

Article

## The New Secular Humanists: Ronald Dworkin and Philip Kitcher on Life without God

Charles Taliaferro

Philosophy Department, St. Olaf College, 1520 St. Olaf Ave, Northfield, MN 55057, USA;  
E-Mail: taliafer@stolaf.edu; Tel.: +1-507-786-3662

Academic Editor: Jonathan Hill

Received: 29 April 2015 / Accepted: 7 July 2015 / Published: 17 July 2015

---

**Abstract:** Ronald Dworkin and Philip Kitcher recognize that traditional, religious faith—especially in Christian theistic tradition—has virtues that seem to be missing in a secular worldview. To remedy this apparent deficit, they both propose that a secular worldview can provide a satisfying foundation for a flourishing, meaningful life. Moreover, Kitcher argues that secular humanism is far more justified than a religious worldview because it does not face the problem of diversity that arises in the case of religion. I argue that secular humanism faces the same problem of diversity that Kitcher proposes undermines religious belief. I further argue that Dworkin’s and Kitcher’s secular alternative to a religious worldview is problematic.

**Keywords:** Dworkin; Kitcher; religion; secularism; diversity; humanist; atheism; theism

---

### 1. Introduction

Some of the so-called “new atheists” such as Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens advanced their case against theism, especially Christian theism, with little appreciation of anything culturally or philosophically positive about theism and with little doubt about the sufficiency of a secular worldview in providing a satisfying alternative framework for a meaningful life. Two recent contributions by self-described atheists Ronald Dworkin and Philip Kitcher adopt a different stance: both express appreciation for the merits of religious tradition, specifically the theistic strands as found in the Abrahamic faiths, and both concede that it is not obvious how a secular worldview is able to offer a deeply satisfying understanding of life and death and (in Dworkin’s case) the feeling of awe that seems to be called for as we contemplate the beauty of the cosmos. Nonetheless,

Dworkin and Kitcher offer grounds for thinking that the secular humanism they present is up to the task in providing an alternative, meaningful way of life without God. Moreover, according to Kitcher, the case for secular humanism is bolstered when we take seriously the diversity that afflicts, and ultimately undermines, religious worldviews. While Dworkin's position has been described as *religious atheism*, in this paper I use "secular humanism" to describe their shared position.

In what follows, I offer an overview of the secular humanism defended by Dworkin and Kitcher. After reviewing their positive case for secular humanism, a second section brings to light what I believe to be some of its serious limitations in matching and fulfilling important functions offered by theistic tradition. In that section, my focus is on questions of meaning and value, rather than evidence. That is, I raise questions about which of the two worldviews offers a more satisfying, desirable outcome for the persons and things we love. In assessing the thesis advanced by Dworkin and Kitcher that secular humanism can offer a deep, perhaps equally or more satisfying approach to meaning and values, we will need (for the sake of argument) to temporarily suspend matters of evidence about the truth of theism and atheism in order to focus on meaning and value. Presumably, all interested parties are first and foremost committed to adopting the worldview that is more reasonable (or evident) than its alternatives. So, if someone is committed to the absolutely certain truth of atheism, no appeal to the meaningfulness of a theistic worldview will be of great interest, and, conversely, if someone is committed to the absolute certain truth of theism, the appeal to the meaningfulness of a secular life will not be of great concern (unless one of the reasons for theistic belief is the thesis that life without theism is meaningless). My ideal reader is one who is prepared in the second section to be open, in principle, to the truth of either theism or the atheistic secularism of Dworkin and Kitcher, and to engage in an inquiry into the implications of either in terms of meaning and value. A third section will address matters of evidence. Kitcher appeals to religious diversity in order to argue for the supremacy of secular humanism over and against theism. I present his position and offer reasons why I believe his line of reasoning either leaves theism still standing or undermines the very justification that Kitcher makes for secular humanism in general, as well as undermining his justification for his own more specific philosophical convictions (what Kitcher calls *pragmatic naturalism*). In some final observations, I suggest how a further philosophical exchange between secular humanists and theists might be fruitful.

Before getting underway, I believe that a modest preface is appropriate on the form of theism that both philosophers reject. Before being able to appreciate Dworkin's and Kitcher's constructive philosophies of life without God, it seems appropriate to get a picture of *what it is that they are living without*. Both secularists use Christianity as their foil, though their secularism would rule out other religious conceptions of a divine higher power worthy of worship (and so on). If I am right that Christian theism has resources in terms of meaning and value missing in secular humanism, then this would provide some reason for thinking that non-Christian concepts of the divine and religion that surpass or at least have equal meaning and value as Christian theism have greater worth than Dworkin and Kitcher estimate.

*The modest preface:* I briefly sketch here a form of Christian Platonic theism in order to have a referent for "God" when considering (to use the title of Dworkin's book) religion without God. There are innumerable forms of theism in the literature today. The form of theism that I embrace, and would like to put on exhibit for this project, is rooted in the New Testament and then flows through the long

Platonic Christian tradition that includes Clement, Origen, Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas, and the Cambridge Platonists. It is represented today by theists who are identified as Anselmians or advocates of Perfect Being Theology (R.M. Adams, Linda Zagzebski, Lynne Baker, Robert Audi, and so on) (see [1]). Neither Dworkin nor Kitcher refer to such thinkers and Platonic theism, though there may be some veiled allusion to a Platonic view of God insofar as Dworkin identifies God as pictured in the Sistine Chapel as a God he rejects (Michelangelo's famous mural is influenced by Neoplatonism). Kitcher identifies some of his key interlocutors as advocates of "refined religion" which includes, essentially, Christian theists (and those like them) who are not fundamentalists and who seek to frame their religious views in light of science (as the Cambridge Platonists did in the 16th century in the age of Newton).

In this tradition, God is understood to be the unsurpassable, excellent creator and sustainer of the cosmos<sup>1</sup>, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, necessarily existing, eternal or everlasting, without beginning or end in time. God is further understood to be Triune, consisting of three divine persons in co-inherent, perfect love, exemplifying the three great loves (self-love, love of another, and love of two for a third). God has been and is revealed through ordinary reflection on the nature of the cosmos in general, which has been and is refined through philosophical reflection and through experiences that philosophers have appealed to in theistic arguments from religious experience. Central to the Christian tradition is the claim that God became incarnate as Jesus Christ and that through Jesus' life, teaching, passion, suffering, death, and resurrection, persons may be transformed and redeemed into a boundless life in relationship with other creatures and the God of limitless love. The Platonic Christian tradition contends that a life lived with God amounts to a high calling of seeking justice, compassionate action for the sake of the dispossessed, and a dedicated responsiveness to the values and disvalues of the world (that is, to use Platonic language, to promote the good, the true, and the beautiful and to redeem, confront, salvage, or rescue those who oppose the good, the true, and the beautiful). This tradition holds that each created person matters so much that the God of incalculable love acts now and will act so that physical death is not the annihilation of persons but an occasion of transformation in which there may be an inexhaustibly enhanced afterlife where there will be a triumph of both justice and mercy.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Life without God

Dworkin begins his book *Religion without God* with the following claim:

The theme of this book is that religion is deeper than God. Religion is a deep, distinct, and comprehensive worldview: it holds that inherent, objective value permeates everything, that the universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring, that human life has purpose and the universe order. A belief in a god is only one possible manifestation or consequence of that deeper worldview. ([2], p. 1).

<sup>1</sup> This would also include our cosmos and any other actual contingently existing things in "alternative worlds" if one is sympathetic to that vernacular.

<sup>2</sup> As noted by an anonymous reviewer, there are strands of Christian tradition influenced by Plato that can be "radically world-denying". The Platonic Christian tradition I am representing here (and believe to be true) is one among many that may claim to be influenced by Plato.

What Dworkin seems to be doing is carving out a place for religion as a practice or phenomenon that can be regarded as the recognition of certain goods (purpose, meaning, awesomeness) that is not dependent or logically or conceptually tied in with the existence or non-existence of God. He seems to be claiming that the really important matter for us is whether there are inherent, objective values. On this point, he thinks that the conflict between atheists and theists is not as important as what can and should unite them: a commitment to values.

The religious attitude accepts the full, independent reality of value. It accepts the objective truth of two central judgments about value. The first holds that human life has objective meaning or importance. Each person has an innate and inescapable responsibility to try to make his life a successful one: that means living well, accepting ethical responsibilities to oneself as well as moral responsibilities to others, not just if we happen to think this important but because it is in itself important whether we think so or not. The second holds that what we call “nature”—the universe as a whole and in all its parts—is not just a matter of fact but is itself sublime: something of intrinsic value and wonder. ([2], p. 10).

Dworkin seeks an alliance between a religious life with God and a religious life without God. This involves his argument that the existence (or non-existence) of God is of secondary importance to what his religions without God offer.

Dworkin’s description of the role of god or gods or God (Dworkin uses all three terms, written in lower and upper case) is hardly flattering: “Of course, gods have served many human purposes: they have promised an afterlife, explained storms, and taken sides against enemies” ([2], p. 1). There are not many theists who would see God as important only because of an afterlife, meteorology, and military campaigns (as should be evident in the modest preface above). We will consider more on what the existence of God might mean in the second section of this paper. For now, it is important to appreciate Dworkin’s claim that the primary affirmation of objective values is deeper than questions about the truth or falsehood of theism.

In the following passage, Dworkin addresses the importance of values as something of absolute, foundational significance in religion. It involves, in his view, a faith that is at work in both religion as well as in science and mathematics.

The religious attitude rests finally on faith. I said that mainly to point out that science and mathematics are, in the same way, matters of faith as well. In each domain we accept felt, inescapable conviction rather than the benediction of some independent means of verification as the final arbiter of what we are entitled responsibly to believe. This kind of faith is not just passive acceptance of the conceptual truth that we cannot justify our science or our logic or our values without appealing to science or logic or value. It is a positive affirmation of the reality of these worlds and of our confidence that though each of our judgments may be wrong, we are entitled to think them right if we have reflected on them responsibly enough. ([2], pp. 18–19).

Over against this rock bottom faith, God’s existence seems of secondary importance.

I do not argue in this book against the science of the traditional Abrahamic religions. I do not argue that there is no personal god who made the heavens and loves its creatures. I claim only that such a god's existence cannot in itself make a difference to the truth of any religious values. ([2], p. 25).

Near the end of his book, *Religion without God*, Dworkin makes his case for living life well with the focus on immanent or immediate values without seeking some transcendent, good reference point as one gets in theistic religion. He writes of the importance of art and creativity and then addresses a critic:

Does all that strike you as silly? Just sentimental? When you do something smaller well—play a tune or a part or a hand, throw a curve or a compliment, make a chair or a sonnet or love—your satisfaction is complete in itself. Those are achievements within life. Why can't a life also be an achievement complete in itself, with its own value in the art in living it displays? ([2], p. 158).

It is hard not to see Dworkin's affirmation of the goods within life as immanently sensible and worthy of our deepest concerns.

Turning to Kitcher, he also focuses on the immanent goods within life shorn of any transcendent, purposive God. Like Dworkin, Kitcher recognizes the religious affirmation of objective values: "At the core of religion, then, is not a body of doctrine, a collection of descriptions of the transcendent, but a commitment to values that are external to (independent of) the believer, and indeed to all human beings" ([3], p. 64). In *Life after Faith*, Kitcher seems unvexed by not having a more solid, metaphysical foundation for ethics (and ethical objectivity) other than affirming that ethical standards have evolved over time in order to promote harmony among persons and to adjudicate conflicts. His pragmatic form of ethics seems to incorporate what might be called common sense and respect. "Secularists can thus rehabilitate a notion of ethical truth. They can defend a set of core ethical truths, rough generalizations corresponding to the good advice learned at parental knees" ([3], p. 45). Kitcher's positive case for values is not sufficiently worked out (in my view) to critically assess, but his view on the sufficient value of a life that is lived in terms of immanent goods is enough to draw on here and then assess (along with Dworkin's secular humanism) in the next section. Kitcher locates the meaning of life in terms of personal relationships: "Mattering to others is what counts in conferring meaning" ([3], p. 101). Kitcher fully allows that the finitude of life, the unavoidability of death from a secular point of view, creates a deep cause for distress and despair. However, he believes that this despair can and should be muted as we reflect on the ultimately unsatisfactory alternative of life after death and as we take up the long view of history. So, Kitcher offers the following response when contemplating with genuine grief about how he feels about his own death. Does he lament that, at his death, we will be absent from the lives of those who matter to him now?

I do. As I imagine the world in the years immediately following my death, I feel a more intense regret about not being part of it than when I project forward a century, or even half a century. Increasing the time interval diminishes my sadness—it fades relatively swiftly to indifference. Not because I'm envious of those who live happily and actively into extreme old age. I don't even yearn for the longevity advances in medicine may someday achieve

for future generations. Absence from the period just after my death is poignant because so much of the stuff of my life will be continued in it. Whenever I die, people about whom I care most deeply will live on, and I should like to be there, sustaining them and being sustained by them. Endeavors to which I have committed my energies will remain unfinished. Loose ends will be left, and I should like to tie them up—while knowing that ends are always beginnings and strands will inevitably dangle. By contrast, the connections with the more distant future are dim, and I cannot even be confident of the large contours of the remote world from which I shall be excluded. Were I to survive into that world, there would be a continuously evolving set of relationships and activities that would give me a stake in it, but lacking any experience of the development of my life, the concerns I would come to have are not vivid for me. So, as I look forward sufficiently far, regret declines into indifference. ([3], p. 98).

Kitcher offers an intriguing diagnosis of the state of those who wish for life beyond life: they wind up entertaining and possibly even hoping that human persons might become non-human.

We cannot, I think, fully imagine what it would be like to be the kind of being for which immortality was a condition for joy. If my diagnosis is correct, distress at the prospect of not being is founded in confusion. For absence from any part of the future is only terrible because something has been felt to be lost. If extended sufficiently far, the threat of termination—indeed, cessation would ultimately appear as a blessing. What lies behind the sense of horror at not being is regret at being human. To my humanist sensibility that species of regret appears one we should try to overcome—just as we should seek to accept, even enjoy, the arc of aging. Our real problem is posed by the prospect of a removal from a web of connections that matter deeply to us. ([3], p. 100).

### 3. Life with God

Let us return to Dworkin's depiction of religion and his philosophy of God. Presumably there is nothing that any sane, sensitive person would protest about relishing the value of (to use his examples) being creative, making art, playing a tune well, writing sonnets, making chairs, making love, and so on. Nor is there anything objectionable (in my view) of Dworkin's valuing the beauty of the cosmos and independent (that is, objective) values. The deep question that arises is whether someone who has the values that Dworkin embraces would share his views about the comparative insignificance of the reality of God. If we compare Platonic theism and Dworkin's atheism on the assumption that either might (for all we know) be true, we face a problem. If theism is true, then its truth is relevant to everything Dworkin values. Given such a theistic framework, if God did not exist (which for theists is impossible, given that God's existence is necessary) there would be no persons or any living thing to feel awe, no created objects of beauty, no opportunities to make love or chairs or write sonnets or practice philosophy. Given theism, God is the *sine qua non* of the cosmos itself. Moreover, given the sketch of Platonic theism in the preface, the existence of a God of the true, the good, and the beautiful—all that Dworkin values—is a reflection of the creativity of this supreme, superabundant, loving God. That is, the goodness of what Dworkin values is one of the reasons why the cosmos is

sustained by God and why God calls persons to fulfillment and to confront and seek the redemption of those who seek to destroy the values Dworkin identifies. Dworkin's effort to separate the existence of God from recognizing objective values seems to liken God to a fellow creature who might be found uninteresting by created persons, rather than taking seriously the Platonic tradition in which the realm of objective values is a constitutive part of the divine nature. Once one enters into a comparison of secular humanism with Anselmian or Perfect Being theism (without presupposing the evidential superiority of either), one sees that the division Dworkin is looking for is not available.

Consider now, more specifically, Dworkin's effort to confront death from a secular point of view in contrast to the affirmation of life one finds in Christian Platonic tradition. After Dworkin enumerates the kinds of goods that make life an achievement, he writes:

If we do crave that kind of achievement, as I believe we should, then we could treat it [the achievement of a meaningful life] as a kind of immortality. We face death believing that we have made something good in response to the greatest challenge a mortal faces. That may not be good enough for you: it may not soften even a bit the fear we face. But it is the only kind of immortality we can imagine: at least the only kind we have any business wanting. ([2], p. 159).

In response, it should be conceded that if the hope of life beyond life is incoherent (*viz.* it is not merely unimaginable but it may be seen to be unintelligible), we should embrace something like Dworkin's and Kitcher's position. In the next section, I address Kitcher's one argument against theism, but for now, I suggest that if you are at least open to the possibility of a life of continuous loving and growing (with all the goods Dworkin identifies), I do not see how one might conclude *that this would be something one would desire to terminate*. The point I am proposing here needs to be carefully placed: I am not asking about whether Dworkin or we might desire the termination of anyone's life. Given that we believe we will all perish when we die, and there is no possibility of any alternative, this simply needs to be faced up to. However, consider the matter from the point of view of entertaining two worldviews, which (for the sake of argument) let us assume are epistemically possible: one is the secular worldview of Dworkin and Kitcher, the other is the Christian Platonic position in which death is not the annihilation of individual persons. Two worldviews may be said to be epistemically possible for a person if she is justified (warranted or she has intellectual integrity) in believing one or the other. In comparing the worldviews, let us advance a question in the second or third person rather than the first person: imagine you love a single person or a group of people whom we might call Eric and Miriam. They are creative, caring, loving persons who delight in what they think is the love of persons and God. In contemplating them, is it possible for you, out of love, to desire that secularism is true (with the result that their lives will have an absolute, irreversible terminus) rather than the Platonic Christian alternative? Let us revise Dworkin's remark about whether a finite life of achievement "may not be good enough for you" and ask this: if one is truly to guide one's judgment in terms of what is good, should one crave (desire, hope for) the truth of a world view in which Eric's and Miriam's lives cease to be or an alternative worldview in which they do not? In further considering such matters, let us return to Kitcher.

If Kitcher were right that relationships matter, would a relationship with God as understood in Platonic Christianity not itself be a source of unfathomable delight? Let us re-consider Kitcher's thought experiment in which his sense of sadness diminishes the longer he imagines life continuing 50

or 100 years after his death by putting it in a second- or third-person point of view. Again, imagine you deeply love Eric and Miriam and you think it is possible for them to flourish for 50 or 100 years (with no diminishment of the quality of their lives). Is it not clear that there would be something unloving or odd or even churlish if you hoped they only lived for 50 years? Now imagine you are contemplating two worldviews, one in which Eric and Miriam are annihilated at 50 or 100 years and one in which they live on with greater and more exquisite varieties of goods. I suggest that a person who truly loved them would want the second. Kitcher writes that he would be less and less sad as he contemplates life continuing after his death because he would (or does) relate less and less to future people. He feels less sad as he realizes that he personally has less at stake in what happens; his concern for what happens becomes less vivid for him the more distant in the future he thinks about people. This point is well taken, but when put in the third person it seems profoundly disturbing. Again, please note that the direction of my thesis concerns which worldview offers more in terms of meaning and what we would hope for when it comes to those we love. Given that it is evident that death is absolute and brings about the irreversible loss of the individual, to hope things were otherwise would seem to amount to pointless wish fulfillment. Moreover, there might be something odd for a person who believes with certainty that mortality involves annihilation to love such an (ostensible) fact. However, if one genuinely is uncertain about the truth about death, matters change, or so I propose.

Let us return to Kitcher's worry that desiring unbounded life for persons would involve the horror of wishing that persons ceased being human. That suggestion seems to involve using the concept of being human in a way that goes against the practice of billions of people today and in the past. Presumably, those who believe that human persons survive death (by the grace of God, for example) also believe that such a future is part of what it is to be human. Perhaps Kitcher is getting at a slightly different point to the effect that, if there is an afterlife for human persons, this would be a life without their humanity (e.g., being post-mortem would amount to being post-human). Imagine our humanity is a stage in an extended life like the stage of a caterpillar that evolves into something better, like the stage of a butterfly. Speaking personally, I am not sure this would be so very horrifying (it might be quite wonderful to be transformed into a griffin), but it may also be observed that billions of people who believe in an afterlife for human persons believe in the resurrection of the body. Presumably, this is belief in the resurrection of a human body.

#### **4. Reasons for Living without Belief in God**

Let us now consider Kitcher's case against religious belief and thus his reason for adopting secular humanism. He offers the following account of religion: "Religions are distinguished by their invocation of something beyond the mundane physical world, some 'transcendent' realm, and they offer claims about this 'transcendent'" ([3], p. 2). Religious believers are contrasted with secularists who allow for only the physical world. "The core of secularist doubt is skepticism about anything 'transcendent'" ([3], p. 6). Kitcher proposes that religious views of the transcendent contain incompatible diverse elements, not all of which can be true.

The bases of belief are remarkably similar across the entire array of religious traditions...Often the faithful are born into a religious tradition whose lore they absorb in early childhood and continue to accept throughout their lives; sometimes, when the

surrounding society contains adherents of a different doctrine, acquaintance with a rival religion prompts conversion, and a shift of allegiance. In either case, however, religious believers rely on a tradition they take to have carefully preserved insights once vouchsafed to privileged witnesses in a remote past. Because that pattern is so prevalent in undergirding religious beliefs of the present, it is very hard to declare that one of the traditions has a special status, or even that a manageable few have transmitted truth about the transcendent. The beliefs of each tradition stand on much the same footing: complete symmetry prevails. ([3], pp. 7–8).

The argument, then, seems to include the following cluster of interrelated claims:

- Religious claims about the transcendent emerge and are justified by religious education, the testimony of witnesses.
- This educational base gives rise to and purportedly justifies conflicting incompatible claims from different groups about the transcendent, not all of which can be true. There is, in other words, a symmetrical form of justification for incompatible truth-claims.
- No one belief about the transcendent has any more justification than another.
- None of them are justified and, in fact, all of them warrant skepticism, especially compared with a secular worldview which limits itself to the recognition of “the mundane physical world.”
- One should only believe in “the mundane physical world.”

Let us begin by looking at the concept of *the mundane physical world*, as featured in what I have noted as 4 and 5. In the history of ideas and culture, is there a stable, long-standing concept of the mundane physical world that can be used as part of a critique in arguing against the plausibility of there being something that is not part of the mundane physical world? I doubt that there is any such concept. Some philosophers have argued for the incoherence of there being a non-physical or incorporeal Creator, but these arguments are either question-begging or they assume a highly controversial or implausible account of what is physical (as I have argued elsewhere, e.g., [4]). However, quite apart from the philosophy of theism, the history of philosophy, west and east, reveals profound disagreements about human and animal natures, the reliability and status of thought, reason, perception, memory, space, and time. The sheer diversity of philosophical positions on what Kitcher refers to as the physical world in the so-called Eastern tradition is breathtaking.<sup>3</sup> In the west, there is a massive spread of views in which philosophers have differed about what counts as physical and where (in terms of ontology and metaphysics) to place consciousness, experience, perception, thought, agency, purposes, values, and so on.

Arguably, contemporary physics has made it even harder for self-described materialists or physicalists to suppose their concept of matter or the physical is stable (e.g., [5]). How do mathematical reasoning, numbers, or the laws of logic fit in with the mundane physical world? It is even puzzling to determine what kind of thing the idea “*the mundane physical world*” is. Is it a thing that has weight, color, electric charge, spin, taste, smell? These are matters that require philosophical

---

<sup>3</sup> To draw on examples from Asian philosophical treatments of ourselves and the world around us, consider the hundred schools of pre-imperial China, the skepticism of Zhuangzi, the work of Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu, Dong Zhongshu, Ge Hong, Xuanzang and Chinese Buddhism, Shankara, *et al.*

engagement and do not admit of resolutions in the tradition of Samuel Johnson kicking stones as a way to show that Berkeleyan idealism is on a poor footing. As Bertrand Russell observed about 20th century physics: “Matter has become as ghostly as anything in a spiritual séance” ([6], p. 78). Noam Chomsky’s position seems to reflect a widespread, current position: “The notion of ‘physical world’ is open and evolving” ([7], p. 5). On this point, then, I suggest Kitcher’s structural analysis of comparing belief in the transcendent *versus* a problem-free concept of the mundane physical world is unacceptable. In what follows, then, I will focus on two types of belief: theism (the main target of Kitcher’s and Dworkin’s work) *versus* a secular philosophical worldview.

Is the belief in theism bolstered by the same level of evidence as non-theistic beliefs, both in terms of culture at large as well as among philosophers? Are those of us who are theists—in and outside the history of philosophy and the communities which practice philosophy today—justified in our belief in theism only because, as Kitcher purports, we were trained to have such a belief, a belief backed up by witnesses we “take to have carefully preserved insights once vouchsafed to privileged witnesses in a remote past”? It strikes me as highly unlikely that the robustness of theism would not also include appeals to the apparent purposive nature of the world, its contingency, the felt experiential sense of the divine not simply in the remote past but in the *present*. The field of natural theology (which is undergoing a revival) has sought to articulate in formal terms the common sense or at least widely held convictions that a cosmos with such order as ours and that has given rise to conscious, moral agents is better accounted for in theistic teleological terms than in terms of chance, necessity, or any number of non-teleological accounts (see e.g., [8,9]). I suggest that in order for Kitcher to be justified in believing that theism is no more supported evidentially than any other non-theistic belief, he needs to do more than propose (without, as far as I can see, any argument at all) that the evidence for theism is on a par with non-theistic alternative views of what he calls the transcendent. Also, he needs to offer some reason for thinking that his form of secularism is in some way better backed evidentially than theism or any number of alternative secular philosophical positions.

So, in terms of his own position—pragmatic naturalism—do we have reason to think that the justification for Kitcher adopting pragmatic naturalism is any better than the justification for the vast number of philosophers today and historically who are either explicitly in opposition to pragmatic naturalism or who adopt some incompatible alternative? To appreciate the problem Kitcher faces, it is not essential for us to engage in a lengthy exposition and examination of what is involved in pragmatic naturalism and why he accepts it. All that needs to be pointed out is that his position is a minority one that many of us reject. He might have adopted any number of other minority positions such as phenomenistic idealism or logical positivism or analytic behaviorism or Kantian transcendental idealism. The point is that he adopts a position of which there are multiple alternatives that appear to many to be less well-supported than some alternative. His evidential base for his pragmatic naturalism might actually include an appeal to past philosophers whom some believe to “have carefully preserved insights once vouchsafed to privileged witnesses in a remote past,” e.g., John Dewey and his students in the first half of the last century. However, I think it safe for us to assume that without reading all of Kitcher’s work and examining all his reasons, the reasons are probably no more or less recognized as plausible than contemporary defenders of the theistic cosmological argument (see [10]).

Kitcher is dismissive of there being *any* evidence for theism: “Unless ‘evidence’ is to be used in a radically new (and unspecified) sense, there is no present evidence for the transcendent” ([3], p. 22).

We are not given any reason to think he has seriously considered contemporary versions of any theistic arguments (his formal work in philosophy has not included philosophy of religion), so it is far from obvious how much confidence we should have in Kitcher's claim. Consider, for example, the extant and articulate versions of theistic arguments today: defenders of the cosmological argument include D. Braine, W. Craig, S.T. Davis, G. Grisez, J.J. Haldane, H. Meynell, B. Miller, R. Purtill, B. Reichenbach, W. Rowe, and R. Taylor; defenders of theistic arguments from religious experience include W. Alston, C. Frank, J. Gellman, G. Gutting, R. Swinburne, W. Wainwright, and K. Yandell. Kitcher references none of this literature or the vast body of work on theistic arguments (see [1,11]).

I propose two points, then, in response to Kitcher's argument: first, as noted earlier, his concept of a problem-free idea of the mundane physical world is unacceptable, and second, his reasons for thinking theism is undermined (because, he says, alternative, incompatible worldviews have equally good justification) would themselves undermine his own philosophical commitments. Should Kitcher give up his pragmatic naturalism on the grounds that it appears that there are many persons who think his position is unwarranted and, in fact, wrong? Kitcher rejects *a priori* knowledge claims; for example, he thinks that mathematical knowledge is empirically based. Many of us think this is incoherent: the law of identity must be presupposed as true (and knowable *a priori*) for there to be any empirical claims. I suggest, however, that Kitcher is entitled to his position and its defense even in the face of powerful counter-points. Similarly, I think reasons for theism (or evidence) are substantial and justificatory even if Kitcher does not think so.

Admittedly, for all I know, Kitcher may be in possession of (unpublished) overwhelmingly powerful arguments for why pragmatic naturalism is far better justified than any alternative, including the alternative of agnosticism (the position of someone who claims not to know whether pragmatic naturalism is warranted)—arguments so powerful that all fair-minded, mature, well-informed, and unbiased philosophers who consider his arguments would not be able to justify rejecting them. However, in the absence of evidence of widespread conversions to his position by readers of his books (see, for example, reviews of *Life Beyond Faith*), it seems doubtful that Kitcher has a justification for his position that is radically more forceful than the justification of philosophers who consider his position and either reject it or do not accept it.<sup>4</sup>

## 5. Conclusion: Moving Forward

I suggest that one way to move forward in dialogue between theists and their secular counterparts is not to decry pluralistic views of the physical world or simple views of reality itself. Kitcher supposes that theists and secularists are on a profoundly different footing, but I suggest that the evidential landscape is not so lopsided. I further suggest that both theists and secularists and persons in general—all of us—rely on a foundational epistemic understanding of justification. I sketch this foundational principle and then offer a suggestion about charitable inquiry.

Let us consider in general terms the justification that is employed in the formation of theistic beliefs and the justifications employed in the formation of beliefs in the domain of philosophy, both theistic

---

<sup>4</sup> As a personal judgment, I think the extant defenses of theism in the philosophical literature seem to be far more impressive than the literature defending pragmatic naturalism.

and nontheistic. There are abundant, breathtakingly diverse accounts of the justification of our beliefs (internalism, externalism, different combinations of the two, *etc.*), but one basic, quite plausible, foundational form of justification is that *a person is justified in accepting some belief as true if it appears to the person that the belief is true*. This is sometimes defended under the title “the principle of credulity” or a principle of critical trust [12]. I will articulate a principle of critical trust, following Kai-man Kwan, in language that avoids explicit use of the terms “true” and “belief”: a person is justified in trusting that some state of affairs obtains if it appears to the person that it obtains and she is not aware of good reasons why the state of affairs does not obtain. The states of affairs can cover what may be considered matters of fact, philosophical methods, or values. The principle is deeper than more specific accounts of justification such as foundationalism, coherentism, and the panoply of other alternatives. To appreciate its being more basic than these other accounts, note how the principle would be at work in accounting for why someone would be a foundationalist or coherentist *et al.*; namely, it appears to them to be true. There will be other reasons to account for why someone would be a foundationalist, but I propose that all of these reasons would require the viability of the principle of critical trust.

Consider an objection to my proposal that the secularist and theist share a common epistemic principle. Kitcher observes:

In the uncharitable quip, faith is when you believe and yet know it ain't so. On a slightly more sympathetic reading, faith is belief that outruns the evidence available to the believer. According to some religious people, even if religious doctrines are held without compelling evidence, such belief is legitimate. ([3], p. 16).

On the uncharitable view of faith, it seems that the secular critic is attributing to “the believer” something completely incoherent. The believer would be supposedly be saying “P, but I do not believe P” or “You are a Canadian, but I do not believe it.” The incoherence of such a use is well-articulated by G.E. Moore and Max Black [13,14]. As for the “slightly” less hostile reading, many of us (presumably) have beliefs that are not backed by *compelling* evidence or reasons. I assume this is the case for Kitcher’s pragmatism. If the evidence were compelling, why would there not be more pragmatists like Kitcher? I suggest it would be (or is) virtually impossible for someone to believe P (the truth of theism or that pragmatism is a superior methodology) without it appearing to the person to be the case. Someone might assume P without believing it (e.g., “for the sake of argument”) but belief and appearing (and thus seemingly evident) to a person seem inseparable [15].

If we grant that all of us need to rely on a principle of critical trust, perhaps it is not too far afield to suggest that we engage each other with a trust that is critical. In this paper I have (I hope) taken seriously the claims of Dworkin and Kitcher and spelled out reasons why I think their projects are unsuccessful. But I have done so in a way (again, I hope) that I would like to be treated by my own critics. I have not in any way denigrated or not honored the great, important goods that Dworkin and Kitcher have identified. I have only proposed that these goods would be honored even more in the theistic framework that they propose ought to be replaced or rejected because of some inadequacies they find in that framework. I remarked at the outset about how the new secularists seem more open-minded and appreciative of the merits of religion than new atheists. It is because of Dworkin’s and Kitcher’s careful, appreciative look at theism, critical though it is, that many of us (theistic or not)

can take heart at a more respectful form of engagement than that currently offered in the new, often acrimonious atheistic literature.

### Acknowledgments

Thank you to Glenn Gordon, Alexander Quanbeck, and Samuel J Benson for their astounding work in proofreading and preparing this article for publication. I am especially grateful for the careful, critical comments of three anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this paper.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

### References

1. Charles Taliaferro. *Evidence and Faith: Philosophy and Religion since the Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
2. Ronald Dworkin. *Religion without God*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.
3. Philip Kitcher. *Life after Faith, The Case for Secular Humanism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.
4. Charles Taliaferro. *Consciousness and the Mind of God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
5. Fiona Ellis. *God, Value and Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
6. Bertrand Russell. *An Outline of Philosophy*. London: Routledge Press, 1927.
7. Noam Chomsky. *Rules and Representations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
8. William Lane Craig. *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*. Edited by J. P. Moreland. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
9. Russell R. Manning. *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
10. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. "Cosmological Arguments." Available online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmological-argument/> (accessed on 10 July 2015).
11. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. "Philosophy of Religion." Available online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/philosophy-religion/> (accessed on 10 July 2015).
12. Kai Man Kwam. *Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust and God*. London: Continuum, 2011.
13. G. E. Moore. "Imaginary Objects." supplementary, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 12 (1933): 55–70.
14. Max Black. "Saying and Disbelieving." *Analysis* 13 (1952): 25–33.
15. Richard Swinburne. *Faith and Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

© 2015 by the author; licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).