

**Philip Kitcher.** *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism*. Yale University Press 2014. 200 pp. \$25.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780300203431); \$18.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780300216851).

Recent critics of religious belief, commonly labelled the ‘new atheists’, maintain that the demonstrated falsity of religious doctrine recommends a complete rejection of all things religious. While sharing the secularist viewpoint behind this critical perspective, in this new book Philip Kitcher aims to supplement this critical stance towards the foundations of religious belief with a more tempered and sympathetic response to the varied functions served by a commitment to the religious life. In doing so, he further attempts to articulate a positive account of the way a secularist viewpoint can offer genuine sources of meaning and purposefulness in life. The result is a thoughtful first attempt at grappling with a set of issues that are vital for the secular humanist position but which are usually ignored by those critical of the religious life.

Chapter one outlines the precise nature of the secularist doubt concerning religion. This doubt arises from the longstanding and detailed empirical, historical and sociological examination of the sources of belief in the ‘transcendent’, something beyond the physical, organic human world in which we live. These studies reveal that the processes that have led to the diversity of religious beliefs about the transcendent are unlikely to give rise to true beliefs. Kitcher goes so far as to claim that they are so unreliable that all specific conflicting and divergent sets of religious beliefs are false (he says ‘almost certainly false’) (19). While this provides strong grounds for a rejection of religious doctrines, Kitcher’s ‘soft atheism’ leaves open the possibility of the transcendent. Future scientific work might uncover some aspect of reality so different from our current views that we need to revise our concepts. Of course, this feature of reality would then be amenable to scientific investigation and be something that was awkwardly and unclearly grasped by religious doctrine. But the bare possibility of something fitting a ‘transcendent’ role cannot be ruled out entirely. Even more importantly, soft atheism leaves some forms of religious commitment untouched: such as those of ‘refined religion’ which reject theological doctrines, but find value in religious practice and rituals, and further recognize religion as expressive of what is most deeply valuable. As we will see, examining this religious viewpoint enables a fruitful dialogue with the secular perspective to emerge, one where the focus turns to the question of the value and significance found in human life, and the challenge that this presents to the defender of the secular humanist viewpoint.

Before taking up this challenge, chapter two considers the vexed relationship between religion and morality. Although this connection was severed by Plato, many still hold on to the idea that it is through commitment to religion that we find a truly objective conception of morality. According to Kitcher, this viewpoint persists because no one has been able to offer a fully adequate naturalist alternative that does justice to this need. If his secularist view is to meet this challenge it must make good on this talk of objective value. Here Kitcher outlines his own naturalist account more fully developed in his *The Ethical Project* (2011, Harvard University Press). This account depends on Darwin’s key insight: puzzlement about a certain group of phenomena can be overcome if we adopt a historical approach and wonder how this set of phenomena have historically emerged and developed (31). The historical record of early human social life highlights the instability caused by our limited ability to be responsive to the needs of others. This, Kitcher argues, led to additional ethical guidance, in the form of normative suggestions for addressing these problematic situations of social conflict. Evolution has given us the need to live together but a limited responsiveness to the needs of

others. Ethics developed as a way to address these shortcomings and began as a kind of social technology (41-42). Extending Darwin's genealogical insight into the study of human ethical behavior encourages a fundamental change in the way we think about moral objectivity and progress. Rather than identifying new moral truths, ethical progress is viewed as a group project aimed at correcting and refining an existing ethical code. Humans are portrayed as the creators and loci of value, as they respond to the problematic situations they face and which are the result of the ongoing struggle between social needs and our limited ability to respond to others (59).

Chapter three returns to the prospects for a refined religion and the challenges this presents for Kitcher's secular humanism. Here he offers a more careful description of the vital core function of religious commitment that does not involve accepting doctrinal claims about the transcendent. Rather it views these doctrines as providing moral exemplars for human conduct, where they highlight certain moral values as human ideals in virtue of their further independence from human activity. The test of such a position is found in its ability to explain how human purposes are strengthened through a faith in the transcendent (89). Kitcher finds modest versions of this position the most defensible. Here faith enhances ethical sensitivity through the recognition that our ethical lives are related to something larger than ourselves, enabling deeper commitments and the hope that future ends will be realized. To the extent that this faith suggests ethical options that change lives through an increased awareness of the needs of others, it helps to clarify the important social functions served by religious commitment.

The last two chapters respond to the remaining challenges set by this clarification of religious commitment. These include the view that religious practices provide the sole vehicle for attaching significance to finite human life and the further claim that religion provides an emotional embrace with something higher that enables our lives to possess an added richness and protection against the darker side of human nature. Kitcher acknowledges the immense importance of these features of human life, but strives to locate them within his secular humanism. He notes that a meaningful life results from a freely chosen plan or 'theme' where there is a clear sense of the aims that are important to strive for, and where there is success in achieving these aims (106). He adds a further important constraint: the individually created and freely chosen significance we attach to our lives is attuned to our ability to touch the lives of others. Our lives gain meaning through our successful attempts to solve the moral problem of our limited capacity to recognize the needs of others. Kitcher then accepts that meaningful lives require a connection to something larger but emphasizes that this can be found in the complex ways human interactions extend beyond themselves. By reflecting on the way basic features of human existence generate ethical problems and our corresponding need for a common ethical project, we add a seriousness and richness to human life. While there is then no intellectual problem for the secularist in handling the meaningfulness of life, there remain many practical problems concerning the socio-economic conditions that currently limit many human lives. Lastly, Kitcher addresses the claim that his view is too optimistic in ignoring the dark side of human nature that can only be tamed through the discipline found in religious commitment. In response, he examines two literary accounts of tragic human life arguing that through them we can learn much about what is truly valuable and think more substantively concerning those conditions needed to realize such values (143).

Kitcher's book tries to carefully locate a middle ground within the recent highly charged debates concerning the foundations of religious belief. While sharing the atheist's doubt concerning the

transcendent he wants to resist any swift rejection of all forms of religious commitment. There remain, in his view, vital social and psychological functions served by a commitment to the religious life, which give significance to the lives of many but do not require a further commitment to the religious orthodoxy rejected by secular critics. He then further wants to show that secular humanism has the resources to fulfill these same kinds of functions, where the recognition of our shared ethical project gives a rich meaning to our admittedly finite human strivings. Secular humanists and reformed religious believers should then, he suggests, recognize each other as allies (93). Their shared rejection of religious doctrine enables them to take a unified stand against those who equate the religious life with belief in sacred doctrine. Kitcher comes close to acknowledging that his attempt to promote a positive, forward looking secular view of meaningful human existence, runs the risk of sounding like a replacement for the religious life. This might make it difficult for some religiously minded individuals to see themselves as allies in his cause (94). John Dewey's similar approach (which has a notable influence on Kitcher's own) tries a somewhat different strategy. Dewey enlarges the scope of what counts as religious by arguing that any attitude that gives a deep and enduring significance to life be seen as religious. By freeing religious attitudes from their doctrinal formulations, Dewey locates our 'common faith' in a community life expressive of religious attitudes and devotion. Kitcher shares much of this outlook but his secular defense of meaningful human life and purpose, a life *after* faith as his title indicates, inadvertently makes it seem as if religious attitudes are to be replaced by these secular alternatives. Calling these shared communal attitudes 'religious' may seem excessive and unnecessary, but perhaps this might be a small concession if the benefits include an increased recognition of common ethical ideals and a further forging of alliances between the religious and secular encouraged by Kitcher's own positive perspective on human life.

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