannot fully present any such perspective here, I think it is possible to envisage the lines along which it would be developed. When our lives touch others in ways that protect them, or open up possibilities for them, we establish a connection with something that survives our own individual finitude. As when a stone is dropped into a pool, ripples continue after the stone has vanished, before they eventually die away. So, too, with our projects and our strivings, when they are well-directed and well-pursued. Even though the difference

we make is not permanent, our having been affects something larger than our own existences, and thereby links us to a world that endures beyond us. We can abandon the hankering for the eternal contribution, and still recognize the significance of the finite limited impact that we, finite limited beings, manage to achieve.³⁰

Two main challenges have been considered: the thought that secularism can find no place for value, and the charge that it cannot identify purpose or significance in human lives. For my third challenge, I turn, far more cursorily to a feature of the secular perspective that is easily connected with issues of purpose in human lives, particularly with human finitude. Religions sometimes, although by no means invariably, offer the prospect of immortality, and that offer may be understood as delivering forms of hope that secularists have to relinquish.

Is death fearful? Some thinkers have thought not, or at least not for those who have come to maturity.³¹ Resentment or regret may be a more appropriate emotion, or resistance an apter attitude towards death, yet there may still be things about death that it is reasonable, even for fully grown-up people, to fear. We may be appalled by the gradual loss of abilities that is likely to precede the end, even the loss of the full vigor of our youth. We may fear the possibility that what remains in some terminal stage may not be anything we can identify as the self we value. We may be frightened of the pain of the process of dying. The most basic fear (or regret or resentment) is, I suggest, the

³⁰ I believe that the picture of human significance that I sketch very briefly here has been most thoroughly developed in some works of art, music, and literature. In *Joyce's Kaleidoscope* (Oxford University Press, 2007), I try to show how it emerges from the explorations of *Finnegans Wake*.

³¹ Bacon writes "Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark ..." (*Essays*, Oxford University Press [World's Classics] 1962, 9; I have modernized the spelling). For a sensitive recent discussion of whether death is to be feared, see Julian Barnes *Nothing to be Frightened of* (New York: Knopf, 2008). From the first lines, Barnes self-consciously contrasts his own discussion with the supposedly more rigorous thought of his brother, a professional philosopher, and yet his book is far more attentive to philosophical nuances than many more academic treatments –including those that issue from the word processors of Darwinian atheists.

anxiety that death will damage the value we aim to create with our life. What is most frightening is the prospect of *premature* death.

The religious offer of immortality helps with none of this. Whether we re-emerge in some wondrous state after we die does not halt the dwindling of our capacities or preserve our youth, does not relieve us from that final stage of pitiable half-life (or less), does not salve whatever agonies come at the end. Nor can it complete the projects we leave unfinished. If your life is directed towards nurturing others who need your protection and guidance, and if, unluckily, you die before they are ready to cope without you, the fact that you will be restored – and maybe restored to them in some entirely different state – is immaterial. Your project, around which you have centered your existence, has still been compromised by premature death. Conversely, the prospect of death ceases to appear terrifying to those who have lived long enough to recognize that the central aims and purposes to which they have directed themselves are firmly in prospect, even fully secure. Their recognition does not halt the desire to live on, to see the course you have tried to direct unfold further, but, knowing that there is to be a terminus, you can become reconciled to its coming at any future point. The nurturing parent (and grandparent) sees the children (and the grandchildren) well launched in life, having found their own way and following it confidently, and would like to see further continuations of the family story – yet it is clear that, whenever death comes, there will always be loose ends, more episodes not yet seen.

The example I have chosen reflects the most common way in which people, religious or secular, find purpose in their lives, and it also indicates the most obvious context in which the religious promise of life after death brings hope. For those whose

lives are centered on relations to others, death entails losses for which there can be no secular compensation. Although the deaths of young children are particularly poignant, the subtraction from your life of someone whom you love is painful at any stage – witness the decline of so many people who lose a lifelong companion. Here, apparently, religions like Christianity can offer hope – as Charles Kingsley wrote to his friend Thomas Henry Huxley on the death of the latter’s beloved young son, he regretted that the famous agnostic (who had even coined the term) could not have the consolation of anticipating a reunion with the boy in the hereafter.³² (Despite his grief, Huxley responded with an unflinching declaration of his resolve to “serve Truth”.)

From conversations with religious people who do look forward to some sort of encounter with those whom they have loved and lost, I know how powerful this promise of hope can seem. Yet the sense of consolation depends, I believe, on not thinking hard about the terms of the offer. It is easy to suppose that the reunion will amount to a continuation of what has been, as if the tape of life were replayed and the death avoided. Plainly, that cannot be what occurs. Huxley could not have what he most wanted, the continuation of his young son’s life: he could not see Noel grow up and find his own pattern of earthly life. Moreover, any reunion would apparently confront two strangers with one another, a parent whose life had extended in different directions after Noel’s death and a child who would no longer occupy the emotional space vacated by his early death. Perhaps human understanding of the conditions of the reunion is defective, and the characterization just given is inadequate, but that is surely no help in providing consolation for the bereaved. It is common for Christians to disdain the material

³² Leonard Huxley (ed) *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley* (London: Macmillan, 1900) volume 1, 233.

comforts of the paradise offered to Muslims in the Qur'an, but the Islamic vision of the hereafter does have the advantage of connecting with the desires of the faithful (the emphasis on flowing water is quite comprehensible, given the desert conditions in which the early community lived). Christian doctrines of the resurrection, by contrast, are admitted to be mysteries, and, when that fact is appreciated, it is totally uncertain whether the conditions of our reunion in the hereafter make any response to the pains and losses we actually feel in the mundane world, or whether the form of existence envisaged is anything that would compensate for actual human grief and suffering.³³

Many – perhaps most – human lives do not go well. Death often removes those we love, and shatters our projects. Secular humanism is committed to the attempt to decrease the frequency with which people's aspirations are frustrated and broken, despite recognizing that it can never expect to turn back all the reversals our mundane existence brings. Rather than promise some nebulous hope for the future, its attention is clearly focused on enlarging the prospects that the purposes we set for ourselves will be achieved, and on providing whatever consolation can be given when those purposes fail. The hope that is apparently abandoned is less wonderful than the religious take it to be, and, while life in a completely secular world is always vulnerable, it is not, on that account, bleak and hopeless.

V

In his recent analysis of how we arrived at contemporary secularism, Charles Taylor plainly diverges from some of the conclusions of previous sections. His

³³ The witty intermezzo, "Don Juan in Hell" from Shaw's *Man and Superman*, scrutinizes the Christian vision with particular clarity.

historical narrative views the potential basis for repudiation of the supernatural quite differently: instead of the challenge *of* secularism reconstructed in §II, Taylor only considers less powerful forms of reasoning, lines of argument that would not make a conclusive case against supernaturalist beliefs. Having substituted weaker reasoning, the way is open to interpret the transition to secularism as occurring because of various social movements that make up for the deficiencies of the anti-supernaturalist arguments. Hence, Taylor can preserve a space for the – Christian – religious doctrines he regards as a live option.

Much as I admire the historical narrative, it suffers from underestimating the challenge *of* secularism. In presenting the challenge *for* secularism, however, Taylor avoids the popular versions of the charges, offering something more sophisticated. He would probably not accept the answers of §§ III and IV, but it is clear that he does not take the crucial shortcoming of secularism to lie in the lines of criticism they address. He acknowledges forthrightly that secular lives can have a “moral/spiritual shape.”³⁴ I take him to recognize very clearly that secularists can still find a place for talk about values and the purposes people attribute to their lives. Nor does his central concern about the secular forms of existence center on some loss of hope, enjoyed by religious people who can look forward to an after-life. Rather, he insists, throughout his long book, on the idea that the secular life is “flattened,” that it has, in a useful metaphor, lost a dimension.

As I interpret him, Taylor is concerned to elaborate a view towards which William James was groping in his classic discussion of Mysticism. James characterizes many mystical writings as “musical compositions,” and he takes this “music” to supply

³⁴ *A Secular Age* 5.

“ontological messages which non-musical criticism is unable to contradict, though it may laugh at our foolishness in minding them.” So we receive “whispers” from a world beyond, and, if we heed them, we come to “live in the eternal.”³⁵ James struggles with the epistemological question of whether these experiences supply any warrant for belief in the supernatural, but he is thoroughly convinced that the conception of a larger realm beyond that of everyday (and scientific) experience enriches certain parts of human life.

Early in his book Taylor introduces the notion of a religious dimension in human experience, with a quotation from the Catholic writer (and monk) Bede Griffiths, a passage that serves to anchor later discussions.

One day during my last term at school I walked out alone in the evening and heard the birds singing in that full chorus of song, which can only be heard at that time of the year at dawn or at sunset. I remember now the shock of surprise with which the sound broke on my ears. It seemed to me that I had never heard the birds singing before and I wondered whether they sang like this all year round and I had never noticed it. As I walked I came upon some hawthorn trees in full bloom and again I thought that I had never seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness before. If I had been brought suddenly among the trees of the Garden of Paradise and heard a choir of angels singing I could not have been more surprised. I came then to where the sun was setting over the playing fields. A lark rose suddenly from the ground beside the tree where I was standing and poured out its song above my head, and then sank still singing to rest. Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt

³⁵ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* 379, 380.

inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God.³⁶

The power of this example – “Bede Griffiths’ Epiphany”, as we might call it – lies in its resonances with the experiences of many people: the stage of life (around 18), the time of year (spring), the time of day (early morning or evening), the setting (familiar country under unusually beautiful light). For Taylor, however, the experience stands for something distinctive about the religious sensibility (this “one example” is to “stand for many”). It indicates that

[s]omewhere, in some activity or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be.³⁷

What secular lives lack is not the values and purposes, the “moral/spiritual shape,” but, Taylor suggests, this sense of fullness.

Powerful though the passage is, we need to be quite careful in distinguishing various questions that arise about it. Here are those I take to be most important:

1. Can thoroughly secular people have experiences like Bede Griffiths’ Epiphany?
2. Do such experiences provide any evidence for a “supernatural realm”?
3. Are the experiences of those who believe in supernatural sources richer and deeper than the experiences of those who do not?

³⁶ Bede Griffiths *The Golden String* (London: Fount) 9; quoted in Taylor *A Secular Age* 5.
³⁷ *A Secular Age* 5.

4. For religious people, do such experiences reinforce a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives, and do they strengthen the commitment to shared ethical projects?
5. Are experiences of this sort more readily available and more sustainable, if they are linked to systems of religious belief?

Beyond the historical analyses, Taylor's book obtains much of its genuine power from suggesting answers to some of these questions, and letting them spread – by what I regard as unhealthy contagion – to others.

Begin with the easier questions: do secularists have similar experiences? Of course. Perhaps they happen above Tintern Abbey or in prospect of Mont Blanc or when the light strikes a particular Manhattan façade. Sometimes they occur in reading, or in listening to music. For thoroughly secular people, too, there come occasions of uplift, feelings of connection to others or to places, a sense that this is how life should be. There is no sense that these experiences are somehow “flatter” or bereft of some quality that religious people find in them. Possibly we secularists deceive ourselves, for even though we may try to compare our current epiphanies with those we enjoyed when we were once believers, memory may prove deceptive here. Let us, then, rest with the recognition that the experiences occur, and postpone the harder issue of a difference in richness or depth.

Question 2 already received its answer in §II, but it is worth revisiting it here. Bede Griffiths' language is telling. He writes of angels, of choirs of angels, of Paradise and of God. The entire passage is imbued with the categories of a religion he had previously known, to which he assimilates his emotional response. As William James

recognized so clearly, there are rival hypotheses about the sources of those feelings, potential psychological explanations in terms of very different causes. Secularism should acknowledge that experiences of this type currently lack full scientific explanation: it would be a mistake to assert, dogmatically, that there are antecedent features of Bede Griffiths' psychological state, that would dispose him to feel just that surge of joy on just this occasion. We simply do not know what to make of some parts of our psychological lives, including these precious epiphanies. That does not mean, however, that we have a license to conceptualize them in terms of myths handed down to us from the remote past. Better to acknowledge our ignorance, to refrain from covering it with labels drawn from some unreliable tradition with which we are acquainted, and to look forward to some future possibility of a well-grounded explanation of these important forms of experience.

The remaining questions are harder, in large part because of well-known difficulties in comparing the experiences of different people and in assessing the effects that particular experiences have on subsequent conduct. The most obvious way in which to address question 3, is to ask those who have acquired or lost faith to consider the epiphanies they have had at different periods in their lives, and to compare them for depth and richness. As already noted, any such procedure is vulnerable to the objection that the judgments rendered are distorted by failures of memory and, possibly, later confabulation. It is easy to conjecture that those who have traveled in one direction (from faith to secularism, say) would give different verdicts from those who have made the opposite journey: those who have lost their faith declare that there has been no change in the quality of the experience, those who have acquired faith extol the gain in richness

and depth. Judgments of this sort would, of course, cohere with the beliefs that the evaluators have at the time they make their assessments, and would embody a sense that they have now arrived at the correct view.

There is, however, a different way to approach the question, one in line with the discussions of §IV. What exactly could a sense of some higher, supernatural world add to these epiphanies? The obvious answer is that the religious person feels a connection to something far vaster than his or her own life. To accept that answer, however, would be to return to the issues of the last section, specifically to the thought that seeing oneself as fulfilling an externally-imposed divine purpose, even if it must be opaque to finite creatures like ourselves, is intrinsically more satisfying than anything secularists can offer. The attitude I attributed to secular humanism can be recapitulated here. Thoroughly secular people can interpret the purpose of their lives, not through some “vertical” links to a dimly-understood transcendent reality, but through “horizontal” connections to a natural world that is vaster than their own individual existence. Recognition of yourself as part of a world, including most importantly other human lives, on which your actions make an impact, the epiphany can be a rich source of broader connections without any presuppositions about the supernatural. The religious claim of especial depth or richness in these experiences is thus exposed as the residue of misguided presuppositions that ought to be forsworn.

Questions 4 and 5 require more extensive concessions from the secularist. Despite the fact that many people who lack belief in the supernatural have had experiences through which they became committed to a course of action, a course they pursued with great diligence for the rest of their lives, I am prepared to allow that *as*

things currently stand, the acceptance of a God may provide the epiphany with a force that pervades subsequent conduct. One of the most admirable people I know is a committed Christian, who, despite medical problems that have affected her for decades, is truly remarkable for the intensity and scope of her work in her community. She sustains and inspires her family, and simultaneously contributes extensively to the nurturing of the sick, the poor, and the aged. Her dedication is truly extraordinary, and it has often seemed incredible to me that, suffering as she does from multiple sclerosis, she manages to bring so much light into so many lives. Her own explanation for this is her recognition of God, once present in the person of Jesus – as she said to me when we last talked, “If I didn’t believe that Christ really was who he said he was, I couldn’t keep going with all these things.”

Perhaps, then, the answer to question 4 is “Yes”, and perhaps secularists should allow that, *in the social environments that currently exist*, there is an asymmetry between the motive force felt by those whose epiphanies are framed in religious terms and those for whom there is no sense of the supernatural. Similarly, it may be that the forms of the religious life make these important experiences more frequent or more enduring. Anyone sympathetic to the proposal that religions have evolved to meet human psychological and social needs ought to appreciate the possibility that the rituals and devotions in which religious people engage may have beneficial effects in directing human conduct and in providing a sense of “fullness”. As §II constantly emphasized, the evolution of religious traditions doesn’t have to accumulate or refine truths for the religion to succeed.

Inside or outside religious life, the effects of epiphanies upon us are often fleeting, and the sense of uplift offered by those experiences is hard to sustain. To Bede Griffiths' avowal, I juxtapose a (fictional) presentation by a far greater writer.

He had confessed and God had pardoned him. His soul was made fair and holy once more, holy and happy.

...

He sat by the fire in the kitchen, not daring to speak for happiness. Till that moment he had not known how beautiful and peaceful life could be. The green square of paper pinned round the lamp cast down a tender shade. On the dresser was a plate of sausages and white puddings and on the shelf there were eggs. They would be for the breakfast in the morning after the communion in the college chapel. White pudding and eggs and sausages and cups of tea. How simple and beautiful was life after all. And life lay all before him.

The "he" of this passage is Stephen Dedalus, protagonist, if not "hero", of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and the scene occurs just after Stephen returns from the confession to which the four sermons of the school retreat have driven him.³⁸

Yet the uplift proves transient. Stephen quickly becomes caught up in a rigorous schedule of rituals that drain the vitality out of what he has experienced.

Sunday was dedicated to the mystery of the Holy Trinity, Monday to the Holy Ghost, Tuesday to the Guardian Angels, Wednesday to Saint Joseph, Thursday to the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, Friday to the Suffering Jesus, Saturday to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

³⁸ James Joyce *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1992) 157-8. The passage comes almost at the end of Chapter III.

...

His daily life was laid out in devotional areas. By means of ejaculations and prayers he stored up ungrudgingly for the souls in purgatory centuries of days and quarantines and years; yet the spiritual triumph which he felt in achieving with ease so many fabulous ages of canonical penances did not wholly reward his zeal of prayer since he could never know how much temporal punishment he had remitted by way of suffrage for the agonising souls: and, fearful lest in the midst of the purgatorial fire, which differed from the infernal only that it was not everlasting, his penance might avail no more than a drop of moisture, he drove his soul daily through an increasing circle of works of supererogation.³⁹

Stephen is hardly bereft of epiphanies – indeed, the frequency with which he has them, has made the term itself famous – but their effect on his life, whether in his devout or his lapsed phases, is typically fleeting. The significance of these episodes is very hard to maintain in one’s consciousness, *and even the machinery of religion can erode any enduring effect.*

Joyce’s point is, I think, a deep and important one. For almost all people, whether religious or secular, the occasions of uplift are rare, and their motive power is easily dissipated. That fact points towards the right way for secular humanism to respond to the challenge Taylor poses, as it emerges in the affirmative answers to questions 4 and 5 I have conceded. *Special forms of experience – epiphanies – are partly a social achievement.* The force that they have on human conduct, and the

³⁹ Joyce *Portrait* 159. This is the opening of Chapter IV, a less celebrated, but equally effective, switch of tone than that in the transition from Chapter IV to Chapter V.

frequency with which they occur, depend on effective techniques that religions have introduced and honed over very long periods of time.

A commonplace about music asserts that the devil always has the best tunes. However that may be, when it comes to the cultivation of episodes that embody Taylor's "sense of fullness," religions have a long history of practice. They can draw, often brilliantly, on resonant words, forms of ceremony, art and music, and the secular surrogates (for example, the "services" of Unitarians) frequently seem anemic by comparison. This means that the concessions I have made in response to questions 4 and 5 should not be viewed as marks of secularist loss, but as challenges to develop ways of sustaining those experiences we take to be most important that will be as powerful as those supplied by long-evolved religious traditions.

Dewey saw the point very clearly. Rather than suppose that epiphanies, like that of Bede Griffiths, owe their power to the belief in the supernatural, he suggested that we take the experiences for the valuable episodes they are and find ways of sustaining and deepening them.

It is the claim of religions that they effect this enduring change in attitude. I should like to turn the statement around and say that whenever this change takes place there is a definitely religious attitude. It is not religion that brings this about, but when it occurs, from whatever cause and by whatever means, there is a religious outlook and function.⁴⁰

Decades later, secularism still needs to attend to the cultivation of this attitude, to elaborate ways in which it can become more widespread and more enduring. That task is plainly difficult, for the established religions of the world have honed their abilities to

⁴⁰ John Dewey *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934) 17.

respond to the human need for community. There is, however, no reason to think that the obstacles are insuperable, or that secular humanists cannot find inspiration in those forms of religion that have committed themselves to non-literal understandings of traditional doctrines. In outlining responses to some important challenges for secularism, I hope to have renewed the quest for what Dewey called a “common faith,” a complex of psychological states beyond the acceptance of myth, that recognizes secular *humanism* as more than blunt denial.