

George Levine, ed.

The Joy of Secularism.

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The Joy of Secularism is the first entry in what will no doubt be a new genre of literature, one that might be called secularist religion. It aims to start a second phase of atheism, moving beyond the vitriolic negativity of the militant New Atheists writers such as Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris (and many others), whose strategy has been mostly limited to mocking the religious believer for his foolish superstitions and blaming religion for everything bad in the world. The New Atheists seem to believe, naively, that if you ridicule religious believers enough, they will have to all come around to atheism eventually, and that once the world finally gets rid of religion it will all be sweetness and light. Needless to say, this conviction is just as foolish and superstitious as many of the beliefs they mock in religion, and itself reflects a form of faith in the power of Reason to bring justice, harmony, and happiness to the world.

To their credit, the contributors to the Joy of Secularism agree that it is not enough to attack religion; secularism owes it to the world to present an alternative, positive, attractive ideal of life that can replace that of religion. Further, at least some of the contributors are willing to acknowledge what most New Atheists would not admit even under torture, that religion does and has always had substantial positive contributions to human existence. Most notably, religion provides an assurance that life is meaningful, that there is a moral purpose to human existence, and that the universe is not merely a cold, bleak place without purpose, direction, or goal. It is not enough, George Levine rightly remarks, to adopt the “dramatic complacency” of the stoical pose of “heroic facing of the truth” (8), though Levine admits he is greatly tempted by such a stance. What is needed instead is a demonstration of how a secular, atheistic life can be meaningful and happy.

It remains of course an open question whether secularism can in fact provide what religion has provided in the past. It would surely seem to be a problem if secularism does entail the essential meaningless of life and existence. Philip Kitcher wonders whether stripping the world of meaning and purpose might be in fact a gain rather than a loss: “we *gain* significance for ourselves once we recognize the importance of choosing our own pattern and our own projects” (43). This argument seems to be a stretch—an extreme case of making a virtue of necessity—and even Kitcher recognizes that this secular “emphasis on autonomy” may be seen as a “form of arrogance” (44). It also seems flatly inconsistent with Kitcher’s high valuation of science, which like religion rejects the idea of total autonomy and insists on responsibility to the Truth. Levine goes so far as to hold that secularism is not only an improvement, but is positively necessary for an effective democracy: “the moral and spiritual authority that religion inevitably claims *must* imply universality, and this has to mean in all consistency that each religion must demand moral and spiritual control over lay society as well” (3). This claim is rather surprising given that American democracy, like the original Athenian democracy, was founded by religious believers and has remained religious throughout its entire history. Indeed, it was religious believers who invented the doctrine of separation of church and state, and there is no

“inconsistency” in being a religious believer while maintaining an attitude of tolerance of other views (here Levine seems to inherit the caricatured view of religion from New Atheism). Secularists have no monopoly on tolerance and respect for diversity of opinions; indeed, as exemplified by the New Atheists, they often lack it altogether. It is also a problematic view given that modern science really *does* claim universal authority (Levine mentions “science’s absolute authority” (9)), and yet that hardly seems to undercut human freedom or democracy. And how does one handle the opposite problem: the possibility of good government when there is no objective basis for any political values at all, even democratic ones? To assert the unconstrained freedom to choose is no answer at all, if there are no standards for good versus bad choices.

One of the major problems facing the contributors to this volume is the difficulty of basic definitional questions. It is notoriously difficult, for example, to define “naturalism,” and to distinguish it from scientism (though thankfully the contributors mostly avoid crude scientism in this volume). It is notoriously difficult even to define the word “science,” nor is “supernatural” an especially clear concept. The concepts of the transcendent and the transcendental are equally problematic, though they are usually used in this book as pejoratives associated almost entirely with religion. One problem with demonizing transcendence is that many religions take the divine realm to be immanent rather than transcendent (or both at the same time). Another is that there is a perfectly secular use of the idea of transcendence (as in de Waal’s claim that morality “transcends” self-interest (166)) that does not presuppose an ontological commitment to an otherworldly existence. Other terminological issues include the substantial debate in this volume over Max Weber’s famous description of the modern world as suffering from “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*). Although some commentators seem to think Weber is referring to the elimination of magical elements (elves, fairies, ghosts, etc.), it seems clear that Weber was referring to something much more profound: the sense that the world is no longer meaningful or inspiring. Equally, contributors debate the notion of “fullness”: does the religious worldview permit a sort of fullness that secularism cannot match? The fuzziness of the term “fullness” makes this a rather frustrating discussion.

These problems are not merely terminological. Rebecca Stott’s charming final essay discusses the poetry of the mundane, e.g. the humble earthworm, and the possibility of the “rapturous epiphanies of life” (207) in the natural world, the idea of the Darwinian sublime. As attractive as her position is, it is far from clear whether it constitutes a secular as opposed to a religious ideal, as she seems to believe. Her meditations would not be out of place in a book on Zen Buddhism, or Blakean mysticism, or even aspects of Christianity (“consider the lilies of the field”). The concept of the sublime is just the sort of notion that has traditionally belonged to religion or to a romantic literature that expressly rejects the perceived deadening reduction of the world by Newtonian science. Certainly one need not be secularist to appreciate the sublime in the natural world; the harder question is whether the sublime can be appreciated at all without at least an implicit religious basis. The same concern applies to Paolo Costa’s to provide a Heideggerian alternative to religion, embracing such ideas as the “embodied growth in world-openness” (145) and the “inverted sublime” (151). It is unclear just how these ideas could be translated into a secular ideal with wide popular appeal (one wonders whether Richard Dawkins would have any more patience with Heideggerian jargon than with religion). But more importantly, it is unclear just how such views fit into the religious/secular divide; surely a

religious person can be open to the world as much as the secular. It is interesting that the word “sublime” appears in both of these essays; it is precisely the question whether atheism can accept such notions as the sublime, which borders on the notion of transcendence and even the supernatural. Why is the sublime a permissible concept, whereas the transcendent is not?

One might also have liked to see more attention paid to what is surely the most pressing problem for secularism: how to make sense of the status of morality. If we give up a transcendent foundation for morality, are we required to take the view that morality is either reducible to a Darwinian adaptation, or that it is simply up to us what morality to choose? Neither of these options seems plausible (and it is far from clear that a secular worldview necessitates giving up on objective morality). An illustration is the essay by the naturalist Frans de Waal, who recycles here his position that primates display many aspects of proto-morality. Even if true however (and as critics have remarked, the thesis is too vague to be very useful), it is hard to see what de Waal’s point is. He snidely remarks (in the vein of the New Atheists): “perhaps it is just me, but I am wary of anyone whose belief system is the only thing standing between them and repulsive behavior” (155) (presumably by “belief system” he means religion). In any case, the remark misses the point entirely. The purpose of claiming a religious (or any sort of transcendent) foundation for morality is not that without the threat of hell all of us would immediately begin raping and pillaging. Rather, the idea is that morality has an objective basis, that it is not a merely contingent product of evolution, and that it has a status higher than mere preferences such as the taste for dark chocolate or fine wine. De Waal, thankfully, is not a total evolutionary reductionist, claiming that even if morality is a product of evolution, it (like the sex drive) has its “own autonomous motivational dynamic” (156). But the problem is to distinguish autonomy from arbitrariness; if morality no longer is grounded in reproductive success, then what is its goal now? And what reason is there to choose morality over naked self-interest? Indeed, the comparison with sexuality is hardly reassuring; whatever the “motivational dynamic” of sex is nowadays, one would hardly want to put morality in the same category.

It is perhaps unfair to judge the essays in this volume too rigorously, given now novel and experimental this approach is. It is conceivable however that the project may be doomed from the start: perhaps it is not possible, almost by definition, to live a meaningful life in a world stripped of any meaning or purpose. Or, perhaps it will turn out that secularism is wrong, and that even if the specific doctrines of religion are false, the broader more abstract insistence on the reality of something beyond the realm of science is correct. Here Philip Kitcher is to be commended as the only contributor to the volume who is willing to admit the possibility that secularism may prove wrong on the big picture:

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 (30).

Kitcher thus avoid the dogmatic assumption by Levine and presumably many of the other contributors that the debate is already over, as reflected in the smug subtitle “11 Essays for How We Live Now” (one wonders just who this “we” is, given that atheists comprise only a tiny percentage of the world’s population). In fact, the debate is just beginning. This volume, for all

its faults, is a valuable first contribution to an important topic, and will no doubt inspire much more work in this area.

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