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Secularism Redux: Humanists and Materialists, Ancient and Modern

Adrian Kuzminski

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The cultural opposition between 'secular' and 'sacred,' fundamental to Western thinking, was born out of the triumph of Christianity in the late Roman empire. St. Augustine and other Christians writers were anxious to demonstrate that the traditional gods of antiquity were not gods at all, but confused figments of the human imagination desperately projected to make sense of the fears and terrors of ordinary life. The very humanity of the human imagination only proved to Christians that it was inadequate as a representation of the divine. For the God of the Christians (and the Jews) necessarily transcended all conceivable human powers. Any revelation of true divinity for them could come to humanity only from outside the natural world, just as they believed the natural world itself to have been created and directed from without by a power wholly separate from it.

Secular comes from the Latin *seculum*, perhaps an Etruscan term. It denotes a peculiarly human time–oddly, an epoch or era marked by the complete turnover of living human beings, so that none of those living at the beginning are alive at the end. This span the ancients rounded off at at least a century. The cycle of the *seculum* was celebrated in Rome by the secular games, largely dedicated to the gods of the underworld. The games were an old custom revived by Augustus in 17 BCE, and again by Claudius in 47 CE. This led to two independent series of secular games, each celebrated more or less on schedule once every one hundred years or so until abandoned by later Christian emperors. Somehow in Christian minds the *seculum* celebrated by the games came to stand for the natural world as a whole, including the human faculties of reason and imagination, perhaps because it provided a measure of the limits of

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living community memory. This secular world in their minds was a creation of divinity, but was not itself divine.

This Christian dualism of secular and sacred, of nature and God, dismissed the holistic naturalism of the Greek and Roman philosophers. Christianity brought God back into the picture after Hellenistic philosophy had effectively eliminated him. Starting with the Pre-Socratics' meditations on the physical world as a self-contained and self-determined sphere of activity to be understood exclusively in its own terms, coupled with Socrates' folding of human social activity, or ethics, into the same natural sphere, the Hellenistic philosophers, following Aristotle, arguably created the first entirely naturalistic understanding of experience. Plato's dualism of body and soul–the last philosophical remnant of the traditional cultic religion of the gods–was replaced in high antique elite culture by a naturalistic monism understood to somehow incorporate the soul–including mind and emotion–into nature and the body.

In retrospect, we can recognize ancient Hellenistic philosophy as the mature voice of the First Age of Secularism. Earlier presumptions of an independently existing divine power controlling nature and human affairs from the outside–manifest in the cults of the traditional gods–were quietly abandoned by the Hellenistic schools, including Stoics, Cynics, Epicureans, and Sceptics. Aristotle had already reintegrated the Platonic divinity of separate, pure forms back into the natural world; his pure abstraction of a prime mover became an object of naturalized philosophical contemplation. The Stoics recognized this naturalized divinity as the providence they saw informing the rational flow or *logos* of human and natural affairs. The Epicureans, following Democritus, went even further and reduced reason and all of nature entirely to material atoms in motion, while Academic sceptics finally made evident the inaccessibility of any non-human divinity, external or internal. The spirit of the First Age of Secularism is perhaps best captured in the extended philosophical dialogues of Cicero. In his sceptical, open mind, the major schools jostle together much as they must have done among the elite and educated literary secularists of his day.

The rediscovery of antique learning in the Renaissance, especially in surviving accounts of Hellenistic philosophy by Cicero, Sextus Empiricus, Diogenes Laertius, Plutarch, and others, sparked a momentous revolution of Western philosophy which made possible the scientific and industrial revolutions. Out of this was born a Second Age of Secularism. Like the First Age, the Second has rendered moot claims to be able to access a divinity existing and directing the world from the outside. This time around, however, the tables are turned. It is the Christians and other cultists who are now on the defensive and must fight, as did the traditional pagan cults of antiquity, a rear-guard action against the onslaughts of secularization. Under modern secularism, church and state are largely separated, while belief in divine dispensation has withered in the aftermath of Darwinian attacks on creationism. A financialized modern

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economy has developed, as it did in ancient times, in the service of secular, not sacred, ends. In sum, a restless, materialistic, multicultural, and relativistic modern society has emerged which is strikingly similar to what we find in Hellenistic and Roman times.

Ours is a post-Christian, globalized society whose dominant cultural and social institutions have been largely secularized from within, if not entirely from without. Religion–by which I mean belief in an active, external deity or power–has no more disappeared today than it did in Hellenistic and Roman times, but then, as now, it ceased to be the center of cultural gravity. The endless variety of religious cults, characteristic of both epochs, only confirms their weakened and marginalized status. The challenge in a renewed secular age, as it was for our ancient predecessors, is to figure out how to live happily in a world disconnected from divinity. The answer of the First Secular Age to this challenge was to cultivate virtue, which they understood as the uncompromising application of human faculties, preeminently reason, to an understanding of the self and the world. The perfect Sage was the ideal embodiment of the exercise of virtue.

The beauty of a virtuous rational understanding of things lies in its promise to resolve the impermanence of our worldly experience of pain and suffering. Nature may be in constant flux, but the recurring forms it displays as it unfolds in consciousness suggests, as a consolation prize, the possibility of a permanence grasped by reason behind it all. What is less clear is the place of human beings in such a recurring, rationalizing natural world. Secular philosophers, both ancient and modern, have split over this question. Insofar as human beings exhibit freedom of action based on choices clarified through deliberation, they can be said to retain something of the divine: the freedom to choose. In this view, humans, unlike animals, can reason and thereby intervene in the course of nature, like the gods, perhaps more modestly, but still dramatically, as witnessed by the stupendous transformations unleashed by modern science and technology.

This ability to act freely, whether out of reason for good ends (or passion for bad ones), appears self-evident to many, but it also appears to contradict the materialistic presumptions implicit in secularism. In a purely natural world, as the Epicureans pointed out, all of our actions are physically determined through the motion of particles in space. The idea is that all we do (and think) is physically determined by impulses from inside of nature, where everything is caused by something else; these impulses fully determine our actions. We do not have free will in a purely secular world.

That was the conclusion drawn by the radical secularists of antiquity, especially the Epicureans. For them, human beings, minds as well as bodies, were entirely physical entities, just as they are for neuroscientists and materialists today. On the other hand, the more conservative ancient secularists–the Stoics and Academicians–resisted this conclusion. They strove to

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retain some measure of human autonomy in an otherwise deterministic natural world, making them the first humanists. They contrasted body with soul, holding the latter to be incorporeal but somehow self-animating from within (by a force they called *psyche* or *pneuma*–Greek terms related to 'breath'). The soul in this view becomes a mini-prime mover, an independent agent which directs our activity from within the body, as opposed to having our body being entirely directed by external forces. Similarly, if the cosmos has a soul, it too must direct the world internally from within, not externally from without. This internal cosmic direction is manifest, the Stoics believed, in the rational unfolding of natural processes in an orderly world which they called providence. Freedom lies in our choice either to accept this natural order, and find happiness, or resist it and be miserable.

Modern secular humanists, like their Hellenistic predecessors, insist on the integrity of an autonomous self or ego, for whom free action is taken for granted, even exaggerated. Just as what happens after death was largely side-stepped by ancient secular humanists, their modern descendents focus on the freedom they think we have in this world, and tend to defer questions about death. The virtue practiced by modern humanists is the art of personal fulfillment validated by social recognition on the basis of a rational ethics. Modern materialists, by contrast–including philosophers from Hobbes and Marx to Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, as well as scientific materialists like positivists and eliminative materialists, among others–place the highest value, as did Epicureans, ultimately on pleasures and pains driven by physical sensations and emotions.

While the most radical materialists–transhumanists like Ray Kurzweil, Marvin Minsky, and Nick Bostrom–imagine a physical immortality secured through the transfer of consciousness from bodies to software, in the absence of free will, conservative humanists cling to an irreducible autonomy they imagine to be located within the body. Like the ancient Hellenistic philosophers, modern humanists see within natural persons (and within nature) a divine impulse manifest in creation through free action. By insisting that this free impulse somehow emerges from within nature rather than being imposed from without, they make possible a view of human beings as mortal gods. It is a strange paradox that, while some modern materialists fantasize about a purely physical immortality, with no free will at all, most modern humanists fantasize about persons as mortal gods who enjoy a bit of divine power internalized as free will, while abandoning any prospect for immortality.

As the ancient sceptics pointed out, the forms of secularism, like those of traditional cults, are no more than unsubstantiated beliefs. They saw no proof of free will, external or internal. But it was only those Hellenistic outsiders, the Pyrrhonists, who drew the conclusion that liberation from belief of any sort could itself be a way of life. Rather than remaining hung up on what to do about our problematic beliefs, the Pyrrhonists advocated instead that we

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suspend judgment about them altogether. They abandoned the fruitless struggle to affirm or deny them, and simply set them aside. Rather than trying to live by one or another unstable belief–that is, some *interpretation*, pro or con, about how things really are–they opted to live humbly, by the dictates of the actual sensations we directly and involuntarily experience. As a result, they claimed they gained enlightenment, or *ataraxia*, but that is another story.

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