Enchantment? No, Thank You

The eminent translators of Max Weber’s great lecture “Science as a Vocation” (1917/1919) put the phrase “disenchantment of the world” in quotation marks.¹ This may be because, as they note in their introduction, Weber was borrowing the phrase from Schiller. But the German text has no quotation marks.² This is a small thing and perhaps a trivial one. Still, it hints that Gerth and Mills may have been putting a certain distance between Weber and the historical process with which his name has been so tightly associated. Perhaps they merely wished Weber had taken such a distance. On the other hand, perhaps they had decided, on the basis of what they knew, that he could not have given himself over fully to the disenchantment story. The latter hypothesis seems quite plausible. As it turns out, there is evidence that Weber was not merely ambivalent about disenchantment— that is the standard view— but that he did not believe the disenchantment of the world had happened, at least as it has been popularly understood. I would like to pursue this idea here, not so much for its pertinence to the understanding of Weber (I leave that to the Weber scholars) as for its own sake. Whether or not Weber did believe in it, disenchantment seems to me one of the more disabling and sneakily misleading stories we are in the habit of telling ourselves regularly. It’s a habit I’d like to see us kick.

The outline of the story is simple: there is something called enchantment that 1) we once had, but 2) we have since lost, and 3) we are now in dire need of. Opinions differ as to whether
it can be retrieved, but everyone agrees that what has been lost is extremely valuable. Each of these propositions is problematic in its own right. Let us begin with the valuable something called enchantment.

Enchantment sounds like religion, but Weber seems to have been at least moderately eager to distinguish the two. Schiller’s version of disenchantment— it turns out that Weber was not quoting him directly— is “Entgötterung” (de-divinization). When Schiller used the phrase “die entgötterte Natur” (nature from which the gods have been eliminated) in his 1788 poem “The Gods of Greece,” he was criticized for seeming to lament the end of polytheism, and he backed down.³ Weber’s term is “Entzauberung” (the elimination of magic). It may bow gently to Schiller but, whether for reasons of diplomacy or not, it certainly takes the emphasis off divinity. In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and elsewhere, Weber had already argued that religion was responsible for the elimination of magic; Christian monotheism could not be seen as the simple victim of the disenchantment or rationalization of the world since it was (also) an agent of that process, helping to thin out the pagan population of spirits and demons. In any case, the switch from gods to magic makes Weber’s version sound more inclusive. Orthodox belief is not the object Weber is chiefly mourning. Whatever magic is a figure for, non-believers suffer from its loss as much as believers. That at least seems to be the popular understanding.

But if enchantment cannot be simply identified with religion or tradition, then how should it be understood? According to Jane Bennett, “enchant is linked to the French verb to sing: chanter. To ‘en-chant’: to surround with song or incantation; hence, to cast a spell with sounds, to make fall under the sway of a magical refrain, to carry away on a sonorous stream”
Here being enchanted sounds like an innocent good time, entirely lacking in those unbending dogmas and rigorous obligations that burden tradition and religion alike. There is no obvious reason to resist it. But before you are swept away by Bennett’s mellifluous poem in prose, pause to consider that the words “cast a spell” and “fall under the sway” are at least as crucial to the history of the term as the sonorous stream of song. What a modern English speaker hears in the word enchantment is the state of being exceptionally charmed, delighted, enraptured, as by an encounter with a person or an artwork. But all this is of course dead metaphor, and it needs to be dug up, cleaned off, and seen for what it is. Once upon a time—that is, in the time before the world was disenchanted—enchantment would have meant, literally, the employment of magic or sorcery. It presumed a situation in which people considered themselves in constant threat of being attacked and having their will overridden by the irresistible compulsion of a spell. The disenchantment story borrows its movie-blurb vocabulary (“enchanting!” “spell-binding!”) from a sense of causality that would have involved serious psychic inconveniences for those concerned. Conservative Christians still inhabit that threatening mental universe—that’s why, unlike the rest of us, they cannot safely enjoy J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books as fantasies (which is a shame, since in many ways they are quite conservative fantasies). What the disenchantment story does is invite the rest of us to abandon ourselves to the desire for figurative enchantment without worrying what it would be like actually to believe we are vulnerable to spells, that the world is full of magicians and malevolent spirits that at any moment could harm us, strike our loved ones with paralysis or disease, destroy our crops and livestock, and so on.

The point is not incidental. As Charles Taylor argues in *A Secular Age*, a re-reading of the disenchantment narrative that I will discuss in some detail below, for most of the history of
the West it was the certainty that evil spirits existed that made disbelief so very difficult for most people even to conceive of, let alone enter into. You needed Christianity’s good spirits because you needed protection against the evil spirits who, you had no doubt, lurked in wait all around you. Nature back then was famously animated, and the spirits were what animated it—animated it with intentions, but not necessarily good intentions. The disenchantment story celebrates the pre-modern past without bothering to remember the evil spirits. The sort of belief it tells us we need is defined by allowing the bad stuff from back then to drop out. We are urged to buy the whole package without being reminded of half of its contents.

There are of course versions of the disenchantment story that don’t seem to be a story at all. The concept is at its weakest when the crudeness of “before” and “after” is most exposed. This is especially true for the embarrassing “before”: when you can’t avoid identifying enchantment with, say, the notion that you can successfully propitiate the gods and get favorable winds to blow by sacrificing your daughter. But it also holds for the logic that links them: the highly improbable assumption that what society today is most sorely missing is (of all things) precisely and symmetrically what society used to have. Disenchantment seems a more plausible proposition when it cuts directly to the present, insisting on how deeply desirable enchantment is whether or not it is an aspect of the past that can now be retrieved. In Bennett’s version, for example, enchantment is more or less liberated from the encumbrance of the disenchantment plot. Bennett argues quite persuasively against that plot. She breaks the narrative apart by dismissing stage 2), enchantment lost. And, unlike Taylor, she pays little attention to the idyllic stage 1), the pre-modern era when enchantment supposedly reigned. But her lack of interest in stage 1) and her dismissal of stage 2) in no way diminish her commitment to stage 3), the present
desirability of enchantment, which remains perfectly intact. Bennett never stops to question the idea that enchantment is what we want and what we need. On the contrary, she allows the concept to expand imperiously. Enchantment as she presents it is a sort of magical solution to a great deal of what ails us, ready to sort out our most pressing ethical and political dilemmas while also re-aligning our emotions and even our bodily existence. Luckily it’s right here, fully available, all around us.

The present volume doesn’t go quite so far. Still, the paradox written into the idea of “secular enchantment” seems again to want to have it both ways, narratively speaking. Disenchantment has happened, so the book implies: that’s why the world is secular, why we have the specific problems (no natural basis for ethics, no meanings or values that reach beyond self-satisfaction, no compensation for life’s inevitable pains, losses, and injustices) for which enchantment can be proposed as the solution. But disenchantment also cannot have happened, or else enchantment would not be still so readily available. This is probably not too far from what I believe myself, with some readjustment of emphasis. (To put this alternative in the same paradoxical form: disenchantment has not happened, and therefore enchantment is not the name of what we need. And disenchantment has happened, but what has been produced thereby is secularism, which is less of a problem than a solution, though by no means a final or inclusive one.) But I would prefer if possible to put my beliefs in terms that are less paradoxical. I suggest, then, that we examine the paradox at both ends. Are we sure it is indeed enchantment, and not some other thing entirely, that we really need and want? And has there occurred something that can properly be called disenchantment?

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There is no doubt that “the enchanted world” was “an object of longing” for Weber, that he saw enchantment through a “haze of nostalgia” (Bennett, 63). Still, nostalgia was only one of Weber’s inspirations, and what Bennett calls “the problem of meaninglessness” (7) was by no means the key result of disenchantment as Weber imagined it. Here a bit of social context is helpful. As Fritz Ringer points out in *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, the mandarin elite to which Weber belonged was “rapidly losing its influence upon the new electoral politics” (134). For this reason and others, it tended to be pessimistic about democracy and quick to confuse democratic institutions or reforms with the supposed soullessness of a bleak, alienated, meaning-deprived modernity. Weber shared this nostalgic sensibility. But he also stood fast against the “thoughtlessly unqualified rejection of industrial civilization itself” by which many of his fellow mandarins were attracted (as many champions of disenchantment are today). “Weber himself tended to speak of rationalization and bureaucratization as more or less unpleasant inevitabilities. His tone was that of the heroic pessimist who faces facts; but it was also characteristic of him that he would not tolerate the obscurantist illusion of a total escape from modernity” (158-9).  

If Weber did not fall for or call for that illusory escape from modernity, it was not simply because (as those here taxed with obscurantism would perhaps reply) he had fallen instead for the modernist myth of the social scientist or scholar (“Wissenschaft” in the lecture’s title is better translated “scholarship” than “science”) as a new charismatic hero, facing alone the meaningless void that the fearful masses could not be expected to inhabit or even acknowledge. That myth had (and has) its attractions. But it is counter-balanced in Weber by elements of a history that does not, as later readers have assumed, begin in meaning and end in meaninglessness.
According to Catherine Colliot-Thélène, there are two basic reasons why Weber should not be read as proposing, even ambivalently, a nostalgic narrative of rationalization. First, the “after” of Weber’s narrative was not simply rational. Second, the “before” was not simply irrational.

Weber sees religion as both an agent of rationalization, eliminating magic from the world, and as itself in a real sense quite rational. What people want and have always wanted from religion, in Weber’s eyes, is not so much personal alignment with ultimate cosmic truths as material, this-worldly things like good health, prosperity, and progeny. Religion is not alien to instrumental rationality. (That is also Taylor’s point about protection against evil spirits, though he later forgets he’s made it.) When Weber describes religion, then, he does not put the emphasis on “the beyond,” as if this-worldly life were inherently inadequate without some reference to a mysterious or unknowable higher reality. On the other hand, the iron cage of modernity could be described equally well as hyperrational or as just the opposite. At the end of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism Weber paints a portrait of unbridled, endless acquisitiveness, shaken loose from the rational-religious goal of increasing the capitalist’s points in heaven or even his physical well-being, unable to remember why, though rich, he is still exhausting himself to pile up further wealth. This portrait is not endearing, but it cannot count as proof that what modernity has done is rationalize the world. The same holds for Weber’s insistence that despite the process of disenchantment the modern world remains, at least metaphorically, polytheistic. More on this below.

As Colliot-Thélène demonstrates, Weber’s various mentions of disenchantment do not all refer to the same thing. “In different passages,” she comments, “Weber gives his famous formula either the limited, precise sense of the elimination of magical techniques for salvation, or
the wider sense of the abandonment of the quest for meaning” (73). What readers have done is to jump from magic, which is historically specific and easier to give up on, to meaning, which seems universal and absolutely indispensable. The loss of the first therefore seems to entail the loss of the second. This is how the story of disenchantment is most often read. For the popular understanding, religion and its near-equivalents exist in order to satisfy a hunger for meaning, and this hunger is universal and ineradicable. To be without meaning, on this view, is necessarily to fall into a famished and pathological state, like Durkheim’s anomie. It’s the ability to fill up anomie’s presumed emptiness that explains the desirable social effects attributed to religion. Hence enchantment—religion plus its near-equivalents—is something that society needs, and will always need.

And perhaps, if society has not yet starved to death, meaning is something that society will always already have supplied. Here the story collides with itself, implying that, if the need is indeed so peremptory, meaning cannot really ever have been absent. To say that disenchantment means the loss of meaning, making use of the predicate as a verb in the very act of declaring that it is lost, is both to risk self-contradiction and to make that loss seem a lesser, much more uncertain thing. Reading the disenchantment story in this way gives it a flatter arc, without either the high peaks of the enchanted before and the re-enchanted after or the deep, deep valley of disenchantment in the middle. To go a bit further in this direction is to suggest that there may not be a narrative here at all. Perhaps meaning is something that one simply cannot not have. In The Meaning of Life, Terry Eagleton distinguishes between two senses of meaninglessness: “when somebody wails ‘My life is meaningless,’ they do not mean that it makes no sense in the way that ‘&$£%’ makes no sense. Rather, it is meaningless more in the
sense that ‘Assuring you most earnestly of our respectful attention at all times, we remain your obliged and most devoted servants ...’ is meaningless. People who find life meaningless are not complaining that they cannot tell what kind of stuff their body is made out of . . . They mean, rather, that their lives lack significance. And to lack significance means to lack point, substance, purpose, quality, value, and direction” (64). Significance in this sense does not require any transcendental grounding. Even “Assuring you most earnestly of our respectful attention at all times” has a legible social purpose behind it, though not that of communicating ceaseless individual attention or respect. The world is full of social purposes. The question is which ones you like and which ones you don’t.

Weber’s philosophical point is, I hope, uncontroversial: that humankind must learn to make do without natural or transcendental foundations for its ethical choices. What seems debatable, and a matter of debate even within his work, is how this bleak vision gets mapped onto society. Instead of seeing society as full of social purposes, hence full of significance (in the lesser, sub-philosophical sense of the term), Weber tended to divide society into ordinary folk who denied the ultimate emptiness and the scholar or sociologist who, set apart from society, heroically embodied that emptiness. Weber’s strongest denial of the need for meaning sets the scholar against the theologian. Every theology, Weber declares in “Science as a Vocation,” “presupposes that the world must have a meaning” (153). The scholar ought to be able to live without this theological premise. Here Weber strikes the tone that Ringer describes: “To the person who cannot bear the fate of the times like a man, one must say: may he rather return silently, without the usual publicity build-up of renegades, but simply and plainly. The doors of the old churches are open widely and compassionately for him” (155). To return to religion will
entail a “sacrifice of the intellect.” Weber does not speak against this sacrifice. He seems to be positing that only a few will have the courage not to offer it, and by his very generosity raising the prestige of the non-sacrificing few still higher. But the passage strikes a general note (“the person” = “Wer”) that allows it to be read as asking everyone, not merely scholars, to bear the fate of meaninglessness manfully.11

This democratic hint suggests another, more positive way to understand Weber’s take on meaninglessness. If meaninglessness is indeed a social and historical phenomenon (as suggested by “the fate of the times”), then there will be more to say about the social history that explains it. Weber lays out this history in a paraphrase of Tolstoy. Tolstoy argued, Weber says, that for “Abraham, or some peasant of the past,” death is meaningful because at the end of his days he had received “what life had to offer,” because “for him there remained no puzzles he might wish to solve.” Today, on the other hand, “there is always a further step ahead of one who stands in the march of progress” (140). For the civilized man, puzzles remain that we do wish to solve. What the civilized man experiences is thus “provisional and not definitive, and therefore for him death is a meaningless occurrence. And because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless” (140). Here meaninglessness seems to be a direct and inevitable result of the belief in progress, which takes the form of puzzles left unsolved.

But Weber’s premises lend themselves to a very different conclusion. Recall that enchantment for Weber has not disappeared, but has only been re-located: “the ultimate and most sublime values have now retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations (155). The site of the loss is “public life.” It is because meaning has supposedly departed from public life that there is no
longer “genuine community” (155). But the historical assumptions here seem anything but sure. In order for ultimate values to have retreated from public life, they first had to have resided there. Was public life ever invested with meaning? Under what conditions can “genuine community” be said to have existed? Weber does not ask these questions, but when he puts “puzzles” and “public life” so close together, he invites them. After all, the unsolved puzzles that haunt people like Weber, keeping them from a fulfilled or satisfied death (Weber himself was to die within a year of the publication of his lecture), were social puzzles, and puzzles that would arguably have been just as relevant to pre-modern society as to his own. The suggestion that “genuine community” used to exist omits any consideration of those who were excluded from such community— the slaves and women of ancient Greece, to pick at random from a long series of possible examples. Opinion on the genuineness of community would depend on whose experience was consulted. If you asked landless laborers in the Middle Ages, such community might have seemed less unquestionably genuine.

But the crucial step in the argument is still to come. It’s this: if genuine community does not seem to exist in the present, as the disenchantment story suggests, it’s in large part because people like Weber are asking the marginal and the excluded. In effect, with allowance for the different methodologies of the time, that’s what the new sociology does. The “puzzles” sociologists work on and that remain unsolved at their death involve questions of what makes public life public, what stops community from being genuine; they are puzzles of social inclusiveness, social cohesion, social justice. It is trying to solve these puzzles, Weber says, that puts one on “the march of progress” and thus leads to meaningfulness. But it makes more sense to conclude that meaningfulness is produced not by progress, but on the contrary by the failure
of progress: that it is a symptom of the present’s failure to integrate social constituencies that the pre-modern world made no effort to integrate, the present’s failure to achieve a level of social justice that the pre-modern world did even not strive to achieve. In other words, the puzzles are not new. What is new is the attempt to solve them. If progress entails or includes progress toward democracy, toward greater and more equitable social inclusion, then progress toward solving these puzzles is exactly the opposite of what Weber says it is. Progress is not the cause of meaninglessness, but an attempt to cure it. This is just what Weber’s puzzle-solving work is doing: not disenchanted a world that would have been enchanted without it, but on the contrary trying its best to supply meaning and community that had never yet existed.

This line of argument offers meaning to Weber’s work— in fact, greater meaning than Weber himself is willing to claim for that work. It suggests that, for all his mandarin suspicion of progress and democracy, he himself is working toward something like democratic progress. It suggests that in so doing he is working against disenchantment, and this although he prefers to see disenchantment, most of the time, as unalterable. It suggests, finally, that something can be done to level the supposed “meaning gap” between scholars and non-scholars: that making ordinary life more inclusive and more just will provide ordinary people with some of that “meaning” they are said to hunger for, while it also makes more sense of the scholars’ existentially empty labors, reducing their necessity to face meaninglessness in proud solitude.

Do we want to call this re-enchantment? I don’t see why we would. The hint of delicious, delirious intoxication, while always welcome outside working hours, seems out of place here. This meaningfulness is more prosaic, more everyday, an extension of the meaning to be found in helping a child with her homework, making a good meal, or eating that meal in good
company. It suggests that enchantment or re-enchantment is the wrong term because
disenchantment has never happened. Was there in fact a historical moment when people lost
their belief in helping children with their homework or offering good hospitality? It’s a short
step from these questions to another, which Weber comes closer to posing: Did people ever lose
their will to join together with others and try to change their shared conditions of life?

His implicit “no” to this question, implying that disenchantment cannot then have
happened, is articulated in one of the very passages where Weber announces disenchantment:

Different gods struggle with one another, now and for all times to come. We live as did
the ancients when their world was not yet disenchanted of its gods and demons, only we
live in a different sense. As Hellenic man at time sacrificed to Aphrodite and at other
times to Apollo, and, above all, as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city, so do we
still nowadays, only the bearing of man has been disenchanted . . . Fate, and certainly not
‘science,’ holds sway over these gods and their struggles. One can only understand what
the godhead is for the one order or for the other, or better, what godhead is in the one or
in the other order. With this understanding, however, the matter has reached its limit so
far as it can be discussed in a lecture-room and by a professor (148).

Figuratively at least—but it’s a figure Weber won’t let go of— the social order that the scholar-
teacher steps out of when he enters the classroom is still polytheistic. In this sense, full
disenchantment has not occurred, despite the significant change in “bearing” from pre-modern to
modern society. Nor is disenchantment going to happen. With the phrase “now and for all times
to come,” Weber comes very near to making polytheism the eternal law of human life, thus
taking his leave of the disenchantment narrative altogether. The gesture is welcome. It’s a relief
to imagine being spared the wishfully, wilfully blind absurdities of this particular “before” and “after,” to imagine that after all there has been no enchantment and there is now no meaninglessness, but rather a persistence of the kinds of dilemmas society had suffered through before, however different the dilemmas themselves or the form they take.

Yet perhaps the hinted departure from narrative is also a bit premature. Weber describes “the fundamental fact” of polytheism as follows: “as long as life remains immanent and is interpreted in its own terms, it knows only of an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another. Or, speaking directly, the ultimately possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion” (152). One might be tempted to think of the element of theism in this polytheism as a mere figurative token. But it isn’t. It guarantees the uniqueness and irreducibility of each god, hence the irreconcilability of the gods with each other. This is the all-important logic by which polytheism for Weber (like “difference” in its strong versions today) comes to be defined by the necessary frustrating of any “final conclusion.” Yet recall that for Weber, inconclusiveness (the “provisional and not definitive” quality of individual lives) is precisely what had produced the meaninglessness and disenchantment associated with “the march of progress.” Inconclusiveness thus finds itself on two opposing sides: the side of progress, and the side of polytheism. The two terms look like contraries for Weber; it is polytheism, “an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another,” that makes progress seem inconceivable. But by associating progress with inconclusiveness rather than with triumphalism, he seems to be drawing them closer together, making it possible to imagine a narrative, which is to say a kind of meaningful progress.

Weber’s language here is Nietzschean, and so is the project of social science as Weber
envisages it, founded as it is on the purposelessness of the void. It may be that we should simply embrace, with Nietzsche, the anti-narrativism of “unceasing struggle,” or in Foucault’s version, each regime of domination succeeding the last in an unending display of the implacable ingenuity of power. Still, there is some sense that this turn to Nietzsche may be evading a potential narrative that is offered up by Weber’s own vocabulary and that, if acknowledged, could enter into interesting competition with the Nietzschean “now and for all times to come.”

The figure of polytheism, or the persistence of plural gods, leads directly into a counter-narrative of secularization. Weber makes the point himself: “Many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanted and hence take the form of impersonal forces” (149). Here Weber reads secularization not as rupture but as continuity, as a combined preservation and transformation of religious concepts rather than an absolute break with them. This reading does not seem incompatible, though Weber does not say so, with a sort of progress. Impersonal forces are not the same as gods. Their authority may for example be more vulnerable to non-priestly intervention, democratic re-interpretation, or flat denial. Disenchantment in this sense produces significant differences, if incomplete ones. The question is how to weigh the transformation against the preservation. These are exactly the materials of linear narrative, which would not be narrative at all if it did not, despite its linearity, loop back to re-connect with its beginnings. A narrative of progress—for example, toward democratic inclusiveness and equality—might well have to forego conclusive resolution, and even embrace its own (polytheistic) inconclusiveness, and yet still take the form of a narrative with a direction, and still count as meaningful progress. Polytheism and progress together: this would be one way to retell the story of secularization with as little reference as possible to enchantment.
On the first page of the first chapter of *A Secular Age*, the book which won him the Templeton Prize in 2007, Charles Taylor chooses the word “enchanted,” despite its evocation of “light and fairies” (25), to describe the world of 1500. He does so, he says, on the grounds that Weber’s “disenchantment” has “achieved such wide currency” as a description of the modern world that succeeded it. Hence he can now “use its antonym to describe a crucial feature of the pre-modern condition,” namely, “the world of spirits, demons, and moral forces which our ancestors lived in” (25-26). The crucial words here are “fairies” and “demons.” For the moment at least, Taylor doesn’t want fairies *without* demons, good spirits without evil spirits. This is going to be a full-dress history of the process of secularization that, like Weber’s, will refuse to pretend that the values of the modernizing progress narrative can simply be reversed. Here, it seems, the vanished pre-modern will not stand for all that is good. And, again like Weber, Taylor will see much of value in our disenchanted modernity. Yet this version of secularization doesn’t quite choose continuity over rupture. Nor can it quite manage to point toward a narrative of progress, even as an unrealized potential.

Taylor does not want to describe secularism’s ascension as what he calls a “subtraction” story. According to this version of secularization or disenchantment, religion is said to shrink as science, technology, and rationality expand. Little by little superstitions are subtracted from the world, leaving secularism behind to represent all that is not superstition. For Taylor, secularism is not the widening zone of clarity left as myth and error are dissipated, but rather the product of shifts in thinking *within* religion, and in particular within Christianity. In this sense he is clearly writing in the lineage of Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which makes
precisely this case. One key difference is that Taylor gives credit for secularization—if credit is
the right word—not to Protestantism but to Catholicism. Like Hans Blumenberg, he argues that it
was in the medieval period that the supernatural was first divided off from the natural, thus
preparing the later moment when “an enchanted world, full of spirits and forces” would become
almost incomprehensible to most people. The cause of this early disenchantment was not
proto-scientific rationality but rather a more conscious and zealous dedication to God. Taylor’s
account of the Reformation puts the same irony on more familiar ground: “So we disenchant the
world; we reject the sacramentals; all the elements of ‘magic’ in the old religion. They are not
only useless, but blasphemous, because they are arrogating power to us, and hence ‘plucking’ it
away from ‘the glory of God’s righteousness.’ This also means that intercession of saints is of
no effect. In face of the world of spirits and powers, this gives us great freedom” (79).

Taylor says that we have disenchanted the world, yet like Weber he also offers evidence
that in an important sense the world is not disenchanted at all. For Taylor, the modern concept of
freedom is Christian (Catholic as well as Protestant) at its origin, and to an important if
unspecified degree it remains Christian. Modern individualism similarly retains the imprint of a
“Christian, or Christian-Stoic, attempt to remake society” (155). Several hundred pages later,
Taylor shows how “the Victorian Christianity of self-discipline created a space for the move to a
humanism of duty, will, and altruism” (396). And what is true of humanism is also true of post-
or anti-humanism. Many of us now look out upon a vast, indifferent universe whose order, such
as it is, seems to have nothing to do with the hopes and fears of our self-important little species.
But we have arrived here, Taylor proposes, not only because our ancestors abandoned “the
immediate encounter with spirits and forces,” but because they did so in favor of a “much more
powerful sense of God’s ordering will” (375). And that sense of order, or one very like it, continues to inform concepts we think of as secular. From a viewpoint that would like to be more rigorously secular, then, there is some question as to whether contact with the indifference of the universe has yet been successfully made, or ever will be.

Writing as a practitioner and defender of Christianity, Taylor cannot be entirely happy to present Christianity as a kind of vanishing mediator, less a form of enchantment in its own right than an agent responsible for leading us all the way from enchantment to disenchantment, the endpoint that is, or that he fears will be, Christianity’s vanishing point. But this is at least one of the stories he tells. When any given religion becomes merely one option among many, he argues, no religion can remain what it was. This is what has happened to all Western religions in the secular age. Taylor calls this secular terminus the “immanent frame” – a phrase that has become the title of a spirited thread of discussion on the website of the Social Science Research Council, one of the foremost sites for the “return of religion” on the American intellectual landscape. The immanent frame is “a ‘natural,’ or ‘this-worldly’ order which can be understood in its own terms, without reference to the ‘supernatural’ or ‘transcendent,’” and that therefore discourages the choice of supernatural or transcendent explanations. “This is something we all share,” Taylor says (594). He does not exempt himself or other believers from it. Here he echoes his earlier position on the inevitability of secularism, a position for which he was strongly criticized by the anthropologist Talal Asad, one of the most influential anti-secularists now writing.15

The generosity of this concession, so dramatically at odds with where Taylor wants the narrative to go, displays a certain unsettlingness at his story’s heart. For if he tells us that we are
now blocked off from the supernatural and the transcendent, he is no less committed to the
notion that try as we might, we have in fact never left the supernatural and the transcendent
behind. In other words, the book seems drawn toward two nearly antithetical alternatives. On
the one hand, it suggests that secularism’s triumph over Christianity, like Christianity’s over the
pagan spirits and demons, does mark an unquestionable rupture. That triumph, embodied in the
immanent frame, now makes religious belief in the old sense very difficult. On this reading, the
disenchantment of the world is an unhappy if not quite an irreversible historical fact. On the
other hand, *A Secular Age* also presents secularism as a disguised form of Christianity, hiding
theological content behind apparently secular concepts. On this reading, the disenchantment of
the world was more like a translation. Everything depends on the translation’s faithfulness, so to
speak—on how much of Christianity was lost in the process and how much was preserved.
Taylor acknowledges neither the irresolution produced by the latter reading nor the difference
between the first line of interpretation and the second. He simply vacillates between them. His
vacillation means that he is more affirmative toward secularism than might be expected from a
champion of Christianity. And it means he is more ambivalent than might be expected toward
Christianity itself. He sometimes describes secularism as an “achievement” (542), and he
sometimes seems to blame Christianity for wiping the old pagan world clean of its wild bunch of
demons and spirits.

One of the book’s effects is to level the playing field between secularism and religion.
This involves both invoking history and flattening it out. Sounding unrepentantly Hegelian,
Taylor suggests that the standard of truth does not apply to entities which are subject to history.
As a historical extension of the religious project, secularism offers a particular set of answers to
the unavoidable question of how to live a good life. Reprising the old communitarian objection to liberalism (unlivable because abstract, empty of value), Taylor assumes that some answer must be given, even though no answer can ever be firmly grounded or incontestable. Since we’re not given enough to go on, he writes, “going one way or the other requires what is often called a ‘leap of faith’” (550). All answers to such questions are equally groundless—there is no difference between being “for” something and “believing in” something. Religious belief gets an epistemological pass, therefore, and secularism has to surrender its sense of superiority, becoming the same kind of thing as what it defines itself against. This might be thought of as a postmodern case for religion, for it takes as given a general lack of foundations. At the same time, however, we are only a short step away here from the fundamentalist claim that secular humanism is “just another religion” and that Darwin’s account of creation deserves no pedagogical preference over the Bible’s.

As it happens, Taylor is not friendly to fundamentalism. He has no time for Hell or for the wrath of God. (His God is a God of love, he says, not a “cruel puppet-master” (389). When the subject of suffering arises, he appears to suffer too, in sympathy, but like his God he is evasively silent on the whys and wherefores.) Taylor himself seems a bit wrathful that the fundamentalists, by accepting a “normal” sense of causation, affirm the materialist concept of the miracle as “a kind of punctual hole blown in the regular order of things from outside” (547). He speaks strongly against churches that identify faith with codes of sexual behavior. What he calls “code-fixation” (704) is one parallel between his counter-Enlightenment narrative and that of Foucault. For Taylor, Foucault’s “disciplinary society” stands as a useful description of the secular present—a present that the fundamentalists unwittingly accept too much of when they
embrace a “fetishism of rules and norms” (742), especially sexual ones.

The problem is that much of what Taylor dislikes about fundamentalism also applies to Christianity in general. After all, it too has moved on from that “enchanted world, full of spirits and forces” about which Taylor does not seek to hide his nostalgia. (The first time the enchanted world comes up, it’s described as “the world of spirits, demons, and moral forces” [26]. Later the demons drop out. I can see why.) In one mood, Taylor posits the functional equivalence of the secular and the religious; in another, more driven by his nostalgia, he emphasizes on the contrary a dramatic historical rupture between them—a rupture that is also within religion, separating the enchanted world (now demon-less) from Christianity itself. Here he has no doubt that secularism has indeed disenchanted the world and that this is a very bad thing. We have not only lost the spirits, which required some sense of a “higher” reality, but we have also lost our full experience of our bodies. Now we take “a distance from our powerful emotions and our bodily functions” (139). Our religions are no longer really religions. We are barely capable of imagining how much else we may have lost.

Imagination is a sort of magical helper in this story, happened upon when Western man seems most lost in the wasteland of disenchantment and offering some hope of a happy ending. What if the spirits had not disappeared after all? What if disenchantment were only “an end to porousness in relation to the world of spirits” (137)? The idea that instead of being properly porous, we are now pathologically “buffered” suggests that the world of spirits is still there to be seen; the ability to see the spirits depends solely on shedding our buffers, cleansing our imagination or our epidermis, opening ourselves up body and mind to the higher as well as the lower world. (Sin, as Taylor describes it, is a closing oneself off to God; accepting the immanent
frame means accepting a closed world. Closure is one of his most frequent and most
ideologically loaded diagnoses.) Here Taylor seems to assume a proposition—the real existence
of spirits—that reasonable people might doubt and that therefore ought really to be supported by
some sort of argument. The only excuse I can imagine for doing so is that Taylor is also
assuming that the widespread belief in spirits can be equated with the existence of those spirits.
In other words, he is giving decisive ontological weight to subjectivity, feelings, imagination.

This is the problem with his characteristic use of “we” and “our.” “Our” feelings count
as hard evidence that various questionable entities have a real existence. In support of “the idea
that nature has something to say to us,” Taylor offers those “feelings of renewal” that sometimes
come to people in countryside or forest (358). Well, yes, wonder is wonderful, but do people
really have to go to the countryside or forest to feel it? And do they feel it there (rather than
walking down a crowded city street, for example, or watching someone rap or make sushi)
because nature is really talking to them, or because they’ve been told what to hear and where to
hear it? Feelings are always interesting but never reliable. Or again: “I cannot see the ‘demand
for religion’ just disappearing like that” (435). Taylor says this as if once the heartfelt demand
for religion has been expressed, the ultimate satisfaction of that demand is somehow obligatory
and guaranteed. I feel that God exists, therefore he does. We desire eternal life, and therefore
eternal life must be real. Why not conclude on the contrary that because we fear mortality, there
is no afterlife? We feel a lot of things. Many of them contradict each other. They can’t all be
true.

On the one hand, Taylor’s respect for certain human feelings seems exaggerated. On the
other hand, there are all sorts of feelings that don’t get respected nearly enough. There’s little or
nothing here about secularists finding meaning by helping children with their homework or cooking good meals, about men campaigning to protect doctors from murderous anti-abortion activists or Jews campaigning against Israeli settlements on the West Bank. Taylor’s portrait of secular modernity is full of stale Brave New World-style cliché about Hugh Hefner, brightly-lit supermarkets, empty suburbs, and the triumph of the therapeutic. Things get a tad aggressive. Secularists, we are told, are utopians and proto-fascists by nature. And their lives, of course, are meaningless. Taylor is quite taken with the cliché that life in today’s secular world is beset with the malaise of meaninglessness. He repeats it without wondering whether, to the extent that it exists, it might be a result of rising expectations rather than disenchantment—a product of democratic progress to be set against centuries of resignation by the poor to their inevitable social fate. No, there was no malaise back then. Why? Because people knew their places. Nor does Taylor bother to compare this putative malaise with the various sorts of sickness, figurative and literal, that people suffered through in the meaning-saturated medieval parishes that he is fond of evoking for contrast. The demons are not scary enough, and in any case they are casually omitted from ensuing lists of spirits, fairies, moral forces, and so on. There is not enough of the fear that vulnerability to literal rather than figurative enchantment would naturally elicit. There is not nearly enough about the ordinary bonds of work, family, play, and politics, the newly invented intimacies and the technologically-mediated attention to distant others, the infinitely varied and surprising forms of love and hope and tenderness that, despite a state of social emergency and the lack of any transcendental foundation, provide most of us, most of the time, with enough meaning to go on.

In short, Taylor is telling the disenchantment story again, and telling it with a vengeance.
This story makes life without religion/enchantment seem so poor and depleted, so toxic and utterly unlivable that one is almost ready to embrace Taylor’s less nostalgic, more postmodern alternative: that the world is ruled by feeling and imagination. But that too would be a mistake.

The immanent frame (that is, secularism) is what Taylor calls a social imaginary. Taylor understands the social imaginary, the subject of one of his earlier books, as a set of normative notions and images that go deeper than mere “intellectual schemes” and that determine the sorts of expectations that are and aren’t possible. It does not specify beliefs, but sets the conditions of belief. Crucially, it determines how much harder it is to sustain your faith once your faith comes to be seen as merely one option among others. But how determining you think a social imaginary is will depend on whether you accent the social or the imaginary. If you accent the social, you get the suggestion that for better or worse secularism is not going away—the tiny, isolated medieval parishes that once sustained belief are not coming back. If on the other hand you accent the imaginary, you can be optimistic again about belief, but you are suddenly in doubt as to whether this age is indeed secular at all. To say that everything is imagination is to say that everything is belief. If that’s what Taylor is arguing, then the disenchantment story collapses. We believe now, he would be saying, and we have always believed. Belief is not impossible; it’s all there’s ever been. Secularism is merely the arrogant illusion that there can be anything other or higher than belief.

Taylor mobilizes Nietzsche, the “death of God” man himself, in this attempt to cut secularism down to size. Perverse as the strategy may seem, it makes a certain sense. When Nietzsche declared that God was dead, he went on to add, at the risk of paradox, that this meant God had in fact gone into hiding and now had to be smoked out of various secular terms, from
morals and nature and history to man and even grammar. The large question that Nietzscheans like Foucault have never been very good at facing is whether these God-terms are or are not God-equivalents. For if the secularization of theological concepts results in nothing but more theology, if God-terms are functional point-for-point equivalents for God, then God is effectively indestructible. In that case, everything would indeed be religion, or faith, or imagination, or belief. Taylor flirts with this idea, and sometimes seems ready to espouse it. “Perhaps there is only the choice between good and bad religion” (708).

No one can be entirely happy with the desperately ahistorical postulate that “everything is religion,” however gratified one may be to observe that it contradicts Taylor’s history of disenchantment. Secular readers will want to insist on maintaining a few distinctions: for example, Darwin’s theory of natural selection does not belong to the same generic or epistemological category as the Biblical story of the Creation. Literary critics like myself will perhaps want to re-think their own self-congratulatory versions of the “everything is X” equation. What I hope everyone will want is a history that presents the transition from God to God-terms— that is, a history of secularization—as real and significant, even if God-terms always invite further suspicion and further secularization. After all, one need not be satisfied with a quasi-theological use of “nature” or “history” or “human rights” in order to feel that these terms mark a significant improvement over the vocabulary of religion as such. One need not idealize what counts today as rational argument in order to judge rational argument an improvement over appeals to the authority of sacred scripture or to the will of God. Such an improvement story could subtract the nostalgia from Taylor’s tale of disenchantment without thereby becoming another story of secularism-as-subtraction— without refusing, that is, Taylor’s valuable point that
secularism too is constituted and limited by history. In short, I think we need a story of secularism as improvement over religious belief, a story that would be both inconclusive and inspiring. At the risk of seeming to reinvent a very creaky wheel, I would call this a narrative of progress.\textsuperscript{17}

* * *

In \textit{Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World}, George Levine agrees “that Weber is right to recognize the power of ‘rationalization’ to demoralize” (24).\textsuperscript{18} I too agree. The question is not whether it would demoralize us if it were the case; the question is whether it \textit{is} the case— in other words, how well the concept of rationalization does in the competition of many rival concepts to decide which best describe the world. I don’t think it comes close to winning. The paradigmatic institution of rationalization is bureaucracy. In the midst of a financial and economic crisis that is extraordinarily severe but historically far from unique, hearing news every day about the sufferings it has caused, we are reminded very forcibly of two things that we ought to have known before: that capitalism has more to do with the shape of our world than bureaucracy does, and that although capitalism also uses numbers, it is not a force for rationalization, but a force for chaos. Faced with such wild, irresponsible, number-based imaginings as the derivative, bureaucratic regulation is very emphatically not a useful name for what’s wrong with our world. It is something that we needed much, much more of. In short, disenchantment is the wrong diagnosis. And re-enchantment is the wrong remedy.

The call for re-enchantment cannot help doing precisely the opposite of what it wants to do. It seems to reject the disenchantment story, but it accepts too much of that story, for ordinary life must first be hollowed out and impoverished in order for re-enchantment to be granted the
contract to fill it up and enrich it again. Wonder and surprise produce the problem they say they want to solve: “a consistent undervaluing of contemporary experience” (Levine, 37). The crucial move here is to present ordinary life as “routine,” which allows wonder and surprise (that is, that which is not routine) to sound like solutions to a problem. This is a terrible failure of imagination. Since when was life in history, fully experienced in all its dialectical twists and turns, ever a matter of predictable routine? If all biology is miraculous, properly considered, then surely the same is true for human history and indeed for everyday social existence. Is it not, Slavoj Zizek asks in On Belief, “that ALL religion, ALL experience of the sacred, involves– or, rather, simply IS– an ‘unplugging’ from the daily routine? Is this ‘unplugging’ not simply the name for the basic ECSTATIC experience of entering the domain in which everyday rules are suspended, the domain of the sacred TRANSGRESSION?” (110). Well, no. If this capitalized ecstatic transgression is suddenly on the agenda, it’s only because people are willing to buy into a depleted, monolithic, contradiction-less sense of “daily routine,” a sense that in the normal course of things, the “rules” unfortunately do work. They don’t. Anarchy is not what we want, but what we already have. Wall Street traders have spent decades happily transgressing, and their unplugged ecstasies have resulted in foreclosures and unemployment on a massive scale. Capitalism is not rationalization. It does not disenchant the world. What it does is different, and much worse.

As Jane Bennett rightly notes, there is a form of enchantment even in commodity fetishism. But consider how much enchantment or poetry or meaning is also to be found in everyday practices of de-fetishization. When you look at the shirt on your back or the coffee in your cup and, for once, see through the object to the labor of the people far away who produced
it, to the lives they are obliged to live, to the invisible but real links between their lives and yours, you may not find enchantment in their lives, but you cannot conclude that the world is dull. I cannot see the merit in making yourself blind to what’s in your path in order to ensure that you will be perpetually surprised. To decide that everyday life is rationalized, bureaucratized, or routinized is to kill it in order to get a pat on the back for rescuing it from the dead.

I cannot speak to the question of how many of the needs traditionally thought to be inseparable from religion might be satisfied by moving from the routine/wonder narrative (itself now something of a routine) to a more dialectical alternative in which the surprises are to be expected and secularization retains the surprising power of counting as progress. I assume that some of what are called “needs” ought to be thought of as wishes, wishes for things we have never had and cannot have, like a good answer to the “meaning of life” question or a basis in nature for human ethics or a satisfactory consolation for the death of a child. To appreciate the “deep value of everything” (Levine, 259), including the virus that killed your daughter, seems to me a religious stance rather than an ethical one. It devalues the word “value” itself. There is no adequate recompense for suffering and injustice that have already happened. But (why be afraid to repeat the banality?) there is meaning to be found in trying to diminish the amount of both that will happen in the future.

It would not be hard, I think, to connect secularization to the theme of democratic inclusiveness and autonomy that I discussed above. If there has been a new tolerance for the “return of religion,” perhaps there is also increasing room for the recently unfashionable meta-narrative of emancipation. Imagining the world without religion, or with less of it, would mean
getting out from under an enormous weight of onerous authority. This emancipation is not easy to imagine, since secular concepts do contain so much religious baggage (hence the inconclusiveness of secularization) and so few places are secular even in the most limited sense. In the US, which is not one of those places, imagining further emancipation would mean, for starters, imagining presidential campaigns without the obligatory display of some sort of faith. It would mean imagining that people might little by little be able to give up saying after a public or private disaster that their suffering is “the will of God,” and this although there is no other consolation that can effectively take that formula’s place. It would mean people taking their fate into their own hands without any guarantee that things would therefore work out better than they have.

Even without guarantees, a secularization-as-progress narrative may sound arrogant or complacent. But if it is, it is less so than a re-enchantment of the world. A modest uncertainty about the limits of human knowledge and action seems to me to fit better on the secular than on the religious side of the aisle. To be secular is to know that not all mysteries can be transformed into puzzles, let alone solved. It means that our words should not ask for what they can’t have. If it makes sense to speak of “the sacredness of a world without a telos” (Levine, 261), surely it makes more sense to speak of the profanity of such a world. Assuming we want as far as possible for our words to have meaning, which is one of the more feasible ways to ensure that our lives too are as meaningful as possible, it might be better to give up on the sacred, and on enchantment in all its variants. There are other and better ways to say nice things about the world.
Notes


4. Jane Bennett, The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Bennett describes the disenchantment story as follows: “There was once a time when Nature was purposive, God was active in human affairs, human and other creatures were defined by a preexisting web of relations, social life was characterized by face-to-face relations, and political order took the form of organic community. Then, this premodern world gave way to forces of scientific and instrumental rationality, secularism, individualism, and the bureaucratic state—all of which, combined, disenchant the world” (7).


6. Paraphrasing Hans Blumenberg, and thus leaving her own views somewhat uncertain, Bennett writes: “The antisecularists are right in that some important source of meaning has indeed been lost with modernity. Call it an ancient cosmos of cyclical events and natural hierarchies, or a world alive with wonders and hints from God, or a teleological substance at work in history and nature—we do indeed live amidst ‘the disappearance of inherent purposes.’ But this disenchantment is a fact toward which we have adjusted quite well!” (66).


8. For example: “Le monde d’hier, tout enchanté qu’il fût, n’était pas constitutivement irrationel, il connaissait ses propres logiques de rationalisation” (68).


11. At any rate, Weber is clearly and forcefully speaking against the “modern intellectualist form of romantic irrationalism” (143)—one that has much in common with the return of religion, explicit and implicit, among intellectuals today.


13. As many have noted, the concept of secularization is ambiguous. Does it signal 1) an absolute rupture with religion, or 2) a transfer of religious structures of thought and feeling to non-religious objects, in other words a means of keeping religion alive to some degree in some other form? History suggests, for better or worse, that the second option is more frequent. Since the Romantic reaction that followed the Industrial and French Revolutions, the critique of secular rationality has always had a large place in European intellectual life. Thus Vincent Pecora suggests that European and American intellectuals have always had a “love-hate relationship with religion” (111). Much of the critique of European Enlightenment happened, he argues, within Europe—and, I think he would want to add, within the Enlightenment. To claim that this critique is internal to the Enlightenment is of course to defend the Enlightenment indirectly by attributing to it the power of self-criticism. Vincent P. Pecora, Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006).


16. For William Connolly, too, the disenchanted world seems incompatible not with the spirit but with the intensities we experience when we refuse to separate the spirit from the body; “modern secularism” ignores or disparages “the visceral register of subjectivity and intersubjectivity” (3). William E. Connolly, Why I Am Not a Secularist (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

17. Despite the general disavowal of cultural evolutionism, Vincent Pecora observes, the conflation of secularism with modernity continues to sustain the terribly misleading idea that everyone must follow the same developmental path, a path on which some are ahead, others...
behind. “The historical narrative of the advent of secular rationality in the West is almost never told as if it were reversible, as if the West would one day return, for example, to a medieval religious cosmology” (29). Making our stories reversible would be, so to speak, a huge step forward. One might say that it is only if secularization were assumed to be reversible that we could properly believe in it as a form of progress.


19. Slavoj Zizek, On Belief (London: Routledge, 2001). It was only after writing most of this essay, and choosing its title, that I read Zizek’s book and discovered that its first chapter is titled “Gnosticism? No Thanks!”