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Feeling Out Alternatives Within Secularity

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## Feeling Out Alternatives Within Secularity

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### Author note:

Joseph Blankholm is an assistant professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His research focuses on secularism, atheism, and the intergenerational transmission of values. NYU Press will publish his first book, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious*, in 2022.

### Abstract:

This essay reassembles many of the key points in the thematic issue ‘Anthropology Within and Without the Secular Condition’ to create a coherent picture of the fragments that comprise secularity and secularism. Understanding what secularism often affirms, such as a materialist ontology and an empiricist epistemology, makes it easier to recognize the vast diversity within the secular discursive tradition. Exploring this internal diversity is important for giving a better account of the secular condition and for finding alternatives to the most common ways of being secular, which have become worthy objects of critique. This essay then looks more closely at two aspects of the secular that are usually overlooked: a poetic language ideology and the locus of explanatory satisfaction. A better understanding of what it means to be secular, in all its variety, will help scholars better control for the ways in which secular discourse shapes their feelings and the knowledge they desire to produce.

Keywords: Religion, Secularism, Atheism, Reflexivity, Language

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This is a wonderful and much-needed forum, and I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to its conversation. While reading the final drafts of these essays, I was struck by two things. The first is the humility of the forum’s narrow focus on anthropology. I found again and again that its contributors’ arguments about anthropologists could just as well apply to me, my colleagues in Religious Studies, or even to my secular friends who are not academics. In other words, I was struck that an inquiry into the secularity of anthropology should double so well as

an anthropology of secular discourse and secular people. Readers of *Religion* will I hope see themselves in these essays, just as I have seen myself, even if they are not anthropologists by training—and still more uncanny, even if they do not consider themselves secular. Secularity, it seems, is a condition in which all of us find ourselves even if we are not all adherents of secularism.

The second thing that struck me is an altogether opposite feeling that I struggled to reconcile with the first. I was perplexed by how broadly this forum imagines the secular condition. I worried that because its authors name so many different things “secular” the term had lost its meaning. Others share my concern with the secular’s creeping definition. At a cocktail party a few years ago, a prominent anthropologist who has contributed a great deal to the study of the secular told me had started to avoid the term in his publications because it means too many things. The critique of the secular—an important endeavor that anthropologists have pioneered over the past two decades—makes this imprecision all the more worrying (Asad 2003). When we mean a lot of things by “secular,” “secularism,” and “secularity,” then all those things can become guilty of the same sins. This way of damning by association is common among the anti-religious for whom “religion” groups everything they disdain (see Hitchens 2007). We should be just as skeptical of a strategy that groups all that is awful under the sign of the secular. It hardly differs from attempts by evangelical Christians to make “secular humanism” their bogeyman and political enemy (Toumey 1993; Blankholm 2017; Greenberg 2020; Schmitt 2007).

My confusion about this forum gave way to a realization, however, that while its authors present a variety of understandings of the secular, they have not rendered the term meaningless. They have, rather, disaggregated the secular condition and given us a helpful starting point for

understanding its heterogeneity, limits, and possibilities. In what follows, I collect these disaggregated pieces to form a picture of secularity that is fragmented but not incoherent. In so doing, I show that secular discourse is both an affirmative and a negative tradition and what it affirms is deeply heterogeneous. Following Furani, Robbins, and Dullo in this forum, I then dwell on secular discourse's internal diversity to emphasize its alternatives within, focusing on two possibilities, in particular, that become available for all secular scholars and not just anthropologists: the recovery of a poetic language ideology and a more self-reflexive relationship with explanatory satisfaction. In making my argument, I revisit much of what the authors in this forum already show in the hope that repetition and restatement can emphasize their important insights.

### **Working Concepts of the Secular**

In the forum's introduction, Furani and Robbins offer highly specific conceptions of the secular. Anthropology is secular because its explanations do not allow immaterial beings to be causes. It denies the reality of the supernatural, and it refuses to make the self-understanding of practices like magic and witchcraft its own. Ontologically, the secular is materialist, physicalist, naturalist, or immanentist. Epistemologically, it is empiricist and rational. Furani and Robbins also identify three anthropological modes they hope to move beyond: secular writing, secular theory, and secular experience. Tacit in each of these is an argument about what the secular is. Not only does secularism entail an empiricist epistemology and a naturalist ontology, but also a mode of writing (that polices, for instance, the boundaries of non-fiction), a theorizing (grounded in secular subjectivity), and a sensorium (limited to the empirically explicable). Furani and Robbins provide a holistic conception of secular discourse that I find quite compelling.

Dullo's essay is equally specific and hits upon many of the same secular characteristics. He observes two secular modalities—*Extinction* and *Captivity*—in which anthropologists operate. In the first, *Extinction*, anthropologists foreclose the possibility of the supernatural or transcendent; only the immanent is real. In the second, *Captivity*, anthropologists explain how humans construct the supernatural or transcendent from an immanentist perspective, thus reducing transcendence to the material. Dullo suggests that these modalities arise from different sub-traditions of the broader secular discursive tradition. Positivists and Marxian materialists, for instance, operate through *Extinction*. They theorize with the assumption that the supernatural is not real. Anthropologists who operate through *Captivity* give a little space to the supernatural only to explain it away.

Dullo offers Tanya Luhrmann's work as an example of *Captivity*. In *When God Talks Back*, Luhrmann shows that her empirical data fit the Protestant ontology of her Pentecostal informants *or* the secular ontology of anthropology and cognitive science (2012). To do so, she operates in the tradition of pragmatist philosophy. She shifts the ground of truth, and by extension, reality, to efficacy rather than fidelity of representation. In the pragmatism of William James, language is a set of tools that can perform the world into being; a performance is true when it remakes the world. As James puts it, "God is real since he produces real effects" (2002, 399). Like James in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Luhrmann provides a lot of empirical data—she shows us the effects—but she refuses to fit those data to a single ontology (James 1979). Her ontological agnosticism is distinctively secular in its method, but it differs from approaches that are firmly committed to a secular ontology. Pragmatism, positivism, and Marxism are at least three of secular discourse's sub-traditions. Dullo is right to identify their

diversity, as Furani also does elsewhere (2015). I will return to James and pragmatism later when trying to recover a poetic language ideology.

Engelke and Boyarin deploy conceptions of the secular that are less direct, but still fit within what Furani, Robbins, and Dullo imagine. For Engelke, the secular seems to stand in for disenchantment, which is closely associated with the sociology of Max Weber and his sharp distinction between facts and values. Engelke's idea of the secular also seems to include the belief that death is the final end, which is true within a naturalist or materialist ontology.

Drawing on anthropologists Katherine Verdery and Thomas Laqueur, Engelke shows that when faced with the corpse, even the secular imagination runs wild. This persistence of the fantastical despite attempts to foreclose it represents for Engelke a softening towards enchantment from within the secular. He leaves open what exactly we should make of this softening. Is it the haunting of modernity by its loss of the transcendent, as Charles Taylor would have it (2007)? Is it the haunting of secular bodies that want to remain spiritually porous, as John Modern would (2011)? Or is it something else? Regardless, death is too overdetermined to let life literally end.

Similarly, Boyarin focuses on secular temporality, pushing back against the Enlightenment narrative's periodization of the "medieval" as the dark ages to be overcome by modernity. He also pushes back against the experience of routinized, "secular" time. Though emphasizing a distinctively secular temporality, Boyarin explicitly avoids theorizing the "ontological" difference of the Yeshiva he writes about because, he argues, "we and our fellows construct our lives across multiple implicit frameworks" (11). While I take his point well that some of us do not live in a single ontological framework all the time, Boyarin implicitly observes that there *are* multiple ontological frameworks in which to live. By extension, there are, it seems, ontologies that are distinctively secular, even if the Yeshiva, as a place and concept, is

ontologically heterogeneous. Because Christians seem to have pioneered progressive history (Hegel 2017) and routinized time (Mumford 1934), secular progressive history and secular routinized time must be somehow separate from their Christian counterparts. Engelke rightly observes the persistence of secularism's exceptional imaginary, but he and Boyarin appear to tell us that secularity assumes life is finite; there is no afterlife, and a world beyond death is unknowable.

Handler and Oliphant adopt more oblique understandings of the secular, which nonetheless fit within the secular discourse the other contributors describe. For Handler, Durkheim's notion of "society" is a secular concept that can only disenchant an abstract "God" in a democratic context because the internal pressure one feels in a democratic society is distinctively that of the mass (see Baudrillard 1985). "Society" cannot describe well a culture that presumes a divine order, such as an aristocracy, in which subjects internalize "God" as the impositions of distinct social strata. Though I wonder where the radically democratized God of Luther and Calvin fits within this schema, I take Handler's point to be that certain sociopolitical structures, myths, ontologies, understandings of time, and concepts of the human hang together and resonate with one another as assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). A disenchanting concept like "society" is a fish out of water when applied to an aristocracy.

Oliphant's point is similar and similarly focused on the Christian condition rather than squarely on the secular. She urges anthropologists of Christianity to engage more with theology and to engage more critically with Christianity. The secular is in the shadows here as a kind of impediment or aversion to deeper engagement with supernatural causes, and ironically, to critical engagement. The secular is also implicitly a cultural relativism badly in need of ground on which to stand; theology could, it seems, provide this ground. Cultural relativism is of course only one

sub-set of the secular discursive tradition, closely associated with Weberian social science and with the legacy of Michel Foucault. Marxism, by contrast, is an ontological materialism with a long history of making value judgments worth dying for. Oliphant's focus on 1492 as a catalyst in the history of the world is valuable, as it sharpens the stakes of her argument. Those of us in the anglophone world live in a culture and speak a language saturated with Christianity, so we ought to understand our Christian condition as well as our secular.

From the pieces the authors in this forum provide we can assemble a picture of secularity. First, however, I should provide a rough guide to what I mean by various terms. I am using "secularity" as a synonym for the secular condition, where the -ity suffix implies a general state. I agree with historian Todd Weir that worldview and political secularism are distinct (2015). Like the rest of the essays in this forum, I am using secularism to describe the former: belief in a secular worldview or working from a secular perspective, where the -ism suffix implies an ideology to which one can adhere. Many of us are non-Christians who do not adhere to *christianisme*, to use the French word and its apt -ism, but we nonetheless live in Christian-saturated cultures we might describe broadly as "Christianity." Many of us, too, are non-secularists who do not adhere to secularism but nonetheless live in deeply secular cultures, in a condition we might call "secularity." As with Christianity, in secularity, secularism must at least be acknowledged and engaged if not affirmed as true and real. I leave "the secular" intentionally vague, not as an escape hatch from rigor, but in solemn acknowledgment that all of these terms mean more than I can possibly disambiguate. Words like "secular" and "religious" should be held gently because the harder we squeeze them the more their meanings squish between our fingers.



Drawing on the authors in this forum, I offer that worldview secularism is ontologically materialist, physicalist, naturalist, or immanentist, depending on which aspect of existence one wants to emphasize. Epistemologically, it is typically empiricist, drawing its primary knowledge of reality from the senses. French captures this well in the doubled sense of *expérience*, which is experience or experiment. Secularism is also logical and rational, though not usually rationalist (Farman 2019). Given Spinoza's central place in the secular discursive tradition, his deduction of an entire philosophical system from God's being is a notable exception (Spinoza 1994; Israel 2001). As for values or ethics, some traditions of secular discourse, like logical positivism and Weberian social science, sequester them from scientific truth, which makes them persistent problems (Gorski 2013). Others, like Marxism or humanism, foreground ethics (Raines 2002; Epstein 2009).

Secular discourse has distinct modes of history and everyday time, though not all secular history is teleological and not all secular time is routine, as any secular psychonaut would surely attest. The secular also has its distinct modes of writing, theorizing, and experience, as well its unique understanding of death as the horizon of both being and knowledge. If one follows Heidegger in taking the phenomenological perspective, as Engelke seems to, then ontology is still mere metaphysics (Heidegger 1962) and finitude is a limit that precedes any ontological claims (see also Hägglund 2020). Here are the secular pieces this forum gives us, which are part of a larger, heterogeneous whole. We should probably follow Abou Farman and call this larger whole the secular discursive tradition (2013; 2020)

### **The Ambiguity of the Secular Condition**

The heterogeneity in this forum accords with what I have learned while conducting years of fieldwork among very secular people in the United States. Secular people use many terms to describe themselves, which capture a variety of secular ways of life. Some atheists are firm in their ontological commitment to materialism and others are firmly agnostic. Among the agnostics, there are those who agree with Thomas Huxley, who coined the term “agnostic,” that science can only falsify hypotheses. Ontology, for Huxley, is speculation based on empirical data (1902). There are also those who call themselves “agnostic” simply because it sounds more polite than “atheist.”

Humanists are part of a tradition that begins within Unitarian Christianity (Weldon 2020), and “freethinkers” by definition participate in a tradition that breaks from tradition. In a recent survey I conducted, in which I asked nearly 13,000 very secular people whether they consider themselves part of a secular or humanist tradition, more than sixty percent said they do. Though only one percent consider themselves religious, dozens emailed me to tell me they are religious non-theists of various kinds and to complain that my survey language fails to include them. Satanists who belong to the Satanic Temple, for instance, are usually atheists in the everyday sense of not believing in God, but many told me they identify strongly as religious and refuse to be called “secular”—despite their metaphorical worship of Satan, which of course means “adversary” in Hebrew. We can add these varieties of secular discourse to the positivism, Marxism, pragmatism, and phenomenology I have already mentioned. There is no one true secularism, and oddly enough, secular people are so religiously ambiguous that even American law considers them both secular and religious (Blankholm 2018).

Secular people’s ambivalent relationship with religion tells an important story. They believe many of the same things just as they avoid many of the same things. They do not share a

single worldview, but neither do all Christians. They invent new rituals for events like weddings and memorial services because they so rarely have access to secular clergy who can perform them. These rituals often resemble one another because the same unspoken rules shape them (Engelke 2015; Copeman and Quack 2015). Secular people are part of the secular discursive tradition—a chain of citation and reference, as well as institutions and embodied practices—but being secular usually means rejecting tradition (MacIntyre 1988; 2007; Asad 2018). Secular people are awkwardly, always at once both religion-like and absolutely not religious (Blankholm 2022).

It is hard to name a presence that also passes for an absence. The vacillation within the secular, between its religiosity and its not-religiosity, generates secular labels and idiosyncratic ways of life. Many atheists think agnostics are mincing words, and many agnostics think atheists are too ontologically confident. Many humanists think atheism is too negative and too framed in Christian terms, and many freethinkers think humanism is too religious, like all the other -isms. Being secular means figuring out how to embrace life's finitude and the joys of the senses without going overboard and making it all feel 'too religious'. Striving to find the right balance is ambivalent work. Secularity's disaggregated pieces reflect this ambivalence.

### **Secularity's Own Alternatives**

Because secularism is both positive and negative it can easily become a hall of mirrors. Atheism is a great example. For most of its history, the term effectively means "heresy." Everyone, after all, is an atheist to someone's God or gods (see Whitmarsh 2016). The early Christians called the Romans atheists, and the Romans did the same to the early Christians. It took many centuries before immanentism became synonymous with atheism, and ironically, it

was Christian theologians who created the unholy combination. Historians Ada Palmer and Alan Charles Kors have shown that Christian theologians invented what we now recognize as modern atheism (Palmer 2014; Kors 1990; 2016b; 2016a). Over several centuries these theologians gave substance to their own antithesis in order to argue dialectically for the truth of their faith. They created atheism before there were self-identifying atheists, and they built it mostly from ancient Epicurean parts. It was not until the late eighteenth century when the French materialist philosophers began calling themselves atheists that an ancient term for heretic became a self-appellation. Atheism still bears this deep ambiguity. In the United States, atheists remain one of the least trusted social groups even as the number of those who identify as atheists continues to grow (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Edgell et al. 2016).

To call something secular—or to identify as an atheist—is particular to Christianity and its inheritance, but being secular is more than just denying Christianity's truth. Recognizing that atheism and other secular worldviews entail affirmative beliefs about the world and not only negative statements about God or the supernatural is an important step in seeing the diversity within the secular discursive tradition. Logical positivism, Weberian social science, political liberalism, and the reductionist calculus of utilitarianism are the most frequent targets of those who critique secularism, but these are not the only ways of being secular. I agree with the authors in this forum that looking to theology can help provincialize the secular and recognize its at times peculiar constraints (Chakrabarty 2008). Once we have provincialized certain secular sub-traditions we can also begin to explore their alternatives *within* the secular tradition.

In what remains of this essay, I want to recover two of these secular alternatives, which this forum and other attempts like it have enabled me to glimpse despite my secularism. In both examples, I make my engagement personal because I want to follow this forum's advice and

consider my secular condition self-consciously, as the ground of my inquiry, and because I want to make it clear that I believe this forum matters. If we take these authors seriously, they can change our minds, as they have contributed to changing mine.

### **An Opponent's Poetic Language**

A better understanding of the secular condition's internal variety has led me to acknowledge, to my surprise, the craftiness of Donald Trump. Though I oppose him politically, I have become amazed by the insistence that he is a liar, an idiot, or a fool. This underestimation, I now see, is distinctively secular and has everything to do with a gap between Trump's language ideology and that of the fact-checking American Left. Yes, Trump lies inasmuch as he makes claims that are not empirically true. But his ability to remake the world in the image of his falsehood is sometimes true in another, pragmatist sense of truth. If God is real because he produces real effects, then the big lie of a stolen election can also become weirdly real when the claim is repeated, acted on, and "believed"—or willed to believe (James 1896).

For the empiricist fact-checker, language should be unambiguous, and words should each correspond, one-to-one, with some part of reality. This flat, simple fidelity—this allegorical relationship between a single word and a single thing (Pecora 2015)—allows a hypothesis to be tested and falsified, so it is crucial for many kinds of science. This verificationism is also the language ideology of logical positivism, which seeped deeply into secular culture in the second half of the twentieth century (Weldon 2020). Acting as if language can only represent and not also perform is gullible because it denies the efficacy of lies (Nietzsche 1873). Scholars writing in this plain scientific mode stipulate definitions as if they might truly wrangle the polysemy of language and the history of violence carried forth in the sediment of every utterance (Barad

2003). The fact-checker's rhetoric requires faith in the knowability of the world, which easily gives way to sadness and disappointment.

Modern disappointment is on full display in Max Weber's famous formulation of "the disenchantment of the world":

Thus the growing process of intellectualization and rationalization does *not* imply a growing understanding of the conditions under which we live. It means something quite different. It is the knowledge or the conviction that if *only we wished* to understand them we *could* do so at any time. It means that in principle, then, we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*. That in turn means the disenchantment of the world. (2004).

"In principle," Weber tells us, "we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces." "In principle," he tells us, we can "control everything by means of calculation." The omniscience promised in theory is not, however, attainable in practice. We are bound to be disappointed, but we must stay strong: "To anyone who is unable to endure the fate of the age like a man we must say that he should return to the welcoming and merciful embrace of the old churches—simply, silently, and without any of the usual public bluster of the renegade" (Weber 2004, 30). Those who give in to their disappointment by turning to the comforts of religion will suffer the condescension of the stoic *Wissenschaftler*.

Rather than let go of its narrow conception of truth as the fidelity of literal statements to the empirical reality of the world, the secular Left trudges on, shocked that lies are so effective and dumbfounded by the stupidity of its enemies. It is James' insistence on healthy-mindedness and his debt to New Thought that offers another way of understanding language if not also another way of using it (2002). Norman Vincent Peale was, after all, Trump's childhood pastor, and Peale's debt to the New Thought tradition is well established (Albanese 2007; Peale 1952). From a young age, Trump was trained in *poiesis*, or world-making, which often comes at the

expense of empirical description (Plato 2008; Heidegger 1977). Those who call Trump a liar, an idiot, or a fool underestimate the power of his poetic language ideology at their own political peril. Though this can rightly be called a secular fault, it is not the fault of all secularisms.

### **Material and Immaterial Satisfactions**

Attending to my feelings—especially about truth and reality—has made me much more aware of my secular condition. One feeling that now notifies me is my emotional need to ground explanations in nature. I do not feel this need as strongly as some, like my colleague Ann Taves, who has pioneered the application of cognitive science to the study of religion (2009; 2016). I find her work fascinating and illuminating, and I have learned a great deal from it, as I have from Luhrmann and others who use methods from “harder” sciences (for instance, Lanman 2011). Taves integrates insights from the humanities and even critical theory into her “building block approach,” but I remain skeptical of its gravitational assumptions. Are the harder sciences really the foundation blocks on which all other knowledge is built? Perhaps predictably given my intellectual biography, I want to imagine the field of explanations more rhizomatically (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), even as I am also convinced of the value and importance of explanations grounded in biology and the other natural sciences (Bellah 2011).

Recently, for instance, when I was rereading Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997), I had to confront my desire for material explanation, of which I have mostly been unaware. For the last several years in my course on religion and politics I have taught students about European contact with the New World and the horrors of colonialism. Doing so is crucial for explaining, for instance, present-day conflicts over sacred land between Native Americans and the U.S. government. Diamond’s environmental determinism is useful for showing students

quickly and simply why Europeans were such successful colonists without assuming the superiority of European culture or genetics.

A very simplified version of his argument goes like this: because Eurasia is a single land mass, societies across it were able to share many of the world's very few domesticable plants and animals. This in turn enabled them to develop technology and achieve population levels typically associated with civilization at much faster rates than elsewhere in the world. With increases in population density and close proximity to animals, they also developed a large number of unique diseases; through attrition, they developed immunity to those diseases. When Europeans arrived in the New World, they held the military advantage of spreading those diseases and causing the deaths of many millions of the Americas' indigenous inhabitants. Combined with technological advances that also developed from greater inter-societal exchange, such as in metallurgy, Europeans' colonizing advantage was overwhelming.

Re-reading the prologue to *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Diamond's interest in explanation gave me pause. He contrasts his environmental explanations for European colonial dominance with explanations he describes variously as "genetic," "racist," and "proximate." His book, he writes, provides "ultimate" explanations:

On the one hand, the proximate explanations are clear: some peoples developed guns, germs, steel, and other factors conferring political and economic power before others did; and some peoples never developed these power factors at all. On the other hand, the ultimate explanations—for example, why bronze tools appeared early in parts of Eurasia, late and only locally in the New World, and never in Aboriginal Australia—remain unclear. Our present lack of such ultimate explanations leaves a big intellectual gap, since the broadest pattern of history thus remains unexplained. [...] Until we have some convincing, detailed, agreed-upon explanation for the broad pattern of history, most people will continue to suspect that the racist biological explanation is correct after all. That seems to me the strongest argument for writing this book. (24-25)

In contrasting "proximate" and "ultimate," Diamond relies on an established way that evolutionary biologists distinguish among explanations: "ultimate explanations address



evolutionary function (the ‘why’ question), and proximate explanations address the way in which that functionality is achieved (the ‘how’ question)” (Scott-Phillips, Dickins, and West 2011). Reaching for the word, “broad,” however, Diamond seems to double his sense of “ultimate.” He is not only answering “why,” but also trying to map “the broadest pattern of history.” To be clear, I share with Diamond a feeling of satisfaction in his very broad environmental explanations, even as I feel the need to deconstruct his language and assumptions. I am also satisfied with the explanations of Talal Asad, who has identified the nation-state, political liberalism, and calculative reason as discursive sources of Europe’s uniquely violent colonialism (Asad 1993; 2003; 2018). I consider both sets of explanations true, and both have shaped my thinking deeply.

Though Diamond’s research is an awkward complement to the postcolonial theory that has contributed so much to the critique of the secular, it provides useful rhetorical tools against persistent racist and colonialist assumptions. The classroom is the crucible for these tools because it thrusts upon me the need to meet students where I find them. As it happens at the University of California, Santa Barbara—as is probably the case at universities around the world—I find that some students hold beliefs drawn from scientific racism and Western cultural chauvinism. Though I am far more likely to mention Asad than Diamond in my classes, I find Diamond’s work indispensable because it short-circuits students’ assumptions and legitimate questions about European technological and genetic superiority. It meets their latent biases on the level at which they claim authority: scientific knowledge of nature. For many students this kind of knowledge is a lot more satisfying.

I feel two ways about the hunt for ever-more-fundamental explanations. On the one hand, they sometimes feel like they conceal the reasons for their own production and the power

struggles that shape the world around us by claiming to produce knowledge for its own sake. And yet, I see in my secular self a longing for material bedrock. The disambiguated, literalist hypotheses of the natural sciences offer respite from the fuzziness of discourse, the thickness of language loaded with symbols and metaphors, and the persistent excess of anything social I try to understand with too much precision. Explanations from the “harder” sciences provide firm empirical ground, with their careful data collection and experimental rigor. On a simpler level, I am a very curious, very secular person, and as such, I am deeply satisfied by certain kinds of large-scale explanations—of the universe, of the history of the earth, and of human evolution (Rubenstein 2010; 2014).

My reservations about Diamond’s “ultimate” explanations and the gravitational direction of Taves’ building block approach are products of my unique discursive formation, just as the dissatisfaction some UCSB students feel when they encounter postcolonial theory is a product of theirs. I want to give these students the evidence that will satisfy their curiosity while helping them understand a history of violence that is irrefutable. This is pragmatic in an everyday sense and pragmatist in a more philosophical one. There are a lot of ways of being secular because there is a lot of variety in the secular discursive tradition. Some of those ways assume the separation of facts and values, and some do not. Some of those ways assume language should represent the world literally and simply, and others do not. Some of those ways feel great satisfaction when explanations are grounded in the natural sciences, and others do not. I agree whole-heartedly with Robbins’ argument for turning to theology (Robbins 2020), and I hope others will engage the a/theological tradition that Furani and Robbins cite (Onishi 2018; and see M. C. Taylor 1984; 1987). I also hope that in addition to reaching outside secularity, we will look for alternatives within.

The stakes to understanding our secularity are high even if they can sometimes feel obscure. Good social science needs to be reflexive and understand the conditions of its possibility and the discursive formation of the researchers who produce it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1988; 2010). *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, as Derrida tells us; there is no outside-of-discourse on which to stand (Derrida 1997). One consequence of elaborating the secular condition is that all of us, including those of us who are secular, have a condition—or conditions, really—we cannot escape. We can, however, better account for how they produce us and drive us to produce knowledge. These are, for me, the “ultimate” stakes of understanding the secular condition. Doing so allows us to grasp a little better who we already are so we can control for ourselves, as in an *expérience*, as actors whose observations are interventions in the world (Barad 2007). Perhaps this forum’s excavation of our secular condition can help us disrupt, at least sometimes, the tautological reproduction of our assumptions as our discoveries and allow us to find something other than what we expected. I hope so.

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