

SECULAR WORLDVIEWS: SCIENTISM AND SECULAR HUMANISM

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Abstract. In this essay, I maintain that although atheism, minimally construed, consists simply of the belief that there is no God or gods, atheists must embrace a secular worldview of one kind or another. Since they cannot be without a worldview, atheists must develop an alternative to the religious, especially the theistic, worldviews which they, by implication, reject. Further, I argue that there are, at the very least, two options available to atheists and that these should not be conflated or treated as one and the same. The two options that I explore and distinguish are scientism and secular humanism. I also maintain that the things that might count as good grounds for or against secular or religious worldviews are shaped significantly by whether atheists embrace scientism or secular humanism.

INTRODUCTION

I shall initially ask whether atheism is a worldview of its own (or a family of such worldviews), standing in contrast to religious worldviews such as Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam.¹ My answer will be that atheism is not a worldview *per se*, but that atheists still need to incorporate their atheistic stance within a secular worldview. In this study, I shall then move onwards and analyze atheism, regarding it as a part of a more as a fully-fledged construal of reality and of our lives. I shall explicate and analyze two such worldviews: scientism (or scientific naturalism) and secular humanism (or humanistic atheism) — not excluding that there are other possibilities.² Both of these are highly influential but distinct ways of developing a secular outlook on life. The former is well known among philosophers and scientists, the second much more common among secular people in general and among scholars in the social sciences and humanities. My purpose here is not so much to evaluate these alternative forms of atheism as to make explicit their respective core commitments and to point out that they face different challenges, and indeed constitute two distinct outlooks on life, which should not be conflated or treated as one and the same. I shall also suggest that the notion of worldview gives us an overarching framework within which both religious and non-religious outlooks on life can fit, and makes it possible for those of us who are philosophers of religion to identify features that we then might compare and analyze.

I. ATHEISM IS NOT NONE-ISM

In response to the question of what atheism is, one possible answer is to say that it is not a worldview, simply because it does not involve any belief at all. It provides no substitute for religion. Atheism, so understood, is what I shall call a form of *none-ism*. We could perhaps say that none-ism is the view that atheists are people who lack belief in God or gods. To take just one example, according to the organi-

¹ This paper was originally presented at conference in Moscow on May 23–24, 2019, on the nature and rationality of an atheist understanding of reality. I want to express my thanks to the organizers, Kirill Karpov and Georg Gasser, for inviting me to this conference.

² Olli-Pekka Vainio and Aku Visula identify four atheisms (“Varieties of Unbelief: A Taxonomy of Atheistic Positions”, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 57, no. 4 (2015), 483–500) and John Gray distinguishes between as many as seven in his book *Seven Types of Atheism* (Allen Lane, 2018).

zation *American atheists*: “Atheism is not an affirmative belief that there is no god, nor does it answer any other question about what a person believes. It is simply a rejection of the assertion that there are gods. Atheism is too often incorrectly defined as a belief system. To be clear: atheism is not a disbelief in gods or a denial of gods; it is a lack of belief in gods.”³ If this is correct, atheism differs from a religious worldview in that the latter but not the former requires belief in something: religions require that their advocates hold some things to be true about reality. Atheists are, literally speaking, non-believers; not un-believers or dis-believers. Atheists lack belief rather than hold a belief.

The problem with this understanding of atheism is that it does not adequately distinguish between lack of belief and unbelief, and for this reason fails to distinguish atheism from *agnosticism*. The agnostic neither believes that God exists nor believes that God does not exist. (Some of them, of course, might claim to know that belief suspension either way is the only rational option for them.) So, if for the moment we restrict ourselves to the question of belief in God, then the theist believes that God exists, the atheist disbelieves that there is a God, and the agnostic neither believes nor disbelieves but withholds judgment. This mirrors the logical distinction between believing that p is true; disbelieving that p is true (i.e. believing that p is false); and not knowing what to believe about p .

It is sometimes objected, however, that agnosticism is merely a “weaker” version of being an atheist, so that ambiguity is acceptable. But this cannot be right, because it is quite possible to be a religious agnostic. *Religious agnostics*, of the sort I have in mind, do not believe with any confidence that God exists, nor do they believe with any confidence that God does not exist. They think that there are things that count against and things that count for the existence of God. Religious agnostics take the universe, as we understand it, to be ambiguous with respect to religious belief. They may think like Paul Draper, who says that he would not be terribly surprised if one day he meets his maker, but he also takes seriously the possibility that he has no maker; that nature is a closed system.⁴ Nevertheless, religious agnostics regard God’s existence as a real possibility, and this makes them behave differently from how they would if they were atheists or secular agnostics. They could pray, because, unlike atheists, they believe that there just might be a God listening. They could cultivate, or at least prepare for, a relationship with God. They might even want there to be a God and want there to be a life hereafter, so that those among us who have been very unfortunate in the lottery of life would have a chance to experience genuine joy and goodness. For these or similar reasons they might participate in religious practices such as those provided by Christianity or Islam.

If we then wish, as I think we should, to distinguish people who are atheists from those who are agnostic, we need to disregard none-ism as an adequate conception of atheism and see atheism as a rejection of belief in God or gods. *Atheism* is unbelief or disbelief in God or gods, not simply lack of belief in God or gods. Further, atheism is more than a denial of the existence of God, since it denies that there are gods in the natural order as well. However, despite this, atheism is primarily a rejection of monotheism (roughly, the belief that there is simply one God and no other gods, and that this God is the creator and sustainer of the world and everything in it; nowadays simply called “theism.”) Atheism in modern Western history arises as a response to and rejection of theism, mostly as embedded in Christianity, but by extension also in Judaism and Islam. I have offered only a minimal construal of atheism. It contains merely one ontological claim and says nothing about what else atheists believe about the nature of reality: their degree of certainty about the non-existence of God (or gods); what their grounds are for holding this to be the true state of affairs; and how they believe we should live our lives and think about their significance or meaningfulness.

3 <https://www.atheists.org/activism/resources/about-atheism/> (Accessed on April 25, 2019).

4 Paul Draper, “Seeking but not Believing: Confessions of a Practical Agnostic”, in *Divine Hiddenness* eds. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge Univ. Press 2002), 197–214. See also Gary Gutting, “Religious Agnosticism”, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 37 (2013), 51–67.

II. SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEWS

Even if we reject that atheism is equivalent to none-ism, it does not automatically follow that atheism, as unbelief, is itself a worldview. I think that there is more than one worldview option available to atheists. They can combine their negative belief (that there is no God or gods) with different positive beliefs about the nature of reality and our place in it. However, I do claim that we should not think that atheists could avoid, even if they might wish to, adopting — consciously or unconsciously — some or other of these belief options about reality. Atheists, like everyone else, in their ways of thinking, talking and acting, inescapably express a worldview of some kind.

Things depend of course on what we take a worldview (or a way of life) to be. I shall take a *worldview* to be the constellation of attitudes, beliefs, and values that people, whether consciously or unconsciously, hold and which constitute their understanding of (a) who they are, what the world is like and what their place in it is, (b) what they should do to live a good and meaningful life, and (c) what they can say, know and rationally believe about these things.⁵ Thereby, two of the three things that a worldview contains are, among others, our ontology — what we take to exist and how these things relate to one another and what properties they have; and our epistemology — what we can know and rationally believe about these things, properties and relations. The third requisite is that a worldview encompasses our ethical or moral stance — the value commitments we express in thought and action. More precisely, a worldview contains those parts of our ontology, epistemology and ethics that are of central importance for how we understand our lives and live them. A worldview is life orienting: it is a way of living in the world. A worldview has, as I have argued elsewhere, a regulative as well as a theoretical function.⁶ Now, if atheism involves merely disbelief in God or gods, then atheism is not itself a worldview, even though it could be a part of a worldview. That is, it could be an element in *all* those worldviews which deny the existence of God and of gods.

Hence, the notion of worldview gives us an overarching framework into which both religious and non-religious outlooks on life can fit, and identifies features that we might compare and analyze. Moreover, it suggests a shift that philosophy of religion might make from merely studying certain features of religions, to studying these features of worldviews more generally.

Sociologists frequently call people who do not consider themselves religious “religious nones,” and talk about “nonreligion” in contrast to religion.⁷ I think we should resist the terminology of religious nones, at least if it is taken to be a synonym for non-believers, because it is not as if such people totally lack life-orienting beliefs.⁸ It is rather that the things they hold or presuppose as true are things other than or different from those things that religious people hold as true in their lives. Non-believers embrace what I shall call a “secular worldview” or are — consciously or unconsciously — searching for secular alternatives to traditional religions. As Charles Taylor phrases it, they try to develop immanent construals of human flourishing.⁹ Being secular in this sense is not just a matter of being without religion but also a matter of being with something else. Moreover, I suggest that we call individuals who seek, in a non-religious way, to understand the world and our place in it “secular people,” and we thereby have a suitably balanced contrast to “religious people,” (not denying that there are many borderline cases).¹⁰ We can then also talk about secular beliefs or secular faith, secular rituals, secular festivals, and so on. How to specify the distinction is not easy, but we could say roughly that:

5 Mikael Stenmark, “Worldview Studies”, *Religious Studies* 58 (2022), 565.

6 Mikael Stenmark, *Rationality in Science, Religion and Everyday Life* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 242.

7 Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, “Becoming a Religious None: Irreligious Socialization and Disaffiliation”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56 (2017): 64–82.

8 This qualifier is appropriate because sociologists frequently use the term “religious nones” to refer to people who are religiously unaffiliated, that is, individuals who have no membership or attachment to any particular religious tradition or institution(s).

9 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (The Belknap Press, 2007), 9.

10 Ninian Smart is, to my knowledge, one of the first scholars in the English-speaking world to distinguish between religious and secular worldviews and use the term “worldview analysis” to capture the study of religions and secular worldviews (Ninian Smart, *Worldviews* (Prentice Hall, 1995), xi, 2).

Religious worldviews affirm the existence of a transcendent, divine or sacred dimension of reality and its importance for how we understand and live our lives.

Secular worldviews deny the existence of a transcendent, divine or sacred dimension of reality, and affirm that reality has a different makeup and it is this structure that has importance for how we understand and live our lives.

There are clearly many borderline cases, such as religious naturalism¹¹ and the so called “new spirituality” (people who say that they are spiritual but not religious),¹² but the two examples I will explore in detail below are paradigmatic examples of secular worldviews.

Secular people can understand this alternative outlook on reality in different ways. Many reflective atheists today embrace a *naturalistic worldview*, that is, again roughly, the view that reality ultimately consists of matter or physical particles, and that neither the universe nor we exist for a reason. Furthermore, it is a subset of the range of religious worldviews that atheists primarily reject, namely a *theistic worldview*, which affirms that there is a God or an all-compassing divine mind who is the creator and sustainer of everything that exists (in nature) and that the highest good for human beings (or self-conscious creatures) is to be in a proper relation to this divine reality.

What then would a secular worldview look like? What are the core options available today for an atheist? (Notice that on my account, the idea of choosing a worldview does not presuppose that belief formation is voluntary. It merely assume that worldview beliefs or at least large groups of them are examples of beliefs that are indirectly voluntary, that is, beliefs that depend on an intermediate voluntary action or course of action, like assessing the evidence or voluntarily moving one’s body.) I shall, in what follows, distinguish between two options, *scientism* and *secular humanism*, and offer a rational reconstruct of the core content of each of these worldviews. However, I shall also suggest that we define naturalism in such a way that it will contain as core commitments no elements that advocates of scientism and secular humanists cannot *both* share. If we do this, and take naturalism to be the main alternative to theism, as is typically done in philosophy of religion, then the distinction between scientism and secular humanism is on the same conceptual level as, say, the one between Christian theism and Islamic theism. (This is not to deny that there are borderline cases such as religious naturalism.)

III. NATURALISM

Graham Oppy and N. N. Trakakis maintain that: “Many atheists have been concerned to develop alternative worldviews to the kind of worldviews that are presented in the world’s religions; and, in particular, many atheists have been concerned to develop naturalistic worldviews that leave no room for any kind of supernatural entities.”¹³ I think this is correct: a naturalistic worldview would certainly be the primary alternative for the majority of philosophers and scientists who are atheists. What then, more exactly, is naturalism?

The basic idea of this worldview is typically taken to be something along the following lines:

(N1) There is nothing beyond or beside nature or the natural order, and consequently everything that exists is a part of nature.

Nature is all there is and ever will be. Since God, according to theism, is the creator and sustainer of the natural order, (N1) entails the rejection of a theistic outlook on life. Naturalism entails atheism and hence is incompatible with agnosticism. (Secular agnostics might instead embrace what Lynne Rudder Baker

11 Mikael Stenmark, “Religious Naturalism and Its Rivals”, *Religious Studies* 49 (2013): 529–550.

12 Jeremiah Carey, “Spiritual but not Religious? On the Nature of Spirituality and Its relation to Religion”, *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* (2018) 83: 261–269.

13 “Late-Twentieth-Century Atheism”, in *Twentieth-Century Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Graham Oppy and N. N. Trakakis (Acumen 2009), 301.

calls *near-naturalism*, the outlook on life that is limited to natural reality and is quiet about anything transcendent or withholds judgment about whether there is anything beyond nature.)¹⁴

However, there might be gods immanent in the natural order, as well as ghosts, ancestor spirits, angels, disembodied souls, immortal souls or processes such as reincarnation, karma or channeling, and spiritual energy in physical objects. According to *animism* (a central feature of many ethnic or indigenous religions, and which could also be found in some forms of so-called New Age spirituality), there is a pervading life and will in nature. It contains the belief that natural objects other than humans have souls, or something along those lines. Animists believe everything to be both material and spiritual in nature, although they do not necessarily believe in God or gods. However, as Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, both naturalists, point out, “perhaps the most familiar definition [of naturalism] is in terms of the rejection of supernatural entities such as gods, demons, souls and ghosts,” including “the Judeo-Christian God and the immaterial soul.”¹⁵ All of these forms of being, properties and processes are no part of the naturalistic conception of nature (and not merely the God whom theists believe is the creator and sustainer of the natural order). Naturalists have, in other words, a restricted notion of nature or the natural order. We could say that they reject not merely theism, but also supernaturalism. Hence a second core claim is:

(N2) There is no God, no gods and no transcendent, divine or sacred dimension of reality.

Naturalists take core claim (N2) to entail a rejection of all religions. However, how they understand (N1) will — as we shall see — have consequences for whether they embrace scientism or secular humanism.

What else about a naturalistic worldview needs to be pointed out if we want to contrast it with a theistic worldview? A first element is sometimes called the *matter-first view* and is based on the scientific discoveries that life and consciousness developed late in evolutionary history. Life and consciousness developed out of non-organic materials, which constitute the fundamental elements of reality. If naturalism is correct, then the world, at bottom, is wholly impersonal. Hence a third core claim is:

(N3) Matter or physical particles lies at the root of everything, and consequently the world, at bottom, is wholly impersonal.

The understanding of reality expressed in (N3) goes beyond (N1) in that it says that ultimately nature consists of matter or physical particles in motion and that all that is non-material, such as consciousness, thought and purpose (if they do really exist), is a consequence of particles that are fundamentally impersonal and without intentionality or consciousness. This means that the ultimate explanation of reality must, as John Searle says, be given in terms of mindless, meaningless, unfree, non-rational, brute physical particles.¹⁶ Consequently, human behavior, just like the behavior of any other things in nature, must be, in the end, traceable back to material causes and effects.

Naturalists also believe that nature is self-organized. There are inherent tendencies in physical things, which over time cause more complex things to arise in natural history. In this way, non-life (pure matter) can generate life, unconscious life can generate conscious life and conscious life can generate self-conscious life, by means of natural selection or similar processes. These qualitative changes have taken place without the input of any power existing outside or beyond nature, for instance a God who has in some way directed and guided the evolution of life and matter. Moreover, nature or the universe is not in any way intended to exist and probably exists only by pure chance. So, there is no reason why the world happens to exist or why self-conscious life has arisen, and consequently no ultimate meaning. If we put these two ideas together, yet another core claim of naturalism would be:

14 Lynne Rudder Baker, “Naturalism and the Idea of Nature”, *Philosophy* 92 (2017), 348.

15 Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, “Introduction: The Nature of Naturalism”, in *Naturalism in Question*, edited by Mario De Caro and David Macarthur (Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), 2–3.

16 John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (The Free Press, 1995), 4–5.

(N4) Nature is self-organized and the existence of nature, its properties and their inherent tendencies to produce increased complexity over time is the result of purely unintended casual processes and natural laws that just happen to exist.

More could be said about naturalism in general, and some naturalists would prefer to express these core theses in slightly different ways. But this account gives us, I believe, a sufficient background against which we can explore the content of two different secular worldviews, scientism and secular humanism.

IV. SCIENTISM

The defining feature of scientism or scientific naturalism (strict naturalism or scientific atheism)¹⁷ is that it privileges science in all areas of life. Scientific naturalists maintain that secular people should rely on what science says about reality and then try to understand themselves, their life and society from that starting point. Science is the measure of all things. I take it that Jaegwon Kim expresses this view when he writes that “the core naturalistic doctrine seems to be something like this: scientific method is the only method for acquiring knowledge or reliable information in all spheres including philosophy.”¹⁸ So does Alex Rosenberg when he states: “Being scientific just means treating science as our exclusive guide to reality, to nature — both our own nature and everything else’s,”¹⁹ and likewise Richard Dawkins when he claims: “Science is the only way to understand the real world.”²⁰

An important thing to pay attention to, especially for those of us who come from non-English speaking parts of the world, is that “science” in this context refers more or less exclusively to the natural sciences: those such as physics, chemistry and biology. Hence, one core claim of scientism is something along the following lines:

(SN1) The only kind of genuine knowledge or understanding we can have is provided by science, and science also sets the standard for justified or rational belief.

Claim (SN1) expresses a kind of epistemic exclusivism: our beliefs are ultimately justifiable only by the methods of science.

In that advocates of scientism treat science as the measure of all things, they are thereby interpreting the core doctrine of (general) naturalism — that nature is all there is and ever will be — in one particular way. (Notice, however, that many of scientific naturalists do not acknowledge this distinction but take their view to be identical with naturalism.)

Why does a scientific naturalist such as Kim raise the question: “What is it about intentionality or consciousness or content that requires them to be naturalized? Why aren’t they perfectly naturalistic as they are?”²¹ It is arguable that people in general take it for granted that things like these are part of the furniture of the world. I think that the reason why these things are not “perfectly naturalistic as they are,” is that a defining feature of the worldview that these naturalists embrace is the pride of place that they grant science. By “nature,” they actually mean the space-time-causal system that is studied and discovered by science, and nothing more. As Wilfrid Sellars is famous for proclaiming: “Science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not.”²²

But this entails that (N1) is not precise enough to capture a core idea of scientism. What we need instead is something along the following lines:

(SN2) There is nothing beyond or beside scientific nature or the natural order discovered by the sciences, and consequently everything that exists is a part of scientific nature.

¹⁷ In this context, I shall treat these notions as more or less synonymous.

¹⁸ Jaegwon Kim, “The American Origins of Philosophical Naturalism”, *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 28 (2003), 87.

¹⁹ Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 8.

²⁰ Richard Dawkins, “Thoughts for the Millennium”, in *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia*, 2000.

²¹ Kim, “The American Origins of Philosophical Naturalism”, 85.

²² Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”, in *Science, Perception and Reality* (Routledge, 1963), 173.

“Natural” in the natural world means essentially the same as “natural” in the natural sciences. At bottom, reality is what the natural sciences say it is, and nothing more. Daniel Dennett, to take another example, summarizes his naturalistic stance by saying: “I declare my starting point to be the objective, materialist, third-person world of the physical sciences.”²³

Hence, the answer to the question of why the things, properties or relations that such words as “person,” “the self,” “intentionality,” “consciousness,” “agency,” “beliefs,” “reasons,” “responsibility,” and “values” refer to need to be naturalized — and this no matter how natural they are taken by people in general to be — is that these phenomena don’t line up neatly with any facts of the kind uncovered by science. They are difficult to locate in the third-person ontology of the sciences. Frank Jackson has called this the “location problem,” and Huw Price has dubbed it the “placement problem.”²⁴

Since science is taken to be the arbiter of all reality, or at least all knowable reality, scientific naturalists will adopt a *skeptical attitude* towards all those things and properties that people believe exist, but which cannot be discovered and measured by science. Science is, after all, our exclusive guide to reality. Thus, this attitude goes far beyond a skepticism against theism and the supernatural.

Although advocates of scientism share a skeptical attitude towards everything that is not a proper part of science, they do not all draw the same conclusions on what to think about the non-scientific. This is because scientific naturalists essentially have two options to consider when making an assessment about something that does not appear to be within the purview of science. They could either maintain that (a) the practice or phenomenon must be redescribed, reduced or transformed into science (the *naturalization* or *scientization strategy*); or alternatively they might maintain that (b) it must be explained away by science and treated as fiction, that is, it must either taken as helpful but illusory belief or else be abandoned completely (the *elimination strategy*). They could try to either “naturalize” or “scientize” a phenomenon, that is, turn it into science or, if that is not possible, reject it. But, scientific naturalists do not share common agreement on what should be located in the first category and what should be placed in the second.

Let me illustrate this way of reasoning with an example that is of significance to understanding the second form of secular worldview – secular humanism – which is available for atheists to embrace, and which I shall consider next. The humanities do not appear to be part of the sciences, so how should one, as an advocate of scientism, think about this set of academic disciplines and their outcomes? Do the humanities have a place in such a naturalistic world? Rosenberg would be an example of a scientific naturalist who opts for the elimination alternative. He maintains:

There is only one way to acquire knowledge, and science’s way is it. The research program this ‘ideology’ imposes has no room for purpose, for meaning, for value, or for stories. It cannot therefore accommodate the humanities as disciplines of inquiry, domains of knowledge. ... the humanities are a scientific dead end ... When it comes to real understanding, the humanities are nothing we have to take seriously, except as symptoms.²⁵

Values, meaning, purpose, love and beauty, as studied by the humanities, are illusions: they are not within the purview of science and therefore have to be ruled out.

Edward O. Wilson, on the other hand, would argue that the humanities could and should be transformed or naturalized. He wants to find ways to incorporate them into a naturalistic or, more exactly, a scientific worldview. Wilson maintains that the “only way to establish or to refute consilience [between the natural sciences and the humanities] is by the methods developed in the natural sciences ... [This idea’s] best support is no more than an extrapolation of the consistent past success of the natural sciences. Its surest test will be its effectiveness in the social sciences and humanities.”²⁶ Why would it be a problem

23 Daniel Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (MIT Press, 1987), 5.

24 Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 1–5; Huw Price, *Naturalism without Mirrors* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), 3–8.

25 Rosenberg, *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality*, 306–307.

26 Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 9.

if the natural sciences failed in undertaking this project? The answer given by the scientific naturalist is that otherwise there is a great risk that there is no real content to the humanities since reality is at bottom what science says it is and nothing more (or, at the least, that there is no knowledge or justified beliefs in the humanities, since our beliefs and our theories are justifiable only by the methods of the natural sciences).

Either way, a remarkable gap opens up between, on the one hand, the everyday life-world that many of us simply take for granted, including the humanities, and, on the other, the scientific worldview that atheists of this persuasion embrace.

This worries some naturalists, who are inclined to think that the world of persons, intentionality, agency, self-consciousness, social institutions, and morality is real and cannot be reduced to the world of the natural sciences; that we can know things about these phenomena, and that they matter for how we should understand and live our lives as secular people. Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, for instance, maintain that “all attempts to reduce, eliminate, or reconceive these concepts [such as intentionality, agency, freedom, meaning, reference, rationality, and personal identity] in terms of supposedly more scientifically legitimate notions do not just fail — they entirely miss the kind of importance that these notions have in our lives and experiences.”²⁷ These atheists want to develop a more liberal naturalistic worldview, or simply, *liberal naturalism*. Atheists such as these think that science is really important for the development of a secular way of life, but not quite as important as scientific naturalists believe it to be, since there are other forms of knowledge beside scientific knowledge (or at least forms of non-scientifically justified belief). De Caro and Macarthur still maintain that liberal naturalists are atheists since they reject theism and supernaturalism. So, their aim is to explore and develop a different secular worldview which still excludes a religious outlook on life.

The broad contours of the alternative ontology and epistemology of a liberal naturalistic worldview seem to be reasonably clear, namely:

- (LN1) Science gives us the best or most reliable form of knowledge or understanding we can have, and also sets the prime standard for justified belief.
- (LN2) The notion of nature must be extended beyond scientific nature in order to fully capture social reality, mental events and normative dimensions of human life (but not so far as to allow any supernatural elements, processes or agents into the natural order).

On this account, liberal naturalists still think that people should privilege science in developing a secular worldview. Perhaps we could say that they believe that a secular construal of human life and flourishing should be *guided by* but not necessarily, as scientific naturalists believe, *derived from* science.

Both scientific and liberal naturalists think that science is of utmost importance for the construal of a secular way of life. They think that the defining feature of naturalism is the pride of place that naturalism grants science. On this account, naturalism is best understood as the philosophical companion to science, and an interesting question is, of course, how far you can deviate from that companionship and still be a naturalist. When might an atheist be better described as a humanist than as a naturalist? My answer is that, at least within the philosophy of religion, we should always understand secular humanism as a form of naturalism in the minimal sense that secular humanists accept (N1) to (N4). If we do so, we can still contrast naturalism with theism, but — as I hope to show in the next section — we must pay much more attention to the fact that secular humanism is a different kind of secular worldview than is scientism.

²⁷ De Caro and Macarthur, “Introduction: The Nature of Naturalism”, 16–17.

V. SECULAR HUMANISM

The starting point of secular humanism is humanism rather than science or scientism. What is then humanism? Just like naturalism, it could mean several different things. I shall offer a rational reconstruction of it, in which the central ingredients are a particular view of human nature, certain core values, and an emphasis on the importance of the humanities and the social sciences. Other plausible understandings of humanism are of course possible. Scientism, as we have seen, is an outgrowth of the sciences, a philosophical add-on to science, with a secular twist. Secular humanism in contrast is a product of the humanities, a philosophical add-on to the humanities, again with a secular twist.

Let me first say some things about humanism in general, to serve as a background for my attempt to explicate what secular humanism might be. *Humanism* is a mode of thought and action in which human interests, values and dignity predominate. Humanists emphasize the value, dignity, agency and uniqueness of human beings and human life, and the essential product of that uniqueness, namely culture. It is here that the relationship between humanism and the humanities becomes evident: humanism takes for granted that the explanations and understandings given by the humanities and the social sciences tell us very much about human culture, whereas the explanations of the natural sciences tell us little or nothing essential about it. Humanists might not always say this explicitly, but it is reasonable to identify this as an implicit assumption, since they tend to pay almost no attention to the natural sciences in their scholarly work and instead are preoccupied with their own disciplinary theories and material.

What, for humanists, differentiates human beings from the rest of the animal world is that we are without a rigidly fixed form and consequently have the ability to make of ourselves what we will, or the potential to be molded by the social environment into many different forms in a much shorter timeframe than is necessary in the case of other animals. There is something exceptional about us, and to grasp this and what this uniqueness has produced, which is culture, we need methods and theories of a qualitatively different kind from those that the natural sciences can offer. Curtis White maintains that:

When hominids became capable of symbols (which is to say, when they became human), they entered upon a new kind of evolution, one that became ever more complex, more self-knowing, and more independent of biology. ... they hallucinated a “parallel” world because, strangely, they could better survive the real world if they first worked out the details symbolically. Eventually, the symbolic world discovered a kind of autonomy. It discovered its own concerns beyond the imperatives of biology and atoms (whatever it is that they want).²⁸

This symbolic world, this extra-material reality is the focal point of the humanities: “the scientist [*as* scientist] is insensible to the nuance of what-it’s-like to be human, while in art a harmonic shift, an unexpected rhythm, will seem to say so much and so convincingly.”²⁹

Roger Scruton embraces a similar view. He writes that we are able to see each other I-to-I, and from this all judgment, all responsibility, all shame, pride and fulfilment arise. We are *persons*, and personality is of our essence:

Hence there are concepts that play an organizing role in our experience but which belong to no scientific theory because they divide the world into the wrong kinds of kind ... the kind to which we fundamentally belong is defined through a concept that does not feature in the sciences of our nature. Science sees us as objects rather than subjects, and its descriptions of our responses are not descriptions of what we feel.³⁰

Persons are not describable impersonally. The subject, the person, is therefore in principle unobservable to science, for “if I look for it in the world of objects, I shall never find it. But without my nature as a

28 Curtis White, *The Science Delusion* (Melville House, 2013), 77–78, 79–80.

29 White, *The Science Delusion*, 185.

30 Roger Scruton, “Scientism and the Humanities”, in *Scientism: The New Orthodoxy*, edited by Richard N. Williams and Daniel N. Robinson (Bloomsbury, 2015), 138. Notice that I am here exemplifying with Scruton’s view of persons but not thereby maintaining that all humanists would explicate the notion of personhood in exactly this way.

subject nothing for me is real. If I am to care for my world, then I must first care for this thing, without which I have no world — the perspective from which my world is seen.”³¹

Human dignity and *freedom* are also of prime importance for humanists. The humanistic stance affirms that human beings possess a special value intrinsic to their humanity, and as such are worthy of respect simply because they are human beings. Human beings are persons, born free and equal in dignity and rights. Humanism focuses on the centrality of humanity and human persons’ unique status among beings in general. Humanists are for this reason suspicious of all attempts to reduce human beings to physical things or to instruments of a divine will, in order to protect human agency and dignity.³² Core humanistic values are thus freedom, liberty and equality. Humanists typically look to the future in hope, believing that human beings, if working together, can build a better — a more humane — world. There is a progressive element to humanism. Stephen Law, in his short introduction to humanism (which he takes to be identical with secular humanism), maintains that: “humanism involves a commitment to the existence and importance of moral value.”³³ I think that this is true, but it is more substantial than that, since humanists affirm the particular values that the idea of human dignity and freedom implies.

What all of this seems to boil down to is that the basic notion held by humanists — in contrast to scientific naturalists — is not nature but *culture*, they strongly emphasize human uniqueness and dignity and the moral values that flow from this commitment, and the importance of an I-to-I or a person-to-person perspective on other humans. So, roughly, we could say that the core ideas of humanism are as follows.

- (H1) Human experiences, intentions and actions should be prioritized over and against the behavior of objects or physical particles.
- (H2) Humans are creatures characterized by freedom, autonomy and dignity, and accordingly all humans possess the same intrinsic worth and the same liberties. (*The doctrine of human dignity and freedom.*)
- (H3) Culture goes beyond nature and is of a different kind, and therefore its central features are not detectable by science.
- (H4) The humanities offer us a different kind of knowledge or understanding than do the sciences (that is, interpersonal knowledge), a knowledge that might even be more important than what the sciences provide us with (that is, thing or third-person knowledge), since this knowledge arises from our unique capacity of seeing each other I-to-I, as persons and not as objects.

Claim (H4), which is a form of epistemic pluralism, entails a rejection of both epistemic exclusivism (SN1) and epistemic privilegism (LN1). Humanism, we could say, expresses a view of life that is *consistent* with science but not *guided* by science (as in liberal naturalism) or *derived* from science (as in scientism). Instead, it is guided by a belief in human freedom, autonomy and dignity, and by the priority of culture over nature in our understanding of human life and its significance.

This consistency-with-science thesis is a part of humanism, but we need to take into account that it comes with an important qualifier, namely: *granted* that science stays within its proper domain of inquiry. Humanists reject scientism or scientific naturalism. To give one example of this skeptical attitude, Leon Wieseltier maintains: “The question of the place of science in knowledge, and in society, and in life, is not a scientific question. Science confers no special authority, it confers no authority at all, for the attempt to answer a nonscientific question. ... Nor does science confer any license to extend its categories

31 Scruton, “Scientism and the Humanities”, 137–38

32 I am not saying that the affirmation of human dignity and freedom entails that humanists must affirm that humans have libertarian freedom. Some of them certainly embrace that view but others are compatibilists; however, most of them have presumably not thought much about the issue at all. The idea is merely that it is something special about humans and this make them unique, so that we, for instance, can genuinely talk about human actions and not merely human behavior.

33 Stephen Law, *Humanism* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2011).

and its methods beyond its own realms, whose contours are of course a matter of debate.”³⁴ But “now science wants to invade the liberal arts.” His response is: “Don’t let it happen.” We should reject scientism, and its “crimes against the humanities.”

Hence, humanists, in contrast to advocates of scientism, can and frequently do question the results of science when it comes to claims about society and culture (but not nature). So, for instance, Thomas Hylland Eriksen writes that evolutionary theory is, of course, accepted today by virtually all social scientists and scholars in the humanities, including himself as a social anthropologist. Still, he maintains, that there are many who:

feel a deep sense of unease about Darwinism. I dare to say that this not merely depends on that it is misunderstood, that it is hard to reconcile oneself with its ruthless and a-moral nature, or for that matter that many of us are demolished and brainwashed Christians. The animosity also depends on the fact that there are many things between heaven and earth that Darwinism cannot give an adequate explanation of, and there are important questions it lacks tools to grasp. There are also certain interpretations of Darwinism which conflict with a humanistic worldview, and there is not much space in the grey zone between these outlooks.³⁵

There is a tension between a humanistic worldview and a Darwinian worldview, and Eriksen, like many other humanists, seriously doubts that Darwinian explanations are adequate when it comes to understanding human culture and society. They reject scientific beliefs such as Dennett’s that “Darwin’s dangerous idea”, that is, evolution by natural selection, bears “an unmistakable likeness to universal acid: it eats through just about every traditional concept, and leaves in its wake a revolutionized world-view, with most of the old landmarks still recognizable, but transformed in fundamental ways.”³⁶ On this account, Darwin’s dangerous idea is reductionism incarnate, promising to unite and explain just about everything in one magnificent vision.

It is against this background that we should understand why Stephen LeDrew writes: “Popular atheism today is becoming more and more indistinguishable from scientism and a drive to secure the cognitive, moral and ultimate political authority of the natural sciences, and thus betray a long tradition of humanistic atheism derived from Enlightenment moral and socio-political critiques and later socialist projects.”³⁷ He highlights that there is a tension within the secular movement between scientific atheism and humanistic atheism, and he thinks that the former is getting the upper hand.

Humanistic atheists or secular humanists reject the hegemony of science and base their secular outlook on other sources of knowledge and justification as well as those provided by science, in particular on the idea of human uniqueness and human dignity. An example of an atheist who disdains the hegemony of science is Richard Rorty. He rejects “the idea that some discourses, some parts of the culture, are in closer contact with the world, or fit the world better, than other discourses. If one gives up this idea, then one will view every discourse — literary criticism, history, physics, chemistry, plumbers’ talk — as on a par, as far as its relation to reality goes.”³⁸ Rorty’s statement is an expression of a quite radical form of epistemic pluralism and most secular humanists are not ready to go that far. On the other hand, there are also those who go beyond Rorty’s parity view and privilege social reality above natural reality. Sandra Harding, for instance, claims that it makes good sense to think of the natural sciences as a subfield of the social sciences and the humanities. She writes that “we should think about the natural sciences as being *inside* critical social sciences because the object-of-knowledge — ‘nature, herself’ — never come to sci-

34 Leon Wieseltier, “Crimes Against Humanities”, *New Republic*, September 4, 2013.

35 Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Charles Darwin* (Nya Doxa, 1999), 86 (my translation).

36 Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (Penguin Books, 1995), 63.

37 Stephen LeDrew, “The Evolution of Atheism: Scientific and Humanistic Approaches”, *History of the Human Sciences*, 25 (2012), 72.

38 Richard Rorty, “Main Statement by Richard Rorty”, in *What’s the Use of Truth?* Edited by Richard Rorty and Pascal Engel (Columbia Univ. Press, 2007), 36.

ence denuded of the social origins, interests, values, and consequences of their earlier ‘careers’ in social thought.”³⁹

If we understand humanism in this way, it is compatible with many (but far from all) forms of religion.⁴⁰ So, let us consider next what is needed for it to become *secular humanism*, that is, a worldview that atheists could accept instead of scientism. Minimally speaking, one would get secular humanism simply by adding atheism (that there is no God or gods) to (H1)–(H4) or, to be a bit more ambitious, by adding in (N1)–(N4). But I think that there is more to it than this. William James writes: “Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”⁴¹ Secular humanism denies this, and finds our supreme good in harmony not with a divine order but with a human order, in accordance with the idea that we as humanity (not God, an unseen order or, for that matter, we as individuals) are the source of all value. Thus, secular humanism adds to humanism something along these lines:

(SH1) Humanity is the source of all value and not God (or an unseen order) and, consequently, human dignity is not God-given (we are not created in the image of God) but flows from the unique kind of being we exemplify, from our humanity.

On this point, secular humanists distinguish themselves from Renaissance humanists, such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who thought that human dignity is a consequence of humans being created in the image of God.⁴²

We should also add that humanists believe our lives can have meaning without it being bestowed by God or it being grounded in science. The existence of values (SH1) and of meaning are independent both of the divine order and of the naturalistic order that science can discover. Perhaps we can say that humanists believe that values and meaning are part of the natural world even if they should turn out to be no part of the “naturalistic” world, that is, even if they cannot be naturalized by science. Roughly speaking:

(SH2) While there is no meaning to the existence of nature and life (no cosmic meaning), our human lives can still have meaning, and this is so irrespective of whether this meaning can be bestowed on life by the sciences.

I take (SH1) and (SH2) to be intrinsic elements of secular humanism.

Philip Kitcher emphasizes that the role religion fulfils in human lives in these regards constitutes a challenge for secular humanism. Atheists have to offer something to replace the functional aspects of traditional religions; to provide secular surrogates for it.⁴³ He criticizes the so-called “new atheists” for failing to consider that religious beliefs are of deep moral and existential value. They ignore that for religious people their beliefs play a critical role in making their lives bearable and in providing answers to the question of why their lives matter. Consequently, the choice between a religious or secular worldview is not merely *intellectual*, it is just as much *existential*. He even thinks that atheists must provide religious people with equal or greater resources for making sense of their lives, or else the latter are rationally entitled to stick to their beliefs. Therefore, a future secularist society that is without religion must ensure that it would suffer no loss or diminishment in its moral and existential resources: it must secure that life in such a society is not only enduring but also meaningful for its citizens. So, Kitcher stresses that secular humanism must be responsive, just as religion is, to our deepest impulses and needs.

39 Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (Open Univ. Press, 1991), 74.

40 See R. William Franklin and Joseph M. Shaw, *The Case for Christian Humanism* (Eerdmans, 1991), for a discussion of what, for instance, Christian humanism is.

41 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Penguin Books, 1982 [1902]), 53.

42 Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man* (Hackett, 1965 [1488]).

43 Philip Kitcher, “Challenges for Secularism”, in *The Joy of Secularism*, edited by George Levine (Princeton Univ. Press, 2011), 24.

For scientific naturalists also, values and meaning could and would be an essential part of their secular worldview, but only if they are within the purview of science, or if they are a proper part of the reality that science can discover. Kitcher himself takes for granted that values and meaning can be naturalized or scientized. He believes that we can find strictly naturalistic ways to think about, and to account for, all or most of the things that we care about. Rosenberg, on the other hand, thinks that value, meaning, love and purpose are illusions. Science has ruled them out. We, therefore, must say “farewell to the purpose-driven life.”⁴⁴

Lastly, and to avoid any possible misunderstanding, I do not deny that secular humanists can and frequently do assume that religion is incompatible with science and that this, at least for some of them, constitutes an important reason why they attempt to develop a secular alternative. My point is rather that, contrary to advocates of scientism, their secular worldview does not flow out of, find its basic building blocks in, or is constrained to what science says reality is and basically nothing more. Secular humanists certainly respect and are impressed by science, but they do not believe that science is the measure of all things; it is we humans, as a *community of persons*, who instead are the measure of all things. It is our freedom and dignity, and not science, which is at the core of their worldview.

One might object that many secular humanistic organizations around the world express a pretty clear commitment to both humanism and scientism, so these are, contrary to what I have suggested, taken to be compatible and perhaps even one and the same.⁴⁵ I have — besides referring to LeDrew’s sociological research that shows that there actually is a tension within the secular movement between scientific atheism and humanistic atheism — argued that humanism is compatible with scientism *only if* the core commitments of humanism can be naturalized or transformed into science and this is far from obvious. Neither could we, as we have seen, and as Kitcher points out, assume that secular people who embrace scientific naturalism also thereby embrace humanism. He writes, “Secular humanism’ will not do [to describe those who do not believe in transcendental entities], since many prominent contemporary atheists are, as this essay suggests, light on the humanism.”⁴⁶ For these reasons, scientism and secular humanism should not be conflated or treated as one and the same.

VI. SOME EPISTEMIC CONSIDERATIONS

To what extent are these secular worldviews emerging in contemporary society justified or reasonable? This, of course, depends upon what the grounds are on which secular people hold their atheistic outlook on life to be true, and upon their degree of certainty that what they believe is indeed correct. It is beyond the scope of this essay to address such issues, but I do want to emphasize that the choice that secular people make when it comes to embracing one or other of the two worldviews I have discussed will have a big impact on what they could take as evidence in support of naturalism over and against theism. What could count as good reasons for (or against) atheism, and against (or for) theism, is significantly shaped by whether atheists embrace scientism or secular humanism.

Basically, advocates of scientism have to stick to the evidence that science can produce, because science is the measure of all things. The atheist William Rowe would have serious problems with this line of argument. He writes that it was a keen sense of the lack of God’s presence in his life, the existence of meaningless evil or horrible suffering in our world, along with his conviction that morality need not be grounded in God’s nature (since Moore’s argument that moral truths are not merely true but necessarily true is cogent) that were the decisive evidence in his case.⁴⁷ However, these are existential and philosophical arguments and evidence of a sort that arguably are not within the purview of science. If that is the

44 Rosenberg, *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality*, 194f.

45 See, for instance, Humanism » Humanists UK (accessed January 21, 2022). I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.

46 Kitcher, “Challenges for Secularism”, 228.

47 William Rowe, “Friendly Atheism Revisited”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 68 (2010), 10–11.

case, it would entail that atheists who justify their secular worldview on the basis of the kind of reasons Rowe gives would lack a rational ground. It would also imply that those who embrace scientism could not appeal to these kinds of evidence in support of their secular worldview and against theistic worldviews.

Science then becomes a double-edged sword. If secular people see science as the only acceptable source of knowledge and justified belief, then such an epistemology not merely requires that theists provide scientific reasons why they believe in God and believe that nature is God's creation; it also requires that of themselves that their atheism, and in fact their whole secular worldview, would have to be scientifically justified. They must be able to show that God does not or probably does not exist by appealing only to science. If they fail in undertaking this enterprise, they should become agnostics. Moreover, the danger that secular people who ground their atheism solely on science are exposed to is that if some form of theism turns out to be compatible with science then their atheism will be undermined. Thence, it is a serious challenge for them that atheists such as Michael Ruse and Elliott Sober maintain that theism is compatible with science.⁴⁸

With regard to this, naturalists in general or secular humanists more specifically are in a better position, since their evidence base does not merely consist of scientific evidence. They could just as well ground their rejection of theism, or other forms of religion, on reasons of a kind other than scientific, for instance on philosophical, political, moral or existential ones, or for that matter on reasons that the social sciences and the humanities can generate. But, at the same time, of course, this opens the door for theists or other groups of religious people to also appeal to such non-scientific reasons when it comes to justifying their espousal of a theistic or religious worldview. If it then turns out that there exists no scientific reason to believe in God, this would be no more alarming than that Rowe lacks scientific reasons for his atheism.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this essay, I have argued that, although atheism consists simply of the belief that there is no God or gods, atheists must embrace a secular worldview of some sort. Since they cannot be without a worldview, they must develop an alternative to the religious, especially the theistic, worldviews they by implication reject. Moreover, I have argued that there are, at the very least, two options available to atheists and that these should not be conflated or treated as one and the same. The two secular alternatives I have explored and distinguished are scientism (or scientific naturalism) and secular humanism.

We have seen that what more than anything else characterizes scientism (or scientific naturalism or scientific atheism) is that it privileges science in all areas of life. Science is the measure of all things. We could perhaps say that scientism is the secular worldview that rejects theism and supernaturalism, and takes science as (more or less) the only guide for understanding the world we live in and for how we should live our lives. However, I have pointed out that, in contrast, secular humanists reject the hegemony of science. They rather maintain that secular people should be guided by humanism in their lives, by a belief in human freedom, autonomy and dignity, and consequently they emphasize culture more than nature in developing their worldview. Humanity is the measure of all things. We could perhaps say that secular humanism is the atheistic worldview that rejects theism and supernaturalism, which is informed by science but rejects its hegemony and which emphasizes instead the importance of the humanities in understanding human life and its significance, and which — because of that humanistic understanding — is guided by a belief in human freedom and dignity. Humanism is, however, compatible with scientism *if* humanism can be naturalized or transformed into science. Most humanists are, to say the very least, doubtful about whether this is possible, and if it is possible, whether it would even be desirable.

We could, as philosophers of religion, choose to call the first worldview simply “naturalism” and the second “secular humanism,” but I have instead suggested that we should avoid doing so and acknowledge that both scientism and secular humanism share a more general form of naturalism. Their followers all

⁴⁸ They are, by their atheistic or naturalistic critics, called “accommodationists,” see Michael Ruse, “Why I am an Accommodationist and Proud of It,” *Zygon*, 50 (2015), 362.

believe that there is nothing beyond or beside nature; that there is no God, no gods and no transcendent, divine or sacred dimension of reality; that matter or physical particles lie at the root of everything and that consequently the world, at bottom, is wholly impersonal; and that nature is self-organized and the existence of nature, its properties and their inherent tendencies to produce increased complexity over time is the result of purely unintended casual processes and natural laws that just happen to exist.⁴⁹

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⁴⁹ On some of these naturalistic accounts, such as secular humanism, these purely unintended casual processes and natural laws have given rise to radically new emergent properties such as those necessary for the existence of human freedom, love, relationships, responsibility, and dignity.

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