

Atheism and Wicca

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1. Atheism and Wicca

I'm always interested in new religious movements, especially the emergence of new types of Western religion. So I've been interested in watching the emergence of neo-paganism in America. America is supposed to be a Christian nation; yet, as every atheist surely knows, Christianity is declining in America. And, as Christianity declines, it's not just atheism that's filling the void. The void is also being filled with neo-paganism. Among neo-pagan movements, Wicca seems to be the largest and most well-defined.

Just to be clear: I'm not a Wiccan and the fact that I write about some topic doesn't imply that I sympathize with it. I write as a philosopher, which means that I'm always highly skeptical and highly critical (I'm critical of and skeptical about atheism, too). There are lots of aspects of Wicca that are just plain offensive to reason. But even that offensiveness goes a long way to illuminating the psychological functionality of religion. And, to be clear on some other points, it's important to distinguish Wicca and other neo-pagan movements from the New Age movements with which they are usually lumped. New Age spirituality and neo-paganism are ultimately very different types of religiosity. With all this in mind, there are several reasons why atheists ought to learn more about Wicca.

One reason is that Wicca is a religious challenge to Christianity. It is a profoundly non-Christian and non-Abrahamic religion (while at the same time being a profoundly Western religion). Here it's essential to stress that Wicca is not Satanism (Wiccans regard Satan as a purely Christian invention). And Wicca isn't a Christian heresy; it isn't deviant or perverted Christianity. On the contrary, it isn't Christian at all. Fascinating!

Another reason is that Wicca has all sorts of deep conceptual roots in American culture. The Americanized version of Wicca is a kind of American nature-religion. That sort of thing has been around since the New England transcendentalists. It's a kind of religiosity that's always been there, lurking strangely in the background despite the best efforts of the puritans and fundamentalists to get rid of it, and now its emerging with great strength. Maybe America isn't really a Christian nation after all.

A third reason is that Wicca may become a large-scale religion in the United States. It may be that, in two or three generations, Wicca will become a serious alternative to Christianity. I won't lay odds on this (I'll be long dead anyway); but it's entirely reasonable to think that American neo-paganism, especially Wicca, will continue to grow, will become institutionalized, and will gain significant cultural power. There are Wiccans in the military and neo-pagans in public office. Wicca may well die out or become absorbed by some other religion. But even in its degenerate "fluffy bunny" forms, it's become surprisingly popular very rapidly. Atheists so far have been fighting Christianity. Should they fight Wicca (or neo-paganism) too? If so, it will be a different fight.

But my greatest interest in studying Wicca is that it contains many aspects that are deeply atheistic. Of course, this can't be overdone: Wicca obviously has lots of theistic aspects,

and lots of just plain ridiculous aspects. And atheists have to criticize them. Still, it may be that there are elements of Wicca that will serve as the basis for a radically atheistic Western religion. There's nothing contradictory about atheistic religion. Religion does not require belief in theistic deities (or in any deities at all). I'd say that Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, and Confucianism are mainly atheistic Eastern religions. So far, pretty much all Western religion is theistic in one way or another. Nevertheless, Wicca has many affinities with the emerging school of religious naturalism (that said, there are serious disaffinities too). Religious naturalism is often atheistic. Here it should be noted that my own opposition to theism is primarily religious: theistic deities are personal; they are made in our image; they are idols. I'm opposed to idolatry.

My goal is to make a series of critical posts on various philosophical aspects of Wicca, especially insofar as they are relevant to atheism. Stay tuned.

2. The Wiccan Deity

I'm going to begin my critical philosophical posts on Wicca by dealing with the Wiccan ultimate deity. First, I'll present some quotes from Wiccans describing this deity. Next (in a separate post), I'll do some analysis and compare and contrast this deity with some other deities in the Western religious traditions. One thing should be clear right away: the Wiccan ultimate deity is not the Abrahamic God. And it is not a theistic deity. The concept of the ultimate deity in Wicca is non-theistic. Of course, some of these quotes also talk about the male God and female Goddess. These deities will be dealt with in later posts. Right now, our focus should be on "Ultimate Source".

The quotes are taken from the books listed at the end of this post. I've chosen these books because they are highly recommended both by writers in print and on the web. However, since I'm an outsider to Wicca, and I'm not an expert, it will probably be easy to object that I've missed some essential data. Fair enough. If anyone knows of any serious discussions of the Wiccan deity that I should look at, I'd love to learn about them.

Here are the quotes:

"Wicca is both a religion and a craft . . . As a religion . . . its purpose is to put the individual and the group in harmony with the Divine creative principle of the Cosmos" (Farrar & Farrar, 1981: 12)

"the God and Goddess [are] aspects of the Ultimate Source" (Farrar & Farrar, 1981: 49)

The Farrars say that the "Seventh Plane" of reality is the "Upper Spiritual" plane and consists of "Pure or Abstract Spirit. The 'Divine Spark'. Substance and energy direct from the Great Unmanifest." (Farrar & Farrar, 1981: 117)

“To the witch, the Divine Principle of the Cosmos is real, conscious and eternally creative, manifesting through Its creations, including ourselves” (Farrar & Farrar, 1981: 154)

“This higher power – the “Ultimate Deity” – is some genderless force that is so far beyond our comprehension that we can have only the vaguest understanding of its being. Yet we know it is there and, frequently, we wish to communicate with it. As individuals we wish to thank it for what we have and to ask it for what we need. How do we do this with such an incomprehensible power?” (Buckland, 1986: 19)

“The Wicca acknowledge a supreme divine power, unknowable, ultimate, from which the entire universe sprang. The concept of this power, far beyond our comprehension, has nearly been lost in Wicca because of our difficulty in relating to it. Wiccans, however, link with this force through their deities. In accordance with the principles of nature, the supreme power was personified into two basic beings: the Goddess and the God” (Cunningham, 1988: 9)

“All is therefore sacred and bears the blueprint of the Divine Source manifest as a binary force of male and female which we call the God and Goddess, complementing one another to form the Whole, The All. We are an integral part of the All, having been created by the Divine Source of All, and therefore bear the blueprint of the Divine Source, giving us potential for a direct connection with the All, and the Divine, which are One. The concept of Deity and the sacred in Paganism and therefore, also in Wicca, is not transcendent, but immanent and indwelling in all. The divine is therefore integral with ourselves; we are inherently divine. We respect Nature as all is alive and divine for we are a part of that All.” (Silver Elder, 2011: 9)

Silver Elder writes: “In Wicca we know that there is a Higher Power, an Ultimate Force, the Archetypal Energy, the Supreme Power, because we see it manifest in Nature and within ourselves each and every day.” (2011: 18)

“We conceive of the Creative Power of the Universe as manifesting through polarity – as masculine and feminine – and that this same Creative Power lives in all people, and functions through the interaction of masculine and feminine.” (Thesis 4 in the Principles of Wiccan Belief, from the Council of American Witches, 11-14 April 1974; taken from Cuhulain, 2011: 28)

“The Wiccan concept of the Divine is shaped by what we see around us in the natural world. . . . We believe that the Divine is immanent in everything around us. We do not separate the Divine from the everyday world . . . Everything around us is divine.” (Cuhulain, 2011: 14)

3. Theism and Atheism

I've been asked to clarify my terms, and it's good to do so. As a philosopher, I always try to use terms in their most precise and specific senses.

The Theistic Deity. The theistic deity is a transcendental person who acts in the universe. The theistic deity is a being (it is not beyond being); it is maximally perfect; its main perfections are that it is all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing; as such it is a rational moral agent, and therefore it is a person; the theistic deity is transcendent in the sense that it exists apart from any universe it creates; the theistic deity is active in the sense that causally interacts with things in the universes that it creates. (You can even find this as the specific sense of "theism" in the Wikipedia article.)

Paul Cliteur writes (in *Philosophy Now*, Nov/Dec 2011): "Nagel puts it as follows in his 'A Defense of Atheism' (1957): "I shall understand by 'atheism' a critique and a denial of the major claims of all varieties of theism." Monotheism is the view which holds that the "heavens and the earth and all that they contain owe their existence and continuance in existence to the wisdom and will of a supreme, self-consistent, omnipotent, omniscient, righteous and benevolent being, who is distinct from, and independent of, what he has created", says Nagel, quoting Robert Flint, Professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. So an atheist is someone who denies the existence of a god with the characteristics as mentioned. In other words: he denies the existence of 'God'. We find this approach not only with Nagel, but also with Robin Le Poidevin, Daniel Harbour and Paul Edwards."

The Christian God is a specific type of theistic deity. It is distinct from both the Judaic and Islamic versions of the theistic deity (which are for instance non-triune).

There are lots of concepts of the divine in the West that are non-theistic. The Platonic Form of the Good is non-theistic; the Plotinian One is non-theistic; the deities of the Western mystical tradition are non-theistic; the deity of Spinoza is non-theistic; the deity of deism is non-theistic; the deities of pantheism and panentheism are non-theistic; the deity of Tillich is non-theistic. And (as I'll argue) the deity of Wicca is non-theistic.

Atheism. I use "atheism" in its most precise and specific form: an atheist denies the existence of any theistic deity.

And I'll note that these are very close to the definitions used in writers like Dawkins and Stenger. Stenger distinguishes between the theistic deity (he refers to it as "God") and non-theistic deities (he refers to them as "gods").

4. The Wiccan Deity: An Initial Philosophical Analysis

More from Eric Steinhart on the Wiccan ultimate deity (which I'll just refer to as the Wiccan deity). This deity is not the Wiccan god or the goddess, but is ontologically prior

to them. My purpose in this post is to talk about some of the features of this deity and its relation to some older Western traditional conceptions of the divine.

On the basis of the quotes in my earlier post, I'd say that the Wiccan deity has these main features:

1. *Ultimacy*. The Farrars refer to the deity as “the Ultimate Source” (1981: 49); Buckland refers to it as the “Ultimate Deity” (1986: 19); Cunningham refers to it as “ultimate” (1988: 9). Ultimacy means that the deity is at the extreme end of some ontological scale; it is somehow at the top or bottom of some serial relation (of causality, of dependency, of abstraction, of power, etc.). Ultimacy usually means independent. To use traditional language, the deity has aseity. It exists in and through itself.

2. *Immanent*. The Farrars tell us that the deity manifests itself through Its creations (1981: 154). Silver Elder says “The concept of Deity and the sacred in Paganism and therefore, also in Wicca, is not transcendent, but immanent and indwelling in all” (2011: 9). And Cuhulain reports that “the Divine is immanent in everything around us. We do not separate the Divine from the everyday world . . . Everything around us is divine” (2011: 14). As immanent, the Wiccan deity is *not* supernatural. It is not above or beyond nature. On the contrary, this is a *naturalistic* conception of the divine.

3. *Power*. Buckland refers to the deity as “this higher power” as a “force” and as an “incomprehensible power” (1986: 19); Cunningham refers to it as a “supreme divine power” and as a “force” (1988: 9); and the American Council of Witches refers to it as “the Creative Power of the Universe” (Cuhulain, 2011: 28).

4. *Creative*. The Farrars refer to the deity as the “Ultimate Source” and as “the Divine creative principle of the Cosmos” (1981: 12) and they say it is the ultimate source of energy (1981: 117). They say that “the Divine Principle of the Cosmos is . . . eternally creative, manifesting through Its creations” (1981: 154). Cunningham tells us that it is “a supreme divine power . . . from which the entire universe sprang” (1988: 9). Silver Elder refers to it as the “Divine Source of All” (2011: 9). And the American Council of Witches says it is “the Creative Power of the Universe” (Cuhulain, 2011: 28).

5. *Impersonal*. Buckland says the deity is a “genderless force” (1986: 9). And according to Cunningham “the supreme power was personified into two basic beings: the Goddess and the God” (1988: 9). Thus the deity is impersonal and then becomes personified in male and female forms. On an odd note, the Farrars say that the deity is “conscious” (1981: 154). And I'm told there are other references to the mentality of the Wiccan deity (e.g. the Dryghtn Prayer). To be sure, the notion that the deity is conscious, or has any mentality, is seriously out of line with every other aspect of the Wiccan deity (and with the longer tradition in which it is situated). So I'll put this down as an error. Impersonality follows from ultimacy and immanence. There are no persons immanent in all things.

6. *Hidden*. Buckland says the deity is “so far beyond our comprehension that we can have only the vaguest understanding of its being. Yet we know it is there” (1986: 19). Cunningham says it is “unknowable” and “far beyond our comprehension” (1988: 9). To use an older expression: we know that it is but not what it is. Of course, to say that the deity is hidden does not imply that it is cognitively inaccessible. We have cognitive access to it through our own being. Silver Elder says “We are an integral part of the All, having been created by the Divine Source of All, and therefore bear the blueprint of the Divine Source, giving us potential for a direct connection with [the Divine Source]” (2011: 9). Here there are obvious links to the Western mystical tradition (which, it must be stressed, is non-theistic). Hiddenness follows from ultimacy and immanence.

On this analysis, the Wiccan deity is the *ultimate immanent creative power of being*. Now there are several points to be made.

The Wiccan deity is an idea of the divine with a very long and venerable history in Western philosophy. It does indeed go back to the Platonic Form of the Good and to the Plotinian One. And this point must be stressed: Plato and Plotinus were ancient pagan philosophers. Later they become Christianized, but they weren’t Christians. One might try to analyze the Wiccan deity using the old Platonic and Neoplatonic texts. But those texts are indeed ancient, and, as such, they are foreign to us in many ways. It’s fine to say that the Wiccan deity has Neoplatonic roots, but we should probably leave it at that. Of course, there are clear parallels with the deities in the Western mystical tradition.

The Wiccan deity is not the God of Abraham. Nor is it the Christian God. And it is not even deistic (in the sense of early modern deism). Since the God of pantheism is both immanent and transcendent, the Wiccan deity is not the pantheistic God. The main difference in each case is that the Wiccan deity is entirely immanent. Strictly speaking, the Wiccan deity is non-theistic. So, an atheist (that is, someone who denies the existence of any theistic deity) should have no objections to the Wiccan deity. And I think it would be inappropriate to refer to the Wiccan deity as “God”; the term “Source” is much better.

The Wiccan deity has some affinities with the various deities in pantheisms. And Silver Elder has some confusing language about the identity of each thing and the deity with the “All”. However, I don’t see these pantheistic affinities as significant. The Wiccan deity is not the Spinozistic substance. Nor is it a whole of which all things are literally parts. Still, for those who like the “New Atheists”, it would be interesting to compare the Wiccan deity to the concept of the divine in the first chapter of Dawkin’s *The God Delusion*. I’ll save that commentary for later; but here is a place where any thoughtful atheist ought to be on the lookout for some interesting similarities.

If I’m right that the Wiccan deity is the ultimate immanent creative power of being, then why would any atheist object to that?

5. The Wiccan Deity: Related Concepts in Philosophy

On my analysis of several key Wiccan texts, I've said that the Wiccan deity is the *ultimate immanent creative power of being*. This is a non-theistic and non-Christian concept of the divine. Please try to avoid projecting theistic or Christian concepts into Wicca. The Wiccan deity is not a *thing*; on the contrary, it is a power within things.

Concepts that are similar to the concept of the Wiccan deity appear in several guises in the history of philosophy. The Wiccan deity is similar to *conatus*. *Conatus* is the tendency of a being to preserve and enhance its being.

Conatus becomes the *natural striving* of Leibniz. Leibniz says that every possibility naturally strives for actual existence. He writes that "Everything possible demands that it should exist" (in Rescher, 1991: 171). And he writes that "from the fact that something rather than nothing exists, it follows that in possible things, or in their possibility or essence itself, there is a certain demand or (so to speak) a claim for existence; in short, that essence tends by itself towards existence" (1697: 86). Possibilities (which are potentialities for being) naturally strive to actually be; and every thing that does exist naturally strives to further actualize its potentialities. This striving is natural: it is an immanent creative power of being within every being. And it is ultimate, since it accounts for why there is something rather than nothing.

After Leibniz, this natural striving gets taken up by Schopenhauer. It becomes the *will* (in his *The World as Will and Representation*). And then it becomes Nietzsche's *will to power*. Leibniz's natural striving, and its later developments in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, all serve as naturalistic alternatives to the Christian God. Schopenhauer was an atheist and so was Nietzsche.

The Wiccan deity is also similar to *natura naturans*. *Natura naturans* is "nature naturing"; it is the power in every natural thing to be what it is and do what it does. *Natura naturans* first appears in various Medieval writers. It is more extensively developed by Spinoza. Spinoza uses the phrase to characterize the creative power of his deity (which is clearly not the theistic deity – Spinoza was charged with atheism).

The concept of *natura naturans* is central to a recent philosophical movement known as *religious naturalism*. The religious naturalists include people like Ursula Goodenough and Donald Crosby. I would strongly encourage every atheist to read Goodenough's book *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (1998) and to read Crosby's book *A Religion of Nature* (2002). It must be stressed that neither of these authors is Wiccan or neo-pagan. And while Goodenough still has theistic tendencies, Crosby is an outright atheist. Since Crosby is explicitly atheistic, I'll focus on his concept of *natura naturans*. Here I'm mainly taking ideas from Chapters 1 and 2 of his *A Religion of Nature*.

Crosby denies that there are any supernatural beings like gods, goddesses, immaterial minds, or spirits. The theistic deity (e.g. the Christian God) does not exist. There is no world-spirit. Crosby is not an animist or panpsychist. Nature has no sentience; it is

ultimately mindless and utterly lacking in purpose or consciousness. There are no supernatural powers or entities that are required to explain nature. There are no entities that transcend nature. Any transcendence happens entirely within nature.

Crosby writes that “Nature, then, is the creative matrix from which all things arise and to which they return, the complexity of orders and powers by which these things are upheld and by which each of them, or each type of them, attains its own peculiar attributes and capabilities” (2002: 21). Nature is “a dynamic, restless energy of growth, nurture, productivity, and change” (2002: 42). *Natura naturans* is “unceasing creative energy” (2002: 114). And *natura naturans* is “the creative power . . . underlying and producing all of the systems of nature that ever have been or ever will be” (2002: 154). Much much more can be said here (and I’ll say some of it in later posts).

It must be stressed again that religious naturalists like Crosby are not Wiccans. My only point is that the concept of the Wiccan deity, which is pretty crudely expressed in the Wiccan texts, is very similar to the concept of *natura naturans* that is very precisely developed in the writings of the religious naturalists. Wiccans ought to study the religious naturalists to gain some clarity. Atheists ought to study the religious naturalists too. It is certainly possible to have an atheistic religion of nature.

6. On Atheistic Religion

We’re rational animals. Which means that we’re rational. And that we’re animals. Many biological and neurological necessities are satisfied by religion. Your neocortex has to live with your limbic system. And as long as we humans have limbic systems in our brains, we’re going to be religious (more on that later).

Atheists tend to downplay the practical and social aspects of religion in favor of focusing on the cognitive aspects. And that’s unfortunate. The practical and social aspects of religion are probably the main aspects for most people. Religion helps people solve all sorts of biological regulatory problems (e.g. the regulation of diet, sex, violence); it helps with social identity formation and group regulation. It works deeply at the boundaries of the biological self: birth, death, reproduction, and the boundary of the self and its group.

Religion serves certain purposes for life, and if atheism wants to flourish, it will have to serve those same purposes. People aren’t going to stop being born, reproducing, or dying. The problems at the boundary of the self and its social group will always be there. You don’t form your language, your emotions, or your thoughts by yourself. Your identity was built in a group (your mother, your family, your school, your tribe, your nation). And the limbic system is almost certainly here to stay, deep in the center of the human brain, persistently interpreting the world in its own strange ways.

On the one hand, *religious atheism* is probably a very bad idea. A religious atheism would probably be an incoherent mixture of conflicting purposes. (I take it that those who say “atheism is not a religion” are objecting to religious atheism.) On the other

hand, *atheistic religions* are entirely possible. Buddhism, in its original Theravedic form, is atheistic. As much as I love Theravedic Buddhism, it's just too alien to the Western mind to ever get much of a hold in our culture. What about atheistic Western religions? They are possible. And many people are working on building atheistic religions in the West.

Various writers have been talking about atheist spirituality. I don't like the term "spirituality", since it seems to be welcoming to spirits. But let's set that aside. You might want to look at *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality* by Andre Comte-Sponville. Atheists can do all sorts of apparently religious activities – like meditation. Sam Harris talks about atheistic meditation in Chapter 7 of *The End of Faith*. There's a decent chapter on atheist spirituality at the end of Kerry Walter's *Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

Another way that atheists have been building religious structures is through religious naturalism. Here I always like to go back to Dawkins, whose opening chapter of *The God Delusion* is "A Deeply Religious Non-Believer". He beautifully describes an *atheistic piety* in that chapter. His atheistic piety is developed by the religious naturalists. He mentions Ursula Goodenough's book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*. Chet Raymo's book *When God is Gone Everything is Holy* is very good, but Chet is still clinging to his old Catholic identity. The best of all, in my opinion, is the work of Donald Crosby. I'd encourage every serious atheist to read Crosby's *A Religion of Nature*.

Atheism has to solve the problems that life presents to people. And every solution to those problems pushes atheism (and atheists) in a religious direction. Some of those problems arise from simple facts of social life: atheists have to deal with their theistic (usually Christian) family members, neighbors, co-workers, and so on. Merely being critical and negative is rarely a helpful strategy. It leads to alienation and hostility. It's almost always better, especially in America, to offer a positive alternative to theism.

People need to have ceremonies to mark birth, marriage, and death. People need socially sanctioned regulatory mechanisms for emotions and for biological urges to sex and violence. Most people need comforting rituals that either hold out the hope of having some power in the face of personal powerlessness (and the suffering that goes with it) or at least make personal powerlessness meaningful or dignified. And people need holidays. Any effort to satisfy those needs leads to religion-building.

Atheistic (Western) religions are being built. One way to build an atheistic religion is to try to naturalize or de-mythologize an existing religion. Liberal Protestants have been trying to do that for a long time, and the only result seems to be the failure of liberal Protestantism. Michael Dowd is trying to naturalize Protestantism with his evolutionary spirituality. I don't think it will go very far. There is an atheistic (or at least pantheistic) strain in Catholicism, represented by Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, and Chet Raymo. But I doubt that will ever become a big part of the Catholic tradition. It's probably impossible to naturalize any form of Christianity. It may be possible to

naturalize Judaism. There is a Society for Humanistic Judaism. But I doubt that project will ever become mainstream.

Another way to build an atheistic religion is to reactivate older religious patterns. This is what is happening with religious naturalism. Religious naturalism is an atheistic version of older Western paganism. Today, the most well-developed type of Western paganism is Wicca. The idea of the divine as an ultimate immanent creative power of being is an idea that comes from *atheistic philosophers* (Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Crosby). I might add Charles Sanders Peirce and plenty of lesser names as well. (And while Leibniz constantly declares his belief in the Christian God, he was thought by many to be an atheist, and there's lots of weird evidence in his writing for a very deep type of atheism.)

I'll say it again just to be clear: I'm *not* Wiccan, I do *not* advocate for it, I do *not* secretly want you to start practicing it. (Of course, if you want to, it's none of my business to stand in your way.) I'm merely reporting on (and philosophically analyzing and criticizing) some very strange new developments in American religious culture. One of these developments is the emergence of an *atheistic Wicca* (or, more generally, *atheistic neopaganism*). Taking the woo out of Wicca seems to be pretty easy (more on that later). For all those who complain that Wicca is merely mythological, I've read plenty of Wiccan books that explicitly declare: hey, the god and goddess are just myths.

You want evidence for these strange new developments? Here are two cases. Consider the growth of Wicca within Unitarian Universalism. Take a look at the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans. Here the sometimes tense negotiations between the old-fashioned atheistic humanism of UU and the new-fangled Wiccan religion are going on at full blast. But my favorite example comes from the increasing use by American atheists of the Wiccan *Wheel of the Year*. More on that in my next post.

7. On Religious Diversity Among Atheists

[I did a short post on this two days ago; I've since dug further into the full Pew report and found more and stranger religious diversity among atheists.]

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life conducts the US Religious Landscape Survey. The survey is statistically sound, and thus its percentages can be reasonably extrapolated to the general public. The full version of second report in this survey (which is well over 200 pages) tells us that among atheists:

21% believe in God or a universal spirit; 12% believe that God is an impersonal force; and 6% believe that God is personal;
37% experience weekly or more a “deep sense of wonder about the universe”;
28% experience weekly or more a “deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being”;
21% believe in miracles;
14% believe in angels and demons;

18% believe in life after death;
12% believe in heaven while 10% believe in hell;
10% pray at least weekly;
18% meditate at least weekly;
58% believe in “absolute standards of right and wrong”;
21% say that “philosophy and reason” are their “biggest influence on views of right and wrong” while 52% say that “practical experience and common sense” are their biggest influence and 20% say that “scientific information” is their biggest influence.

The data indicating that 21% of atheists believe in God or a universal spirit is not as inconsistent as it may seem: atheism in the narrow sense is denial of the theistic deity (a personal transcendent God who intervenes in the universe). Someone who takes atheism in that sense can consistently believe that God is an impersonal force; and such atheists may consistently believe in an impersonal universal spirit. And some atheists in that narrow sense may be *pantheists*, who identify God with the universe or some larger whole of reality. The 6% who believe in a personal God are more problematic, although they may consider themselves to be deists, and deists to be atheists. Divergence from strict adherence to allegedly essential beliefs is common enough and can affect atheists too.

Focusing on the incongruity of atheists who believe in God is distracting – look at all the other religious activities reported by the atheists in this survey! And note that belief in miracles, in angels and demons, in life after death are all consistent with the denial of God. The same goes for both the practices of prayer and meditation. The possibility of an atheistic religion is supported here by real data.

Most interesting is the report of regular (at least weekly) experiences of wonder, spiritual peace and well-being. If this is right, then atheists regularly have experiences that at least resemble what is traditionally known as mystical experience. The similarities between mysticism (at least in the West) and atheism have long been known. Many avowed atheists have reported profound mystical experiences. The atheist thinker Comte-Sponville reports often having mystical experiences and describes one in detail (2007: 155-159).

The data suggests a three part *conjecture*: (1) both atheists and theists have similar types of raw spiritual experience; but (2) theists almost always interpret those raw experiences as experiences of *persons* with whom they are *socially involved* while (3) atheists mostly do not. Thus in the theist brain, raw spiritual experience flows strongly into social processing networks while in the atheistic brain, that same raw spiritual experience flows only weakly or not at all into social processing networks.

Perhaps Chet Raymo (2008) is right: when God is gone, everything is holy. On that view, perhaps atheism is a protest against concentrating the sacredness or holiness of existence into a thing, and even more protest against concentrating it into a person with whom we have social relations. Thus atheism goes hand in hand with a kind of religious freedom: the freedom to let everything be holy. And, at least in the United States, an

atheistic nature-religion might seek legal recognition of and constitutional protection for that freedom.

8. Nine Theses on Wicca and Atheism

I'm planning a pretty long series of posts here. Mainly, I'm going to be arguing for several theses. I won't do posts that present them one by one; each post will typically deal with many theses. Here they are:

The first thesis is that as Christianity declines in America, two communities will be growing: an atheistic community and a neo-pagan community.

The second thesis: Since Wicca is the largest and most coherent neo-pagan community, the neo-paganism will mainly be Wiccan.

The third thesis: As the atheistic community grows larger, social and practical pressures will compel it to begin to develop rituals and ceremonies.

The fourth thesis: The rituals and ceremonies collectively practiced by atheists will become socially recognized as an atheistic religion.

The fifth thesis: As the Wiccan community grows larger, cognitive pressures will compel it to get rid of the woo and to seek greater scientific legitimacy.

The sixth thesis: Underneath all the woo, which is indeed offensive to reason, there are core structures in Wicca which are highly rational.

The seventh thesis: Wicca is neither Christian nor Abrahamic. Wicca is immune to the strategies atheists have developed for attacking Abrahamic religions.

The eighth thesis: As the result of all the pressures, the two main post-Christian communities, that is, the atheists and the Wiccans, are going to be increasingly blended together. This blending will be messy.

The ninth thesis: The common meeting ground of these two communities will be a kind of religious naturalism.

Many of these theses are sociological. And since I'm a philosopher, I'm going to focus on the sixth thesis (I'll also deal lots with the seventh and ninth theses). My focus on the sixth thesis has two parts: Part one involves stripping away the irrationality of Wicca; part two involves revealing the rational structures underneath.

You might object: but doesn't this amount to endorsement of Wicca? On the contrary, I reply that it amounts to nothing more than the endorsement of *reason*. As a philosopher, I am committed to rationality. If something is irrational, I will attack it as such; if

something is rational, I will support that rationality. I try my hardest to avoid partisan loyalties: if I find irrationality in atheism, I will condemn that unreason; if I find rationality in Wicca, I will support that rationality. My only loyalty is to the sovereignty of reason.

You might wonder: why should atheists care about this? I reply that atheists should care about the forces operating to shape the future religious landscape of America. Failure to think about those forces entails the risk of being overcome by them.

9. Atheistic Holidays

As Christianity came to dominate older pagan religions, it Christianized their holidays. The holidays were not abandoned, they were modified. And as Christianity fades away, the holidays are becoming de-Christianized. The main Western religious holidays were pagan before Christianity and they are becoming pagan again after Christianity.

If atheism is ever to become a successful way of life, appealing to a large number of people, then atheism needs to provide holidays. And there already are pressures on atheists to provide positive alternatives to the old Christian holidays. Consider Christmas.

Atheists are often criticized by the conservative press for making “war on Christmas”. And atheistic attempts to send negative messages during the Christmas season have been met with scorn. Consider the case just this month (December, 2011) in which <<the Mayor of Ellwood PA refused to display an atheist banner>> declaring that “there are no gods”. The Mayor had quite nicely invited the Freedom From Religion Foundation to contribute a secular banner to the town’s holiday display. And the FFRF chose to send a politically insensitive and negative message. Arousing hatred and anger is no way for atheists to build a successful large-scale movement.

There’s no need for atheists to attack the Christians for their December celebrations. Increasing conflict and making hatred does no good for anyone. A more positive strategy is for atheists to advocate celebration of the Winter Solstice. Many atheist groups do celebrate the Winter Solstice (e.g. the New York City Atheists). Of course, the Winter Solstice is an old pagan holiday. I love the little essay “How to have a peaceful pagan Christmas”, by Claire Rayner. It’s in *The Atheist’s Guide to Christmas* (edited by R. Harvie and S. Meyers).

On its <<webpage dealing with Christmas,>> the American Atheists group writes: “Indeed, none of the trappings of Christmas are Christian. All of it predates Christianity. Yuletide, and Yule logs come from the Pagan holiday of Yule (the pagans also took the Solstice for their own). Santa Claus is Nordic, Germanic, or Celtic, depending on who you ask, and there were no tinsel-covered evergreens in Bethlehem -- that's Pagan too.”

So go have a merry Yule celebration! Put up a pagan tree and light a pagan yule log. Go out and greet the rising sun with cakes and wine. You can do all sorts of pagan Winter Solstice rituals without believing any mythological or theological doctrine.

Atheists are celebrating the Winter Solstice. But what's next? If you're celebrating Winter Solstice, then symmetry suggests celebrating the Summer Solstice as well. And Easter is a Spring Equinox festival. So atheists can replace Easter with Spring Equinox celebrations. Symmetry again suggest celebrating the Fall Equinox too. How about Halloween? It seems like it's already America's most non-Christian holiday. Atheists may want to celebrate that too. As you probably know, these are all old pagan holidays. And there are plenty of old pagan rituals and behaviors that go with those holidays. You don't have to believe in any mythological or theological doctrines to do the celebrations.

The <<Secular Seasons Project>> is part of the American Humanist Association. The Secular Seasons Project encourages "Unearthing pagan roots, or providing secular interpretations, of holidays that are widely viewed as specific to Christianity or other dominant religions." And they've got some very good ideas for secular holidays (feasts, sending cards, etc.). The themes of the old pagan holidays are based on the natural cycle of the solar year – on empirically verifiable events in the natural world around us. Surely atheists can accept those themes. Celebrate the Renaissance at the Spring Equinox (the dawning of light after the dark ages). Or celebrate the Enlightenment at the Summer Solstice.

Here is something some neo-pagans do at Halloween that atheists can do as well. They hold a "silent supper" honoring the dead. Pictures or memorabilia of dead loved ones are brought to the supper. The supper is held in silence – all sit quietly together, reflecting on the nature of life and death. Holding a silent supper does not imply that you would become a neo-pagan. Nor by mentioning it do I endorse neo-paganism.

It's arguable that there is a very deep structure of holidays in Western culture. This deep structure is the Wheel of the Year. The Wheel of the Year consists of the four main solar holidays (the equinoxes and the solstices). It also includes four intermediate days. The Wheel of the Year (in the Northern Hemisphere) basically looks like this: Halloween; Winter Solstice; a day in early February that is midway between the solstice and equinox; Spring Equinox; Mayday; Summer Solstice; a day in early August that is midway between the solstice and the equinox; Fall Equinox.

If atheists collectively begin to celebrate the eight days on the Wheel of the Year, then it is arguable that they have taken steps towards the construction of an atheistic religion. It should be clear that this does not mean that atheism is a religion. Atheism is merely the denial of the existence of the theistic deity. But a group of people unified by celebration of a common system of holidays by holding feasts or parties has gone a good way towards the construction of a religious identity. The collective celebration of those holidays is the beginning of an atheistic religion. Of course, it does not entail belief in any mythological or theological doctrine at all. It can all be as scientific as you please. After all, the Wheel of the Year is based on the movement of the earth around the sun.

There are atheists who meditate and who pray. There are atheist groups that provide celebrants for social ceremonies marking life-passages (birth, marriage, death). There are atheist groups that advocate the formation of a system of atheistic holidays, celebrated with their own rituals. There are some organized ritual communities which tend towards atheism (or humanism), such as the Unitarians, Ethical Culture Society, and the lonely little North Texas Church of Freethought. There are atheists developing the world-view of religious naturalism. I would say that the formation of an atheistic religion is already well underway in America.

10. Criticizing Wicca: Energy

On the basis of my reading of a few Wiccan texts, I said that Wiccans believe that their ultimate deity is the *ultimate immanent creative power of being*. This is an old Platonic idea. The existence of such a power of being is endorsed by a number of atheistic philosophers (like Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Crosby; probably also by Peirce and Spencer). These atheistic philosophers developed the idea of an ultimate immanent creative power of being precisely in order to oppose theism (specifically, Christian theism).

Unfortunately, many Wiccans very quickly turn this power of being into a non-existent quasi-physical energy. It will be instructive to watch this happen. Thus Thea Sabin writes: “All life is infused with energy” (2011: 42). Ok, that’s true. Then she says “most Wiccans believe that everything contains some sort of energy” (2011: 42). If she’s talking about material things, there’s little reason to object to her statement. Sabin continues: “Energy is important in Wicca. Wiccans hone their ability to feel and ‘read’ it in order to understand the cycles of nature better, to tune in to their surroundings, and to get psychic information. Wiccans also believe that they can bend and use energy to bring about change, which is what magic is all about” (2011: 43). At this point, one has every right to suspect that Sabin is making false statements about human animals.

And Sabin quickly does make false statements about human animals: “Wiccans who become adept at feeling energy in inanimate objects often try their hands at psychometry. Psychometry is the ability to touch something and get information about its past from its vibration; for example, picking up an old photograph and learning something about the people pictured” (2011: 46). It is false that any human animal has the type of ability described by Sabin. Sabin continues by making false statements about natural objects: “crystals are natural batteries, so their energy tends to be easy to feel” (2011: 45). It is not true that crystals are natural batteries for any kind of energy. Of course, one has to be careful: some crystals are sensitive to electro-magnetic radiation, and were used in early radio receivers. But that does not seem to be what Sabin is talking about.

One could go on and on, pointing to falsehood after falsehood about energy in Sabin’s book (especially Chapter 3). Sabin’s claims deserve to be challenged – and skeptics should spend more effort challenging the claims of Wicca. When it comes to claims

about human performance (e.g. psychometry), the challenge is clear: prove it. Notice that I say that *skeptics* should spend more effort in challenging the claims of Wicca. I did not say *atheists*. Sabin has not made any claim about any theistic deity. She has said nothing about the existence of a transcendental personal God that intervenes in the universe. In fact, she denies the existence of any such God (see her Chapters 1 & 2). Of course, many people are atheists *because* they are skeptics. But skepticism and atheism are distinct. To see this, consider that many Christian theists would be skeptical about Sabin's claims.

Mostly Sabin is just guilty of very sloppy reasoning and of making things up that she wishes were true. If a rationalist is somebody who is committed to good reasoning, then it is imperative for every rationalist to criticize Sabin and Wiccans like her. By criticism, I do not mean mockery or ridicule or insult. It is easy to go through Sabin's text, and other Wiccan texts, pointing out the sloppiness and the falsity. However, as a strategy for dealing with Wicca, or with any other religion, it is *shallow*. Atheists are often amazed by the resistance of spiritual nonsense to skeptical debunking. Sabin and other Wiccans (as well as many Christians) have some powerful defense mechanisms against such debunking, which is why it rarely has much success in changing their views. You're probably familiar with them: science can't explain everything, etc., etc.

I prefer a deeper strategy, which in philosophy is known as internal criticism. The idea is that you find a contradiction within your opponents own belief system. Sabin says that Wicca is a "nature-based religion" (2011: 1). So, if it really is nature-based, then it is contradictory for Sabin (or other Wiccans) to present a theory of nature that so deeply inconsistent with natural science. Remarkably, Sabin writes that "Wicca is an experiential religion. . . . You learn Wicca by living it. Your experience tells you what is true, what works for you, and what you believe. We walk this path somewhat like scientists, testing things out and shifting our beliefs according to the outcomes" (2011: 13). So, if Wicca really does demand empirical testing, then it is contradictory for Sabin (or other Wiccans) to make claims that are obviously empirically false.

Skeptics and rationalists ought to put pressure on Sabin and other Wiccans to naturalize their beliefs. Wiccan texts are full of woo and just plain sloppy thinking. But what I find most strange is that they are often also full of naturalistic self-interpretations. Most Wiccan books are two-sided, and it will be helpful to illustrate the sides:

On the one hand, astral travel really is the movement of your soul on the astral plane in which you meet spirits; *on the other hand*, astral travel is merely a psychological exercise designed to increase your self-awareness. On the one hand, magick really does have objectively measurable effects in the external world; *on the other hand*, magick is just a system of psychological exercises designed to help you increase your own power (and, as such, it is a system that you should tune using empirical study). On the one hand, the god and goddess are real spiritual persons; *on the other hand*, they are merely symbols that help you to experience your own biological connection to nature. On the one hand, the Wheel of the Year is the story of the god and goddess; *on the other hand*, the Wheel merely reflects natural cycles and affirms observable regularities in nature.

It is precisely because Wicca has *the other hand* that I have suggested that Wicca can very easily become naturalized and de-mythologized. If skeptics and rationalists do apply cognitive pressure, some but not all Wiccans will work to rid Wicca of the woo. It is easy to imagine a woo-free version of Wicca (I've called it atheistic Wicca). It is very hard to imagine a woo-free version of Christianity. Christianity does not have *the other hand*. Or, rather, in its other hand it holds – the Bible. Attempts to de-mythologize or naturalize Christianity have already failed. I see no way to rid Christianity of its woo.

As long as our brain structures remain the same, religion is here to stay. The question is whether or not religion can be changed so that it becomes more rational. I think an atheistic religion would be more rational. And there is evidence that many groups and individuals in the United States are in the process of forming atheistic religions.

11. Atheism and Beauty

Some atheists seem to be inspired by a thorough-going hatred of metaphysics; perhaps even a thorough-going hatred of all abstract reasoning. They are radical positivists (or radical nominalists, but I'll focus on positivism). Positivism is the doctrine that only that which is empirically verifiable has any truth. And while radical positivism does imply atheism, the converse does not hold: atheism does not imply radical positivism.

And it's sort of odd to hear so much hostility to metaphysics among atheists. After all, it seems that atheism is committed to metaphysical positions that are very deep. Atheism is committed to the ultimate objective existence of at least one abstract metaphysical ideal. A good way to see this is to start with some reflection on the nature of beauty.

Some things are beautiful. And all beautiful things share the quality of being beautiful; they all have the feature or property of beauty. Plato is famous for his theory that beauty exists as the abstract *form* that all beautiful things share in common.

For Plato, beauty is transcendental – it exists in the heaven of abstract Platonic ideals. As is well-known, Aristotle argued that the forms must be brought down to earth – they are immanent powers in concrete things. For Aristotle, the form of beauty is wholly present and active in every beautiful thing. For Neoplatonists, who aim to reconcile Plato and Aristotle, the form of beauty is wholly present *both* in some concrete things in our universe *and* in some abstract structures (such as purely mathematical structures).

All beautiful things express, manifest, or display beauty. Beauty is inherent or intrinsic in every beautiful thing. And things of very different types can be beautiful. There are beautiful works of art like beautiful songs and beautiful paintings. There are beautiful events in nature like beautiful sunsets. And there beautiful things in nature. Some human bodies are very beautiful. And even abstract structures can be beautiful: there are beautiful structures in mathematics. The axioms of set theory are extremely beautiful. The laws of nature can be beautiful. Scientific theories can be beautiful.

Some beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It is subjective and it depends on the perceptual abilities and sensitivities of some observer. Some beauty arises from the interaction of minds with things. But that does not mean that all beauty arises from such interaction. There is an important sense in which some beauty is objective – it is mind-independent.

An aesthetic realist (and I'm one of them) argues that we experience certain natural things as beautiful because they are beautiful, that is, *they are beautiful in themselves*, and they would be beautiful whether or not they are ever observed. For instance, mathematical patterns like symmetry groups are beautiful whether or not there are any minds that ever think of them. Crystals forever unseen in the depths of the earth have the quality of being beautiful. There are chess games, eternally unplayed, that are extremely beautiful.

Beauty manifests itself in things. It may well be possible to design a device that empirically measures the beauty of things. Such a device might detect subtle harmonies, well-balanced patterns, finely-tuned complexities. Human eyes and brains are examples of natural devices that can detect beauty. It's entirely possible that an artificial intelligence could be designed to detect beauty. Nevertheless, the quality being detected is not a thing.

Things exhibit beauty; they display it. Beauty is a power in things, and it is a power that can affect brains (or measuring devices) in certain ways. It is a power that can influence the course of events. It is certainly plausible that biological evolution selects for beauty and that beauty is a marker of health or reproductive fitness. The peacock's tail is beautiful. And thus animals (including humans) become sensitive to beauty and their mating behaviors are guided or influenced by it. On this view, sexual beauty is not subjective at all – it is an objective marker of fitness for which animals evolve very finely calibrated detectors.

I would hope that atheists can affirm that there are beautiful things in the physical universe and even that there are beautiful structures in mathematics. But what is beauty? Things are beautiful, but beauty is not a thing; beauty is *immanent* in things. Beauty is an immanent universal, a quality shared by many things, a power within things. Some of those things are physical while others are mathematical, even purely mathematical, and thus not physical at all. Surely the existence of beauty is compatible with atheism – it requires no theistic deity. And surely the existence of beauty is compatible with naturalism – beauty is an entirely natural quality. And surely the existence of beauty is compatible with rationalism – much of what reason reveals is beautiful, even purely beautiful, beauty-itself.

12. Do Atheists Worship Truth?

Although many atheists seem hostile to metaphysics, that hostility is misplaced. Any deep philosophical position is bound to presuppose some metaphysics. Pure reason is

also highly abstract. Should pure reason be constrained by empirical evidence? How? All efforts to specify any criterion of empirical verifiability or falsifiability have failed. Science today is highly abstract – if you're looking for other dimensions and other worlds, you don't need to go to an occult bookstore, you just need to open a current scientific work in cosmology or basic physics. Science abandoned naïve empiricism long ago.

Atheists, we should all hope, are committed to *truth*. Truth is not a thing – it is a quality of things. And the things that bear truth are strange entities like sentences, thoughts, maps, models, or formal propositions. You cannot see or touch truth with your naked senses nor can you observe it with any instrumental extensions of your senses. Neither microscopes nor telescopes will enable you to visually observe truth.

Truth is objective and mind-independent. A truth-for-you and truth-for-me is not truth at all. If there is no common standard of truth, then there is no truth. If someone asserts that all truth is relative, then the question is: is that relativism true? If so, then not all truth is relative. Relativism refutes itself. It's hard to see why any atheist would affirm relativism and deny the objectivity of truth. That would make Christianity true for Christians and naturalism true for naturalists; but there would be no *common standard* according to which those two doctrines could both be judged, with one found to be false, and the other found to be true. There is one objective common standard for logical judgement: truth.

Perhaps human cognitive systems (brains, nervous systems, sense organs) are material things that are able to more or less reliably detect *those truths that are relevant to the survival of human animals*. That is, when it comes to thoughts (or sentences or propositions) that are relevant to human survival, human cognitive systems are more or less able to distinguish between those that are true and those that are false. But the system of truths relevant to human survival is a very small part of the truth.

And truth is weird. As Tarski showed, if your language contains the expressions “is true” and “is false”, you'll have to provide the definitions of those expressions in a higher-level language; and then in an even higher-level language; and so on endlessly. As Pat Grim showed, there is no *set* of true propositions. As Godel showed, within sufficiently powerful formal systems, like arithmetic, truth exceeds provability (so that there are truths that are not provable). Note please that this does not mean that mathematics is uncertain. But it does add up to this: *there are truths that are not verifiable in any way at all*. Empirical verifiability is not truth. Truth exceeds every logical attempt to define it.

Neoplatonists will say that truth is a power of being. It is a power that is inherent, more or less, in thoughts, sentences, mental images, maps, photographs, works of art, scientific theories, mathematical axiom systems, and so on. Truth is the quality that all true things have in common; they all participate or have their share in *truth*. Truth has the power to influence behavior – you can act in accordance with the truth, and, if you do, your action is more likely to succeed. One classical metaphor is that truth is a *light* that shines out of true things, that shines out of true abstract structures. But truth is not a thing.

It's hard to see why an atheist would deny truth: if you deny that there is any truth, is what you're saying true? It would be odd for anybody to affirm: *there is no truth*. My guess is that atheists are going to affirm the reality of truth: an objective power of being that exceeds every attempt to define it. Truth (like beauty) is a very high level ideal. To use some philosophical jargon, truth is a *universal* rather than a particular thing. On the Neoplatonic understanding of universals (which differs from Plato's), to say truth is a universal does *not* mean that truth is a transcendental quality floating in some Platonic other-world beyond this universe. Truth is a logical quality that is located within structures *in this world* and is *wholly active within the world*. The power of truth is ultimate: deny it and you fail, follow it and you succeed. So truth is an ultimate immanent power of being.

Truth is a power to which your mind and behavior must submit, on pain of failure. If you don't submit to it, you act in accordance with falsehood, and you fail. Augustine, in the second part of his book *On the Free Choice of the Will*, identified truth with God. It's easy to see why atheists would want to deny that identification, and it's hard to see why truth would be the Christian God that Saint Augustine worshipped. It is impossible to identify truth with any theistic deity. The theistic deity is a particular thing; but truth is not a particular thing, it is a universal. Truth is not personal, it is impersonal; it does not transcend the world but is found in structures in the world; it does not intervene in the universe from outside, but it is wholly active within things in universe.

However, this raises the deeper question. Paul Tillich wrote that "whatever concerns a man ultimately becomes god for him, and conversely, . . . a man can be concerned ultimately only about that which is god for him" (1951: 211). For many atheists, truth seems to be the ultimate concern. On Tillich's definition of god as ultimate concern, it looks like *truth is the god of the atheists*. Of course, it would not be the Christian God, nor would it be any theistic deity. Is this right? Is truth the god of the atheists? Do atheists *worship* the truth? I doubt it. Perhaps it's more accurate to say this: atheists *revere* the truth, and, for atheists, truth is *holy*, truth is *sacred*, truth is *divine*.

13. Some Naturalistic Ontology

Over the next few posts, I'm going to do some heavy metaphysics. So a bit of background is necessary. An *ontology* is a taxonomy of categories (usually at a very high level of generality). To avoid misunderstanding, the ontology I'm working with is outlined below. This ontology is naturalistic in exactly the sense that objects in all its categories are found in our best scientific theories.

Material Things – Material things are either simple or complex. Simple material things are instances of the types of particles found in the Standard Model of Matter. For instance, they are quarks or leptons or bosons. Complex material things are wholes composed of simple or less complex material things. For instance, protons, planets, and people are complex material things. All material things are physical things. Also, they

are *particulars*. Scientific theories refer to material things. But scientific theories also refer to lots of non-material things – materialism is an incomplete ontology.

Geometrical Things – Geometrical things include space-time points and regions. Regions are wholes composed of space-time points. Our best current physical theories (e.g. field theories) refer to points and regions. They are physical but not material. Points have properties like force vectors and points participate in distance relations. All geometrical things are particulars. Scientific theories refer to geometrical objects. The theories of relativity as well as quantum field theories refer to points.

Mathematical Things – Mathematical things include all the objects of mathematics. These are numbers, sets, functions, vectors, etc. It's common to define all mathematical things in terms of sets. So, in my ontology, all mathematical things are sets. Sets are defined using some standard set theory like ZFC. Sets are not physical. Sets have properties (e.g. their cardinalities) and participate in relations (e.g. the membership or subset relations). Sets are particulars. Scientific theories refer to mathematical things. Scientific theories refer to numbers, vectors, tensors, functions, matrices, and on and on. If you're looking for arguments justifying the existence of mathematical objects on scientific grounds, a great book is Colyvan's *The Indispensability of Mathematics*.

Particulars – Any particular is either a material, geometrical, or mathematical thing. I'll often use the term "thing" to refer to particulars. The term "thing" is more specific than terms like "object" or "entity". Particulars have properties and participate in relations. Physical things participate in spatial, temporal, and causal relations.

Properties – Some properties are features of things. These include: being-square, being-liquid. Some properties are types of things. These include: being-an-electron, being-a-silicon-atom, being-a-human, being-a-man. Mathematical properties include being-empty or being-prime or being-infinite. Properties are usually given abstraction suffixes like "ness" or "hood". Thus "treeness" is the property of being a tree, "emptiness" is the property of being empty, and "motherhood" is the property of being a mother. The essence or forms of things are properties. Properties are not particulars and thus are not things (but they are objects or entities). Properties are universals.

Relations – Pluralities of objects participate in relations. Examples of relations include loving, being-heavier-than, being-a-subset-of, and so forth. Relations are not particulars; hence they are not things. On the contrary, they are universals.

Patterns – Patterns are also known as structures or forms. They are described by logical templates involving lots of variables. An example of a pattern is the simple family pattern. It has three slots or variables x, y, z. The pattern is: x is male; y is female; x is married to y; x is the father of z; and y is the mother of z. Some of the variables in a pattern may be bound with quantifiers. The laws of nature are patterns. Computer programs are patterns. Scientific theories and mathematical axiom systems are propositions. Aristotle said that the soul is the form of the body (*De Anima*, 412a5-

414a33). If he's right, then souls are patterns. Patterns are not particulars, they are universals.

Universals – Universals include properties, relations, and patterns. Universals are not things. However, they are objects or entities. Obviously scientific theories refer to universals (such as *mass, charge, spin, distance*). And scientific theories themselves are universals. There are good arguments to justify the existence of universals. You can find them in David Armstrong's *Universals* and in Michael Loux's wonderful book, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*. Universals are here understood as immanent universals rather than as transcendental universals (they are *universalia in re* rather than *universalia ante rem*). Universals are not things.

Possibilia – Since our best current physical theories talk about other possible universes, the ontology includes possible particulars and universals. These exist at other universes. David Lewis says his ontology “consists of possibilia – particular, individual things, some of which comprise our actual world and others of which are unactualized – together with the iterative hierarchy of classes built up from them” (1983: 9). Add immanent universals, and the result is the ontology I'll be using going forward.

14. Criticizing Wicca: Levels

Some statements are based on *evidence*, while others are not. And there is *evidence for the existence of some entity* if and only if the existence of that entity is asserted in a statement that is based on evidence. To say that a statement is based on evidence is to say that it is empirically justified. The philosopher Wesley Salmon gave a great analysis of empirical justification. The basic idea is this: a statement is *empirically justified* if and only if either it reports some observation or it is the conclusion of a valid argument whose premises are empirically justified (Salmon, 1966). The argument may be deductive or inductive, where induction includes both generalization and inference to the best explanation, as well as some other forms. Empirical justification is neither empirical verification nor falsification – we're a long way from A. J. Ayer or Karl Popper. Statements that are empirically justified are *scientific*, and entities that are empirically justified belong within *scientific ontology*.

To say that there is evidence for some entity does not imply that the entity is observable or that it can be detected with scientific instruments, or that it causes some effect in us. On the contrary, the criterion of empirical justification given by Salmon is open to all sorts of unobservable and causally inert objects. And that's appropriate, since many types of objects mentioned in scientific theories are unobservable and causally inert. These objects include universals (properties and relations) and mathematical objects. Arguments that provide evidence for universals can be found in David Armstrong's *Universals* and in Michael Loux's wonderful book, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*.

To justify mathematical objects, consider the Indispensability Argument. It's discussed in a technical but brilliant book by Mark Colyvan, *The Indispensability of Mathematics*. There are lots of versions of this argument. Here's one: (1) our best science is empirically justified; (2) if our best science presupposes some theory, then that presupposed theory is also empirically justified; (3) therefore, any theory presupposed by science is empirically justified; (4) but many mathematical theories are presupposed by our best science – if mathematics were false, the science would be false; (5) consequently, those mathematical theories are empirically justified. Of course, they are neither empirically verified nor empirically falsified. Anyway, mathematical theories (like number theory or set theory) declare that mathematical objects exist. They contain statements like: for every number n , there *exists* a successor number $n+1$; or for every set x , there *exists* a set y such that y is the power set of x . So the existence of mathematical objects is empirically justified. Nevertheless, mathematical objects like numbers and sets are not observable.

To be sure, to say that there is an argument that provides evidence for something does not imply that the thing exists. It only means that the existence of the thing is empirically justified, or that there is evidence for the thing. Since the design and cosmological arguments are based on empirical premises, they provide evidence for the *deity of natural theology* (which is *not* the Christian God); but it does not follow that such a deity exists. Empirical justification does not guarantee existence.

However, if there is *no* empirical justification for the existence of some entity, then it is reasonable to think that it does *not* exist. This is one of the principles of rational thought: it is reasonable to believe in the existence of some entity insofar as and only insofar as there is evidence for that entity. And this is where Wicca gets into deep trouble.

Silver Elder writes that “The original Pagan vision of the Cosmos . . . is that of the Three Worlds: The Underworld, the Middleworld, and the Otherworld or Overworld” (2011: 33). From pages 33 through 50, she describes these Three Worlds and the things in them. And Thea Sabin writes about “the other world, the spirit realm” (2011: 78).

The Middleworld is “the material realm of all living beings” (2011: 33). The existence of the Middleworld and its contents is empirically justified, both by direct observation and by scientific inference. She now explains that the Overworld is composed of four planes: the Physical Material Plane; the Astral Plane; the Mental Plane; and the Spiritual Plane (2011: 46-47). The theory of planes is also found in the Farrars (1981: 117). They say the planes are physical; etheric; astral; mental; and spiritual. Of course, any philosopher will recognize these planes as degraded Neoplatonic cosmology.

The obvious problem for Wiccans is that there is no evidence for the existence of things like the Underworld or Overworld. And there is no evidence for the existence of the planes beyond the material plane. These worlds lie outside of the domain of scientific ontology. There is no reason for any sane or sober person to believe that they exist at all. They are mere fictions, inventions of confused and wishful thinking. And these worlds contain many fictional entities. Silver Elder tells us that the Astral Plane is “where most

of the Spiritual entities abide, e.g.: The Nature Spirits . . . the Akashic Records” (2011: 46-47). There is no evidence for the existence of any of these things; they are all mere fictions. Wiccan texts are filled with fictions; they are saturated with mythology.

Any object whose existence is empirically justified is a *natural object*; and any object whose existence is not empirically justified is a *supernatural object*. It is rational to say that all supernatural objects are mere fictions – they do not exist. Michael York, the author of *Pagan Theology*, writes “I believe in the supernatural, but I cannot demonstrate its existence. It is, by definition, beyond the empirical dimension of factual truths.” (2003: 1). And obviously the Farrars, Thea Sabin, and Silver Elder believe in the supernatural too. Belief in the supernatural is common among Wiccans and neo-pagans.

And yet neo-paganism (and Wicca) contains an imperative to oppose supernaturalism. Silver Elder writes “We are made by Nature to live by Nature’s Laws” (2011: 8). She writes that Wicca encourages “Living in harmony with Nature . . . Living in balance with Nature . . . Living in tune with Nature” (2011: 9). Such living is rational. Reason, which expresses itself practically in the scientific method, is the one and only power that puts our lives and bodies in harmony or tune with nature. *Supernaturalism violently throws our lives and bodies out of harmony and out of tune with nature*. A person whose life is in tune with nature is a person whose life runs by rational principles alone.

Although Michael York writes that he believes in the supernatural, he also writes that “Paganism is largely a dialog of affirmation that reflects or develops from the rhythms and cycles of the natural world. It does not seek to escape or obliterate the great round of nature but to work within it and to celebrate it.” (2003: 167) This is further evidence that neo-paganism contains within itself an imperative to destroy all supernaturalism.

Since this same imperative is repeated over and over in Wiccan texts, it follows that Wicca contains an imperative to de-mythologize itself. It does not appear that theistic religions like Christianity contain any analogous imperative. On the contrary, they are committed to their ancient sacred texts, which they cannot de-mythologize. Because of this internal imperative to destroy all supernaturalism, Wicca may serve as the basis for an rational atheistic nature-religion. It is up to Wiccans whether they want to be rational or not.

15. Atheism and the Sacred: Natural Creative Power

The concept of *natura naturans* has a long history in philosophy, and especially in atheistic metaphysics. *Natura naturans* is *natural creative power*, and from now on I’ll use that phrase. Natural creative power is a universal; as such, it is an abstract object. Nominalists deny the existence of abstract objects. So, nominalists are likely to deny the existence of natural creative power. Some atheists are nominalists; however, atheism does not entail nominalism. You can be an atheist and affirm all sorts of abstract objects. The thesis that there exists some natural creative power is entirely consistent with

atheism. This power is natural, immanent, ultimate, and thus at work in every natural thing.

Natural creative power (*natura naturans*) is the ultimate immanent creative power of being. This concept is found in atheistic philosophers like Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Donald Crosby. On my previous analysis of the relevant Wiccan texts, it is also found in Wicca as the ultimate Wiccan deity. For religious naturalists like Crosby, it is an atheistic concept of the divine; it is an atheistic concept of the sacred or holy. Natural creative power is not the theistic deity (and certainly not the Christian or Abrahamic God). After all, any theistic deity is a thing (a particular), while natural creative power is a universal.

An atheist is entirely free to recognize the existence of natural creative power. Schellenberg describes a “reality unsurpassably deep *in the nature of things*” (2010: 19, my italics). On my interpretation, this unsurpassably deep reality is natural creative power. For Schellenberg, affirmation of this unsurpassably deep reality is *ultimism*. He writes:

‘Ultimism’, as indicated earlier, is my label for the general religious view that there is a reality unsurpassably deep in the nature of things and unsurpassably great (metaphysically and axiologically ultimate, as we might say), in relation to which an ultimate good for us and the world can be attained. The idea of a caring God concerned to enter into personal relationship with us represents one way of trying to give more specific content to this view; . . . But there are other attempts to fill out this notion in existing nontheistic religions – consider monistic Hinduism or Buddhism or Taoism – and it may well be filled out in many completely new ways in the future. (2010: 19)

Atheistic religious naturalism and atheistic nature-religions (such as atheistic Wicca or other atheistic neo-paganisms) are examples of this ultimism. To cite Schellenberg, they are some of the “completely new ways” that “more specific content” can be given to “a reality unsurpassably deep in the nature of things”.

Natural creative power is a universal; it is not a thing – it is not a particular. It is a power of being that is active in every existing thing. It is the power of natural existence itself. For naturalists, this means that it is the power of being in every existing thing. It is at work in every creatively active thing in nature. It is at work in the quantum fields; in the cores of stars fusing lighter nuclei into heavier nuclei; in chemical and biological evolution. It drives the complexification of nature (Chaisson, 2001, 2006).

As the ultimate immanent power of being, natural creative power is *being-itself*. It is being-as-being, the power of existence itself, the power to be rather than to not be. It’s obviously not supernatural and it fits perfectly well into the scientific ontology I sketched in an earlier post. The existence of being-itself is certainly consistent with natural science. The same line of reasoning that justifies the existence of scientific universals

(like mass, spin, charge) can be extended to justify the existence of an abstract power like being-itself.

The existence of natural creative power is hardly a radical idea. Being-itself is simply what all beings have in common. If you affirm that many distinct beings exist, then you also affirm that they have existence in common; they all share being-itself as their ultimate universal or power of being. And surely your affirmation is based on the observation of things: the existence of being-itself is empirically justified just as much as the existence of properties like mass or charge. Natural creative power participates in explanatory relations: Why is there something rather than nothing? Because the natural creative power of being must be; it cannot fail to create; it necessarily generates.

Religious naturalists have *reverence* and *admiration* for natural creative power, especially as it is manifest in the myriad forms of life on earth. Natural creative power is not a thing; therefore, it is not a god. But it is holy, sacred, and divine. Atheists are not prohibited from affirming the existence of holy, sacred, or divine powers. Nominalists and positivists might be prohibited; but there's no reason atheists have to listen to *them*.

16. Atheist Ceremonies: De-Baptism

An earlier post presented nine theses on the possible future development of atheism and neo-paganism in America. The third thesis is this: As the atheistic community grows larger, social and practical pressures will compel it to begin to develop rituals and ceremonies.

As support for the third thesis, I gave various examples of atheists celebrating holidays (such as the winter solstice and spring equinox). And further evidence keeps coming. After all, many atheists like to socialize. And, if they want to have a socially coherent community, then they're going to have to develop activities for social bonding.

Some atheists have recently been performing de-baptism ceremonies. And Dan Harris, a reporter for ABC News Nightline, provides a nice title for his article on de-baptism: "Atheists Break Out New Ritual Tool: The Blow-Dryer". Atheists have ritual tools! Well, you might object to the way Mr. Harris is presenting this. Or you might recognize that this is exactly how the larger American society perceives something like de-baptism.

The de-baptism described by Harris took place at the annual American Atheists Convention in 2010. Harris reports that, during the convention, Edwin Kagin used a hairdryer labeled "Reason and Truth" to blow dry the hair of those who wished to be de-baptized. And indeed in an earlier post I suggested that, for atheists, truth is sacred, holy, and divine. It's perfectly natural to add reason to this list: for atheists, reason is also sacred, holy, and divine. Step by step, the atheist pantheon emerges. Of course, reason and truth are both Platonic ideals – they aren't things, they aren't gods.

And the great internet tells me that some of these atheist de-baptisms have involved *atheist communion wafers*. What's going on here? An *atheist mass*? Or an excursus ritual for those engaged in a new *excursus religion*? It's just fascinating to look at American atheism through the lenses of *commitment theory* or *costly signaling theory*. Well, as a philosopher, I leave those studies to the sociologists and anthropologists.

But surely I've missed the point! When they perform de-baptisms, these atheists are just mocking the Christians. The de-baptisms are silly, all in fun. Sure, why not. But a social activity like this is indeed a social activity, which establishes emotional bonds among the participants. As long as we have the brains we have, with their lovely limbic systems, we're going to *come together to establish in-group emotional cohesion through the performance highly scripted and coordinated group activities*.

Does the joke become serious? I'm told that some atheists believe in theoretical entities called *memes*. I don't know what they are, but they look like abstract objects. And de-baptism looks like a meme. Will it spread? Will communal energy be invested in it? Will people *commit resources* to its performance (like driving long distances or renting hotel rooms to attend and participate in de-baptisms)? When does it get serious? When does the joke turn into an essential *identity-marker* for group membership?

One of the more distressing aspects of atheist de-baptism, and atheist communion wafers, is the degree to which it absorbs old Christian ritual content. But that's not surprising: the Christians absorbed lots of Mithraic symbolism and ritual content. But you may prefer an atheism whose symbolic and ritual content does not *merely invert* Christianity. And, on that point, it's interesting to see that some Christians have been developing rituals that are increasingly open to purely atheistic interpretations (and have been so interpreted). These include the *Cosmic Walk* and the *Stations of the Earth*.

17. Atheism and Possibility

The concept of natural creative power (*natura naturans*) is found in both Wicca (where it is the ultimate deity) and in atheistic philosophers (who do not deify it). Natural creative power is the ultimate immanent power of being; it is being-itself.

Unfortunately, being-itself, as the deepest and most abstract of all universals, also seems to have little or no meaning. The concept of being-itself is so purely formal that it is like pure formal logic. Pure formal logic does not assert the existence of any objects at all. It is entirely devoid of ontological content. Fortunately, being-itself manifests itself in many ways; it manifests itself in the various less abstract categories of being.

Within the scientific ontology outlined previously, being-itself divides into universals and particulars. Particulars divide into the mathematical, the geometrical, and the material. This division is equivalent to the division of being-itself into the abstract and the concrete. The abstract includes universals and mathematical objects; the concrete includes geometrical and material things. It really doesn't matter how you slice it.

Categories gain ontological content only by being contrasted with other categories. Thus the category of mathematical being has ontological content: in mathematics, to be is to be mathematically possible, and to be mathematically possible is to be consistently definable. Poincare writes that “in mathematics the word exist . . . means free from contradiction” (1913: 454). And Hilbert wrote to Frege that “if the arbitrarily given axioms do not contradict one another with all their consequences, then they are true and the things defined by the axioms exist” (in Frege, 1980: 39-40).

So far, the best way to make this precise is via set theory. While being-itself is purely logical, and so has no content, mathematical being is not purely logical: it is defined by the addition of one non-logical sign to the vocabulary of the predicate calculus. This sign is the *membership* sign. It is implicitly defined by the axioms of set theory. Mathematical universals now supervene on various objects in the iterative hierarchy of sets. The result is that the category of the abstract has been fully defined.

But what about the category of the concrete? Here to exist is to be physically possible, and physical possibility must be made precise via some theory of possible universes. Many atheists are scientific naturalists, and, as such, they are entirely free to affirm the existence of other worlds – that is, of other physical universes. Current physics and cosmology contains many empirically justified (but not verified) theories that assert the existence of other physical universes. Quantum mechanics, inflationary cosmology, and string theory all posit, in their own ways, other universes besides our own. Max Tegmark is one of the foremost advocates of other universes (1998; 2003). It is entirely reasonable to say that there is evidence for other universes. Of course, to say that there is evidence for something does not guarantee that it exists – merely that positing its existence is reasonable.

Many philosophers have attributed the existence of other universes to the activity of *natura naturans* – to the activity of the natural creative power of being. The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce developed an impressive evolutionary cosmology in which his version of *natura naturans* spawns an ever-branching tree of universes. And Donald Crosby, the atheistic religious naturalist, affirms that the creative power of being also spawns an infinite plurality of universes. He affirms that there is an “endless succession of radically different cosmic epochs spun off by nature in its fundamental role of *natura naturans*” (2002: 41; Crosby often talks about the multiverse in his 2002: ch.2).

The cosmologist Lee Smolin has developed a theory that advocates a branching tree of universes (1992; 1997). His theory is based on the natural creative power of black holes. One version of inflationary cosmology explicitly depicts physical reality as a branching tree of universes. Here the creative power of nature generates universe after universe. This version of inflationary cosmology is the *eternally self-producing universe theory* (Linde, 1994). It says that physical reality is a self-generating fractal:

Recent versions of inflationary theory assert that instead of being an expanding ball of fire, the universe is a huge growing fractal. It consists of many inflating

balls that produce new balls, which in turn produce more balls, ad infinitum. (p. 48) . . . one inflationary universe sprouts other inflationary bubbles, which in turn produce other inflationary bubbles. This process, which I have called eternal inflation, keeps going as a chain reaction, producing a fractallike pattern of universes. In this scenario the universe as a whole is immortal. Each particular part of the universe may stem from a singularity somewhere in the past, and it may end up in a singularity somewhere in the future. There is, however, no end for the evolution of the entire universe. (p. 54) . . . One can draw some optimism from knowing that even if our civilization dies, there will be other places in the universe where life will emerge again and again, in all its possible forms. . . . Our cosmic home grows, fluctuates and eternally reproduces itself in all possible forms, as if adjusting itself for all possible types of life that it can support. (p. 55). (Linde, 1994)

There is no guarantee that these other universes exist. However, their existence is empirically justified. Thus it is rational for scientific naturalists, and atheists inspired by scientific naturalism, to affirm that they *do* exist. These other universes are not parts of our universe, and are not observable from within our universe. But they are not supernatural; on the contrary, they are entirely natural things. Nature is big.

18. The Impossible God of Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich was a Protestant theologian writing in the middle of the Twentieth Century. His writing is highly abstract, so you'll have to forgive me for using abstract language here. He is perhaps best known for his idea that God is the ground of being; that is, God is being-itself. For atheists, Tillich says some interesting things. Like this: "God does not exist. He is being-itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exists is to deny him." (1951: 205) And this: "It is as atheistic to affirm the existence of God as it is to deny it. God is being-itself, not *a* being." (1951: 237)

Tillich says he's a Christian. But here it's worth pointing out that Tillich's "God" is so far from the God of the Bible (and traditional Christian theology) that it's hard to take his claim of being Christian very seriously. And Tillich has widely been criticized by Christians as offering a strange new theory of the divine. Some might say that Tillich was a Christian atheist. Anyway, here are some relevant points from Tillich:

1. *God is being-itself*. Tillich wrote: "The being of God is being-itself. The being of God cannot be understood as the existence of a being alongside others or above others. . . . Whenever infinite or unconditional power and meaning are attributed to the highest being, it has ceased to be a being and has become being-itself." (1951: 235). And he affirms again that "God is being itself, not a being" (1951: 237). Since God is not a being, Tillich famously affirms that God does not exist (1951: 205, 237).

2. *God is the power of being*. Tillich says "the concept of being as being, or being-itself, points to the power inherent in everything, the power of resisting nonbeing. Therefore,

instead of saying that God is first of all being-itself, it is possible to say that he is the power of being in everything and above everything, the infinite power of being” (1951: 236)

3. *God is transcendent.* Tillich affirms the transcendence of God when talks about God as being above all things. He writes that God is “the power of being in everything *and above* everything”(1951: 236). And he says that “As the power of being, God transcends every being and also the totality of beings – the world” (1951: 237).

I think Tillich’s conceptual work leads quickly to paganism. Tillich is a theologian who constantly has to pull himself back from the brink of paganism. And thus Tillich often seems to contradict himself. Tillich says that God is being-as-being, or being-itself or the power of being. Hearing those phrases, any philosopher would conclude that God is the “universal essence”. Within traditional (scholastic) language, being-itself and universal essence are synonymous (and Tillich later says that universals are powers of being – see 1951: 254). But identification of God with the universal essence leads immediately to pantheism (which, for Tillich, is pagan).

Tillich has to pull himself back from this pantheism, and he does it by appealing to God’s transcendence: “It is as wrong to speak of God as the universal essence as it is to speak of him as existing. If God is understood as universal essence, as the form of all forms, he is identified with the unity and totality of finite potentialities, and therefore he has ceased to transcend them. He has poured all his creative power into a system of forms, and he is bound to these forms. This is what pantheism means.” (1951: 236)

For Tillich, God is both “the power of being in everything and above everything”. I’d say that’s absurd – for Tillich, God is both immanent and transcendent. But it’s impossible to be both immanent and transcendent. To be sure, if Tillich wants to claim to remain within Christianity, then he’s got to affirm the transcendence of being-itself. But it makes very little sense to do so. Much of Tillich’s first volume of Systematic Theology looks like a pantheistic or pagan theology onto which a superficial layer of exhausted Christian ideology is painted. That paint peels off easily.

[Maybe mention that Sabin seems to have this same transcendent & immanent thing.]

19. Atheism and the Sacred: Being-Itself

Paul Tillich defined God as being-itself. He argued that being-itself is not any being; it is not a thing, and it does not even exist. For Tillich, being-itself transcends existence. It cannot be identified with any being (neither with any particular nor with any universal). It cannot be located within the categories of any ontology (scientific or otherwise). As purely transcendent, Tillich’s being-itself is like the Platonic Form of the Good or like the Neoplatonic One. It is the ultimate power of being, the form of forms, the highest form, at the top of the Platonic Divided Line or Neoplatonic great chain of being.

As the ultimate power of being, being-itself generates all the other powers of being. It emanates all the other powers of being. Tillich describes these powers of being in terms of the Platonic forms (1951: 254). The Platonic form of a tree (for instance) is what all trees have in common; it is their shared essence or patterning. It is that which makes every tree be a tree rather than some other thing. These forms are also known as *universals*. Platonic forms are traditionally thought of as creative powers, and Tillich continues in this tradition. He says the Platonic forms are “eternal essences” and that they are “the powers of being which make a thing what it is” (1951: 254). For example, he says that tree-ness is “that power which makes every tree a tree and nothing else” (1957: 21).

Although Tillich says that being-itself is transcendent, he also says that it is immanent – that it the power of being that is inherent in every existing thing. And thus he contradicts himself: being-itself cannot be both immanent and transcendent. As long as being-itself has this transcendental aspect, is super-natural. And Tillich does say that being-itself is beyond the world (1951: 237). Thus it is above and beyond nature. This transcendent aspect is necessary for Tillich to identify being-itself with God. But God as defined by Tillich, God as being-itself, is not the God of Abraham; it is not the Christian God. Christian revelation is not true of it. And it is not any type of theistic deity – on the contrary, it is impersonal, and it cannot act within the universe in any special way. It isn’t really even the God of the Philosophers. It probably isn’t any type of God at all. Some atheists, those who merely deny theistic deities, can easily accept the reality of Tillich’s non-theistic God.

And yet there are fatal problems with Tillich’s God. It seems impossible to say that any object is both transcendent and immanent. For the sake of consistency, it is necessary to reject either the transcendence or the immanence. Naturalists, including religious naturalists, will reject the transcendence. When the transcendental aspect of being-itself is rejected, the result is a fully immanent concept of being-itself. Being-itself is the ultimate immanent creative power of being. It is the natural creative power inherent in all existing things – it is *natura naturans*. It closely matches the Wiccan ultimate deity as well as the powers of being described by many atheistic philosophers.

When transcendence is stripped from Tillich’s being-itself, it ceases to be a *god* in any sense. It may still be sacred, holy, or divine (much as reason or truth may be sacred, holy, or divine). When transcendence is stripped from being-itself, it ceases to be a purely Platonic form. It ceases to be a universal above and beyond the things that instantiate or realize it and it becomes a universal within the things that realize it. It ceases to be the highest universal and becomes the *deepest* universal. It is the innermost essence common to all existent things. It is shared by all universals and particulars; by all mathematical and material things; by all things in our universe as well as in any other universes. It is the *unity* of nature. If there is a *theory of everything*, then that theory is the theory of the extension of being-itself. Rationalists will affirm that being-itself is the universal reason inherent in nature. The existence of this universal reason is empirically justified by the success of science as a rational enterprise.

20. Pure Objective Reason

As immanent, being-itself is just the *ultimate nature* of every natural thing. So, how does this immanent being-itself manifest itself? It manifests itself in all the categories of nature. These are the categories of naturalistic ontology. To use some language from Nicholas of Cusa, these categories are derived from the self-unfolding of being-itself. This unfolding is a self-sundering which in which being-itself splits into subordinate universals (which contrast with one another). Another name for this self-unfolding is the Greek term *physis*, from which we get our concept of nature and from which we take the name *physics*.

The categorical structure of an ontology is traditionally presented in a taxonomic tree. The root of the tree is the most generic universal (the deepest universal); as the tree branches, the more general categories divide into more specific categories. The tree is a genus-species taxonomy. It's like listing the taxons of an organism: Kingdom > Phylum > Class > Order > Family > Genus > Species. For instance, being-itself splits into the categories of universal and particular; within the category of particulars, it splits into the mathematical, geometrical, and material; within the material, it splits into the simple and the complex; within the simple, it splits into quarks and leptons and bosons; within quarks it splits into the types of quarks. Thus, after a long series of divisions, being-itself manifests itself in the types of entities found in our best physical ontologies.

Any immanent universal is a form; it is a *logos*. As the ultimate immanent universal, being-itself is the ultimate *logos*. A *logos* is an immanent rational pattern or structure – it is the logic of some domain of being. The *logos* is an old Stoic concept (that is, it is an old pagan concept). As the ultimate *logos* unfolds into contrastive categories, each category has its own *logos* – the logic of its own specific partial domain of being. Scientific theories describe these specific *logoi*. Thus biology is the *logos* of the category that contains all living things. The axioms of set theory encode the *logos* of containment. Tillich (1951: 23) gives a nice description of the *logos* and its relation with pure reason:

The philosopher looks at the whole of reality to discover within it the structure of reality as a whole. He tries to penetrate into the structures of being by means of the power of his cognitive function and its structures. He assumes – and science continuously confirms this assumption – that there is an identity, or at least an analogy, between objective and subjective reason, between the *logos* of reality as a whole and the *logos* working in him. Therefore, this *logos* is common; every reasonable being participates in it, uses it in asking questions and criticizing the answers received. There is no particular place to discover the structure of being; there is no particular place to stand to discover the categories of experience. The place to look is all places; the place to stand is no place at all; it is pure reason. (1951: 23)

For those atheists who are positivists, all this is anathema. All this is metaphysics, and positivists hate metaphysics. But not all atheists are positivists. Some atheists are likely

to affirm the power of pure reason – those atheists are *rationalists*. Being-itself is identical with its own *logos*; it is pure objective reason. It is the object of scientific study. And thinking or acting in which the *logos* in you corresponds to the *logos* of being-itself is truthful. And, despite its abstractness, all this reasoning remains wholly within nature. Atheists who are naturalists are certainly free to agree with it.

It is entirely consistent with atheism to affirm that being-itself is real, and that it is sacred or holy. To be sure, terms like *sacred* and *holy* are merely valuational – the sacred is that which has ontological value, while the holy is that which arouses aesthetic-affective reactions like wonder and awe. The affirmation of the sacredness or holiness of being-itself is equivalent to the affirmation that reason and truth are sacred or holy.

Some atheists might be willing to refer to being-itself as *divine*. For others, that affirmation is too close to thinking of being-itself as a god. However, it would be an error to think of being-itself as a god of any kind. It cannot be either anthropomorphized or even reified. Being-itself is not an idol. If gods are the objects of *worship*, then being-itself cannot be worshipped. That would be idolatry. Perhaps some atheists would say that, since it is sacred or holy, it can be *revered*, where reverence is a positive attitude towards that which has value. Reverence for being-itself is entirely consistent with atheism.

21. Criticizing Wicca: Rationality

According to the Farrars, “Witches [that is, Wiccans] are neither fools, escapist nor superstitious. They are living in the twentieth century, not the Middle Ages” (1981: 105). The Farrars write that “Many witches are scientists and technicians . . . If modern witchcraft did not have a coherent rationale, such people could only keep going by a kind of deliberate schizophrenia . . . and we have seen no signs of that” (1981: 105). They continue that “Modern witchcraft does have a rationale, and a very coherent one” (1981: 105). And finally they say that “it is incumbent on witches . . . to be truly the Wise People and show that Wicca satisfies the intellect . . . They have to demonstrate to themselves and to the world that their faith accords with reality” (1981: 106).

Sadly, the Farrars then go on through the rest of their Chapter XI of *The Witch’s Way* to indulge in the worst sorts of pseudo-science and woo. They talk about levels and energies and vibrations – all the expected spiritualist nonsense. Any science they mention is poorly understood and quickly perverted. They offer little more than the superstition that they say they aim to avoid in their initial quote. And most Wiccan texts are equally cognitively degenerate, shot through and through with corruptions and sicknesses of reason.

On the face of it, Wicca is highly superstitious and deeply irrational. This irrationality runs so deep that some Wiccans have recognized as a genuine threat to their religion and have begun to try to remedy it. MacMorgan is a Wiccan who distinguishes between rational Wicca and irrational Wicca. She writes: “You’ve already seen the core belief of

rational Wicca discussed, the belief that no gods would expect you to believe in things that were impossible for you to believe. This core is at the heart of a greater idea, which literally scares the worst of the New Age Wiccans, that you can be Wiccan without abandoning your senses of morality, integrity, and skepticism.” (2003: 147)

MacMorgan is conversant with the skeptical literature and she urges subjecting Wiccan claims to experimental tests using the scientific method (2003: 213-220). She indicates that most of those claims will not pass those tests. She has scientific training and attempts to reconcile Wicca with science (2003: 221-239). This is evidence for my fifth thesis: as the Wiccan community grows larger, cognitive pressures will compel it to get rid of the woo and to seek greater scientific legitimacy.

The anti-rational tendencies in Wicca are easy to see. Thea Sabin writes that while Wiccans acknowledge the scientifically documented patterns in nature, they “believe that in addition to these well-documented natural phenomena, there are other, less scientifically verifiable patterns in nature and in the spiritual realms” (2011: 29). She claims that Wiccans can sense “things that science can’t explain yet, like the spirits of the dead or the presence of the gods” (2011: 29). Of course, the criticisms here are easy: Sabin is making false claims about things that don’t exist. She is, unfortunately, delusional.

Why would an apparently intelligent person endorse so much unreason? Perhaps the answer can be found in what Wiccans like Sabin say about energy and the mind. When she talks about working with “energy”, Thea Sabin recommends that you “relax, turn off your inner Mr. Spock” (2011: 43). Sabin further writes that “Trance techniques make energy work easier because they allow you to bypass the logical, skeptical, ‘Mr. Spock’ conscious mind and get access to the subconscious more easily.” (2011: 66)

Much of the irrational content presented by Sabin involves psychological techniques for the regulation of emotion. It is directed at the regulation of anxiety (such as anxiety aroused by social conflict or by future personal performance). It involves the self-management of future directed emotions such as hope and fear. It involves the regulation of biological urges associated with sexuality, with social bonding and social conflict. These emotional aspects of life are mainly handled in the brain by the *limbic system*.

Looking at Wicca through the lens of cognitive science, much of the irrational content of Wicca appears to involve processes for the activation or deactivation of the limbic system. It consists of *techniques for the regulation of the limbic system* (and perhaps also of the *temporal lobes*). And to regulate the limbic system, it is indeed effective to deactivate certain parts of the *neocortex*, to turn off your Inner Vulcan. The study of the neural substrates of religion will play a role in some later posts. For now it suffices to note that much of the irrational content of Wicca consists of practical and therapeutic content that is erroneously reified and projected into the external world.

Many writers have hypothesized that one of the most important functions of religion is the regulation of arousal in the limbic system (Saver & Rabin, 1997; Joseph, 2001;

Spinella & Wain, 2006; van der Walt, 2010). Several Wiccan authors refer to Wicca as a type of shamanic practice (Cunningham, 2004: ch. 1; Sabin, 2011: 16-18). And it has been argued that shamanic practices have powerful effects on the limbic system (Winkelman, 2004). Of course, religion has other functions, and much of the neurology of religion lies outside of the limbic system. But this hypothesis (crude and limited as it is) raises an interesting question for rationalists (and thus for many atheists). The question is this: are there techniques for the regulation of limbic arousal that do not involve the types of errors found in Wicca or in other irrational religious systems?

The initial answer to this question appears to be positive. Techniques like meditation, disciplined breathing, and yoga can be done without the woo, and appear to be effective in regulating limbic arousal. Atheists have advocated developing such techniques (Harris, 2005: ch. 7; Sponville-Compte, 2006; Walter, 2010: ch. 8). One wonders how far atheists can take those techniques. What about drumming or chanting? What about worry beads or repetitive ritual activities? It may be possible for an atheistic religion to absorb a considerable amount of liturgy from other religions (including neo-pagan, Christian, and Buddhist). An optimistic rationalist holds that there are techniques that can help us deal with the religious parts of our brains and that do not violate reason.

22. God and Goddess

On the basis of their own texts, presented in an earlier post, it seems like Wicca affirms the existence of an ultimate deity. On my analysis, the Wiccan ultimate deity is the *ultimate immanent creative power of being*. It is an entirely natural power and it appears that the concept of the Wiccan ultimate deity is identical with the concept of *natura naturans* as described by a long series of atheistic philosophers.

The Wiccan ultimate deity manifests itself as a male deity (the god) and female deity (the goddess). The concept of manifestation in Wicca appears to be derived from the concept of emanation in Neoplatonism. The Plotinian One, for instance, emanates the Divine Mind, which is split into a duality based on the subject-object polarity of cognition. However, the similarities with Neoplatonism quickly end. The Wiccan god and goddess are intended not as disembodied and intellectual, but as highly carnal and sexual.

The Farrars write that “the God and Goddess [are] aspects of the Ultimate Source” (1981: 49). Buckland explains that the Wiccan ultimate deity manifests itself to us as the male god and female goddess (1986: 19-21). He writes that “in their early development, people came to worship to principle deities: the Horned God of Hunting and the Goddess of Fertility. . . . In virtually all instances . . . the Ultimate Deity was equated with both masculine and feminine . . . broken down into a god and a goddess. This would seem most natural since everywhere in nature is found this duality.” (1986: 20).

Cunningham writes that Wiccans gain personal access (both cognitive and practical) to their ultimate deity through the intermediation of the God and Goddess. Although the ultimate deity is distant and hard for humans to relate to, Wiccans “link with this force

through their deities. In accordance with the principles of nature, the supreme power was personified into two basic beings: the Goddess and the God” (2004: 9). He writes that “Wicca reveres these twin deities because of its links with nature. Since most (but certainly not all) nature is divided into gender, the deities embodying it are similarly conceived” (2004: 9). The God and Goddess are immanent powers: “The Goddess and God are both within ourselves and manifest in all nature” (2004: 4); they are “omnipresent” (2004: 5).

Cunningham also tells us that the god and goddess are natural creative powers: “the deities *are* the creative forces of the universe (not just symbols)” (2004: 14, italics his). However, he then tells us that the deities are *personifications* of those creative forces; they are projections of human forms onto impersonal energies: “the deities didn’t exist before our spiritual ancestor’s acknowledgement of them. However, the *energies* behind them did; they created us. Early worshippers recognized these forces as the Goddess and God, personifying them in an attempt to understand them.” (2004: 10, italics his).

Cuhulain writes: “The Wiccan concept of the Divine is shaped by what we see around us in the natural world. . . . We conceive of Divinity as manifesting as both female and male, as this reflects what we see in our universe. Therefore, unlike Christianity, we are not monotheistic. Most Wiccans recognize a Goddess and a God.”(2011: 14)

Sabin writes that “Wiccans believe that deity separates (or we separate it) into facets – or aspects – that humans can relate to. The first ‘division’ of deity is into its male and female halves. . . . The two main aspects of deity that Wiccans work with – the male and the female – are simply called the God and the Goddess” (2011: 26).

Silver Elder writes that “the Divine Source [is] manifest as a binary force of male and female which we call the God and Goddess” (2011: 9). She says that Wicca involves “the veneration of the God and Goddess of Nature” (2011: 13) and that “The God and Goddess are revered and celebrated as a binary team, representing the ultimate power and force” (2011: 18).

23. Wicca and the Problem of Evil

Many Wiccan writers criticize Christians for dividing the ultimate deity into a purely good God and a purely evil Devil. They deny this division. Buckland writes: “the idea of dividing the Supreme Power into two – good and evil – is the idea of an advanced and complex civilization. The Old Gods . . . were very much ‘human’ in that they would have their good side and their bad side. It was the idea of an all-good, all-loving deity that necessitated an antagonist” (1986: 5).

The Farrars assert that polarity is very important for Wiccans. But this polarity is not good versus evil. However “the trap into which monotheist religions have fallen has been to equate polarity with good-versus-evil. They recognize that the activity of the world around them is engendered by the interaction of opposites; but they see this

interaction only as the battle between God and Satan” (1981: 111). And monotheists are guilty of “debas[ing] the Theory of Polarity into a mere conflict between Good and Evil” (1981: 113).

Cunningham likewise criticizes the division of the divine into a purely good God and a purely evil Satan. The problem is “the concept of a pristine, pure, positive being – God. If this deity is the sum of all good, worshipers believe that there must be an equally negative one as well. Thus, Satan. The Wicca don’t accept such ideas” (2004: 18). Cuhulain affirms this by writing: “We [Wiccans] do not believe in the Christian God or the devil; . . . we do not have a forces-of-light versus forces-of-darkness concept” (2011: 30). Sabin writes that “Wiccans do not believe in Satan. Satan is a part of the Christian religion and Satanism is a Christian heresy” (2011: 22).

For Wiccans, the ultimate deity divides into a male god and female goddess. Since this division does not correspond to a division between good and evil, it follows that the male god and female goddess must be mixtures of good and evil. But even this seems to be too strong. It seems more accurate to say that they are mixtures of positive and negative values.

Cunningham affirms that the god and goddess are mixtures of values: “*We acknowledge the dark aspects of the Goddess and the God as well as the bright. All nature is composed of opposites*” (2004: 18, his italics). He continues: “When death, destruction, hurt, pain, and anger appear in our lives (as they must), we can turn to the Goddess and God and know that this is a part of them too. We needn’t blame a devil on these natural aspects of life and call upon a pure-white god to fend them off” (2004: 19).

Religious naturalists like Donald Crosby have stressed the moral ambiguity of nature (2002; 2008). Cunningham likewise affirms the moral ambiguity of nature. Since they are natural powers, the Wiccan god and goddess are likewise ambiguous:

Yes, the God and Goddess have dark aspects, but this needn’t scare us off. Look at some of the manifestations of their powers. From a ravaging flood comes rich soil in which new plants thrive. Death brings a deeper appreciation of life to the living and rest for the transcended one. ‘Good’ and ‘evil’ are often identical in nature, depending on one’s viewpoint. Additionally, out of every evil, some good is eventually born. (Cunningham, 2004: 18-19)

Since Wiccans do not recognize a maximally perfect creator God (that is, they do not recognize the Christian God), their deities are immune to the *Argument from Evil*. The Argument from Evil against the Christian God runs something like this: (1) God is all-good and all-powerful and all-knowing. (2) If God is all-good, then God wants to abolish evil. (3) If God is all-powerful and all-knowing, then God can abolish evil. (4) If any agent wants to do something and can do it, then it does it. (5) Therefore, God abolishes evil. (6) But if God abolishes evil, then there is no evil. (7) Hence there is no evil. (8) However, it is obvious that there is evil. (9) Consequently, an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God does not exist. Since that is the Christian God, the Christian God does not

exist. Atheists often appeal to this argument to refute Christianity. It will not work against Wicca. And Christians often reply to the Argument from Evil by developing *theodicies*. A theodicy tries to reconcile God with evil. Wiccans need not develop any theodicies.

As with the god and goddess, so with humans. For Cunningham, Wiccan anthropology says that humans, like the god and goddess, are natural mixtures of positivity and negativity “this polarity is also resident within ourselves. The darkest human traits as well as the brightest are locked within our unconscious” (2004: 18). It should be noted that this conception of human nature differs from the Christian conception of humanity as fallen, or the Calvinist notion that we are totally depraved or entirely lost in sin.

24. The Wiccan God and Goddess: Reality and Mythology

The Farrars have an intriguing discussion of the ontological commitments of Wiccans to their god and goddess. Their discussion has three parts: (1) the realist thesis; (2) the anti-realist antithesis; and (3) the pragmatic resolution.

The more detailed version of the Farrar’s discussion goes like this: (1) The *realist thesis* says that the god and goddess really do exist: “To the age-old question ‘Are the Gods real?’ (or as a monotheist would put it, ‘Is God real?’), the witch answers confidently ‘Yes.’ To the witch, the Divine Principle of the Cosmos is real.” (1981: 154). (2) The *anti-realist antithesis* says that the god and goddess are merely symbols: “A non-religious psychologist would probably answer ‘No’ to the same question. He would maintain that the Archetypes, though vital to man’s psychic health, are merely elements in the human Collective Unconscious and not (in the religious sense) cosmic in nature.” (1981: 154). (3) The tension between realism and anti-realism is resolved pragmatically: “from the point of view of the psychic value of myth, ritual, and symbolism, the somewhat surprising answer to the question is, ‘It doesn’t matter.’” (1981: 154)

For the Farrars, the reality or non-reality of the god and goddess is a matter of personal decision: “Each man and woman can worry out for himself or herself whether archetypal God-forms were born in the human Collective Unconscious or took up residence there (and elsewhere) as *pieds-a-terre* from their cosmic home – their importance to the human psyche is beyond doubt in either case, and the techniques for coming to healthy and fruitful terms with them can be used by believers and non-believers alike.” (1981: 154)

For the Farrars the reality or non-reality of the god and goddess is a matter of *religious indifference*. For them, Wicca is a religion in which ontological commitment is secondary to pragmatic value. An atheistic Wicca is thus compatible with their view. Indeed, the Farrars conclude with an *as-if* approach to the god and goddess: “Voltaire said ‘If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.’ That remark can be taken as cynical; but it can also be rephrased: ‘Whether the archetypal God-forms are cosmically divine, or merely the living foundation-stones of the human psyche, we would be wise to seek intercourse with them as though they were divine.’” (1981: 154) Sabin

also adopts this indifference: all that matters is the practical value of the deities (2011: 118).

Buckland begins his discussion of the god and goddess with an epistemic problem. He first says that the Wiccan ultimate deity is “so far beyond our comprehension that we can have only the vaguest understanding of its being” (1986: 19). Note that Buckland does *not* say that the ultimate deity is *completely* beyond comprehension; it is merely epistemically extremely distant (much like Anselm’s “that than which no greater is possible”). He says we do have a *vague* understanding of it. But this raises a problem: how can humans interact “with such an incomprehensible power” (1986: 19).

Remarkably, Buckland suggests that the solution to the problem of epistemic access to the ultimate deity was provided by Xenophon! Xenophon argued that the gods and goddesses are *merely human projections*. And indeed this is affirmed by Buckland: the god and goddess are “our representations – our understandable forms – of the Supreme Power” (1986: 20). Buckland states that the god and goddess are produced when our minds attempt to understand the Wiccan ultimate deity in human terms: “we have this idea of an Ultimate Deity, an incomprehensible power, and in trying to relate to it we have split it into two main entities, a male and a female” (1986: 21). And that “those we know as the God and the Goddess are our intermediaries. . . . These are the names used for the ‘understandable forms’ of the Supreme Power, the Ultimate Deity” (1986: 21).

Silver Elder writes: “within this work you will find frequent reference to the God and Goddess . . . Reference is not being made to physical people resembling us, instead these are energies and forces which we perceive through our own psychic powers using visualization and mental focus. . . . in order to make these perceived higher powers more intellectually accessible . . . we make them representative. We personify them and give them names . . . We therefore call them the God and Goddess . . . and give them physical representation.” (2011: 18)

For atheists, it is interesting that Wiccans *explicitly allow for a purely mythological interpretation of their god and goddess*. This contrasts with Christianity and with the other Abrahamic religions, which insist only on the *reality* of the theistic deity. On the mythic interpretation, Wiccans frankly confess that the god and goddess are merely human projections or human symbolic creations. Atheists typically say that gods and goddesses are myths; at least some Wiccans agree. This suggests that Wicca might serve part of the basis for a future *atheistic nature-religion* in America. My only purpose here is to describe the possible future tendencies of the evolution of religion in America.

25. On Participation in Being-Itself

On Tillich’s view, since the divine is being-itself, all humans participate in the divine simply by existing. But that participation is not experiential. Any experiential participation in the divine can only be through the distinctive ways in which humans exist. We participate in being-itself through our own being. Since you are material, you

experience being-itself through your materiality – through the physicality of your body, through its chemistry. Since you are alive, you experience being-itself through your life – through your metabolism, through the feeling of vital energy in your own flesh. Since you are human you experience being-itself through your humanity – through the distinctively human features of your physiology, your bipedality, your sociality, your rationality.

For several atheistic philosophers, as well as for Wiccans, natural creative power is sacred, holy, and divine. You experience this power cognitively by learning about the physical, chemical, and biological aspects of your existence. But you can also experience this power through the perception of the energy generated by your metabolism. And you experience this power in a participatory way – you do not merely observe your own energy, your activity is the manifestation of that energy. Your metabolic energy powers your actions as you think, talk, paint, walk, make love, or perform any athletic activity.

If natural creative power is sacred, then you participate in the sacred, in the divine. This participation does not entail identity. You exist; however, that does not imply that you are identical with being-itself. You participate in being-itself; but participation entails that you are distinct from being-itself. You are *a* being, not being-itself. It is correct to say that you *have* being, but false to say that you *are* being. You are distinct from being-itself because you are the result of a long series of specifications or refinements of being-itself into individuality. And you participate in being-itself through those refinements.

To use some Neoplatonic terminology, a *procession* of being-itself is a series of increasingly more refined or specific universals. Here is a plausible procession of universals that become ever more specific: being-itself > particularity > materiality > complex materiality > life > animalia > chordata > vertebrata > mammalia > primata > haplorhini > hominidae > homo > sapiens. And finally, the universal at the species level splits into male and female: sapiens > manhood and sapiens > womanhood.

Within the procession just described, manhood and womanhood are the final manifestations of being-itself. They are the final manifestations of the sacred or the divine. They are the most specific or refined powers of being (of *natura naturans*) in which we participate as human beings. However, they are the manifestations of the divine that are most immediately comprehensible or experientially accessible to human animals. Thus we most directly experience and comprehend being-itself within ourselves through the creative activity of human sexuality. We are most immediately linked to *natura naturans* via sex.

A man or woman who feels the procreative urge within his or her own body directly experiences natural creative power. In sexual lust and activity we participate in a natural power that *overwhelms* the self. It is a power that comes from the very depths of the self but which is enormously greater than the self. It is sublime; it is numinous; it is holy. Thus the Council of American Witches writes that affirms that natural creative power is

at work in the whole universe and that “this same Creative Power lives in all people, and functions through the interaction of masculine and feminine” (in Cuhulain, 2011: 28).

For Wiccans, sex is sacred. The Farrars explain that the “sexual polarity” of masculine and feminine is “central to Wiccan philosophy and practice” (1981: 157). They discuss the centrality and sacredness of sexuality in Chapter XV of *The Witch’s Way*. They say that Wiccans take “a positive approach” to sexuality and that Wicca accepts “sexuality as wholly natural and good, and goes on from there to seek a fuller understanding of masculine-feminine polarity” (1981: 156). Cunningham writes that for Wiccans sex is “a part of nature and is accepted as such” (2004: 13). Sabin writes that “In Wicca, sex . . . is a sacred act . . . Sex is treasured and revered. Sexuality is considered a gift from the gods . . . and a manifestation of the polarity of the God and Goddess” (2011: 32). The Farrars further indicate that Wiccan celebrations may involve ritual sex. This ritual sex is known as “the Great Rite” and may be done either symbolically or literally (1981: ch. 2). And Wiccan rituals are filled with fairly explicit sexual symbols.

One way to understand the Wiccan god and goddess is probably to understand them as the universals. On the most concrete interpretation, the god is manhood and the goddess is womanhood. Perhaps less humanly and thus more generally, the god is masculinity (the quality of being male, present in most animal life) and the goddess is femininity (the quality of being female, present in most animal life). On this interpretation, the god and the goddess are both immanent universals; they are creative powers of being. However, there is a tension here: these universals are not persons and are entirely genderless. Masculinity is neither personal nor male; femininity is neither personal nor female.

On the version of religious naturalism offered here, the very idea of a *god* or *goddess* is self-contradictory. A god or goddess is something that is both maximally sacred and that has the form of something taken from some category of being. On the one hand, being-itself is maximally sacred; however, it does not lie within any category of being, and thus it is *formless*. On the other hand, anything that has a form taken from some category of being is less than maximally sacred. Hence the concept of a god or goddess is self-contradictory; it is inconsistent. It is impossible for any god or goddess to exist.

If you are a human, you can reasonably use your sexuality as a starting point for reflection on the continuity of life, tracing your life, through sexual and asexual reproduction, back to the very first cell on earth. Meditation on this grand continuity and on the evolution of all life may (and should) arouse a sense of wonder and awe. It should arouse you to reverence for all life. Such meditation need not be merely cognitive, but can even include sexual activity itself. Through such meditation on sexuality, you meet what Goodenough calls the sacred depths of nature (1998). But you do not meet any gods or goddesses.

Further application of the Wiccan logic of divinity suggests that we meet the divine most intensely and authentically in those activities which are most intensely and authentically human, that is, in those activities which are most distinctively human. Sex, which is common to many forms of life, is not very distinctively human. Other activities are far

more intensely human than sex. One example is *running*, specifically long-distance running. Humans are among the best long-distance runners on the planet. But the most distinctively human activity is *reasoning*. That's how the divine manifests itself in us.

26. Criticizing Wicca: God and Goddess

According to several Wiccan texts, the Wiccan ultimate deity manifests itself in two forms, the male god and the female goddess.

The first way to think about the god and goddess is realistic. This is *theological realism*: the god and goddess are both real things. They exist. A Wiccan who thinks like this is ontologically committed to the god and the goddess. Wiccan theological realism says that the god and goddess are spiritual persons existing in the natural universe.

This way of thinking about the god and goddess is not contrary to atheism *in the most narrow sense*. Atheism, in the most narrow sense, is the denial of any theistic deity. A theistic deity is a personal being who transcends the universe and who also acts within the universe. The Wiccan god and goddess are personal and are typically represented as having human-like bodies. However, they do not transcend the universe – on the contrary, they are entirely immanent. If transcendence is an essential aspect of theism, then the god and goddess are not theistic deities. The god and goddess are not said to be super-natural; they are said to be parts or aspects of nature. But so what. An atheist in the wider sense rejects all gods and goddesses, and rejects the Wiccan god and goddess.

An atheist who is committed to rationalism is bound to reject the existence of the Wiccan god and goddess. There is no empirical justification for the thesis that there are *spiritual persons* existing in the natural universe. Of course, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. All that can be said is that there is no evidence for the existence of any spiritual people in nature. Hence it is irrational to believe that they exist. To affirm the existence of the god or goddess as spiritual people in nature is to make a profound cognitive mistake. It is also to violate the Wiccan insistence on naturalness. Here Wicca contradicts itself. Wiccan theological realism is self-contradictory; it is absurd.

And not all the objections to Wiccan theological realism come from rationalism. Another objection is also theological (or, perhaps better, it is atheological). It seems clear that the god and goddess are the result of erroneous personification. Wiccans incorrectly project human male and female forms on to natural objects (such as manhood or womanhood, which are immanent universals). But the atheological error happens when Wiccans treat these projections as sacred, holy, or divine. The error is the elevation of human forms to the level of divinity; it is the deification of that which should not be deified.

This erroneous deification is *idolatry*. An *idol* is an object of perverse worship. The perversion is based on the false projection of a higher degree of sacredness or holiness to something that has a lower degree of sacredness or holiness. For some religious naturalists, these degrees of sacredness are based on degrees of universality. The

religious naturalism presented here recognizes the existence of a scientifically justified genus-species taxonomy of types of objects. And it further affirms that these types are immanent universals; they are universals in nature. So the genus-species taxonomy is a hierarchy of immanent universals, with the most generic universal at the top and the most specific at the bottom. The levels in this taxonomic hierarchy correspond to degrees of sacredness, so that higher universals are more sacred. Thus humanity is more sacred than manhood or womanhood; life is more sacred than humanity; and being-itself is maximally sacred.

Idolatry happens when an incorrect degree of sacredness is assigned to some immanent universal (to some natural power of being). Every human animal does indeed have some degree of sacredness; manhood and womanhood have higher degrees of sacredness; but humanity, animality, life, and being-itself have higher degrees. To say something is a god or goddess seems to be to say that it has the same degree of sacredness as being-itself. And that is an axiological perversion; it is immoral. Worse, this perversion is based on an idol that the worshiper has made in his or her own image. Worship of an idol whose form is human is self-worship. It is the elevation of the self to the status of being-itself. This is the worst type of idolatry. It is a profound moral or axiological mistake.

An alternative to Wiccan theological realism is to treat the god and goddess merely as myths. On this interpretation, they are merely symbols for aspects of natural creative power. They are not objects of worship. Cunningham reports that “some Wiccans probably wouldn’t even say that they worship the Goddess and the God. We don’t bow down to the deities; we work with them to create a better world.” (2004: 19)

At a very high level of abstraction, Sabin characterizes the god and goddess as symbols for two aspects of natural creative power (*natura naturans*, being-itself as the power to be). She says that “The God represents, among other things, power unmanifest; the spark of life. The Goddess gives this power form” (2011: 117). We experience these two aspects of natural creative power within our selves as *will* and *reason*. On this interpretation, we experience the god as will and the goddess as reason. The will is formless power while reason gives that power form; power unmanifest is formless while power manifest is formed. All power necessarily manifests itself and thereby takes on form; all form necessarily seeks actualization and therefore becomes invested with power. These ideas appear in Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Peirce. They are a way of building an atheistic metaphysics (which will have to be discussed elsewhere).

A weak mind, working at a crude level of intelligence which demands that all things be personified, thinks of will and reason as people, as spirits. But that is idolatry, which is easy enough to overcome. More mature minds can see will and reason as entirely inhuman and impersonal aspects of natural creative power. The will is the dynamic aspect of natural creative power while the reason is the structural aspect of that power. The will is found in the truth of abstract axioms and the energy of physical systems, while the reason is found in the *logos* (the axioms of logic and mathematics, the laws of any universe). For minds chained in Plato’s Cave, the will and reason look like people. For more mature minds, the idolatry falls away, and the god and goddess merely

symbolize these abstract aspects of natural creative power, the ontological force of being-itself. Positivists and materialists, as well as some nominalists, will despise all this metaphysics; however, since it is non-theistic, atheists are free to agree to it (or not). Anyone who wants their scientific naturalism to be metaphysically well-grounded is also free to agree to it (or not).

At a high level of concreteness, the god and goddess are merely aesthetic or literary forms, they are representations of an idealized man and an idealized woman, of the Eternal Feminine and the Eternal Masculine. They are merely symbols for natural forces (the Green Man or the Harvest Mother are such symbols). They can be used to visually or poetically illustrate the ways that human animals participate in the earthly ecosystem. They can be used to artistically display the ways that we participate, as men and women, as mammals, as animals, as organisms, and as material things, in natural existence – in being-itself. They can be used in dramas, plays, and public festivals. But they are not deities.

On both the highly abstract and the highly concrete interpretation, they become *icons* rather than idols. Strictly speaking, a religious naturalist of the type described here can endorse the use of icons to illustrate the ways that we participate in being-itself. Icons can be used to arouse us to do good, for humanity and for all life on earth. But there is always a danger. Donald Crosby advocates an atheistic religion of nature that “does not speak of God, gods, goddesses, or animating spirits of any sort, even if these terms are used metaphorically or symbolically, or are viewed as aspects, potencies, or processes of nature” (2008: 5). The danger is that symbols and metaphors all too quickly become taken literally. Nevertheless, on the type of religious naturalism sketched here, an atheistic nature-religion can use human and natural forms as icons, so long as their iconic role is stressed and any tendencies towards idolatry are repudiated. Still, it’s dangerous.

27. Sex Equality

An intriguing feature of Wicca is that sexual equality is built directly into its theology. The Farrars stress the balance of male and female polarities in the divine (1981: ch. XV). Buckland urges gender equality: “both the God and the Goddess are important and should be equally revered. There should be *balance*” (1986: 22, his italics). Cunningham affirms the equality of the male and female manifestations of the ultimate deity: “The Goddess and God are equal; neither is higher or more deserving of respect.” (2004: 11) Cuhulain states that gender equality is part of Wicca: “A natural and logical consequence of our duotheistic approach to the Divine is that men and women have an equal place in our religion” (2011: 14). Silver Elder writes that Wicca “identifies the chief Deities as male and female, reflecting the equal power of polarity” (2011: 18).

Some Wiccans prioritize the female over the male; they prioritize the goddess over the god. Thus Starhawk presents witchcraft (Wicca) as a monotheistic goddess religion, in which the male god is derived from the female goddess (1979: ch. 1). This female monotheism seems to be little more than a reactive inversion of Judeo-Christian male

monotheism. And indeed Starhawk's theology resembles Judeo-Christian monotheism in many ways. The main difference seems to be the inversion of male and female.

The Farrars criticize the reactive elevation of female principles over male (1981: 161-162). Buckland criticizes the focus on the goddess in many Wiccan groups: "A general complaint about Christianity by Witches is that there is the worship of male deity to the exclusion of the female. . . . And yet it is a strange paradox that many – if not the majority – Witchcraft traditions are guilty of this same crime of Christianity, if in reverse . . . they laud the Goddess to the near, or even total, excusion of the God!" (1986: 22) Cunningham also criticizes the excessive focus on the goddess in many Wiccan groups: "Religion based entirely on feminine energy, however, is as unbalanced and unnatural as one totally masculine in focus. The ideal is a perfect balance of the two. The Goddess and God are equal, complementary." (2004: 11)

Several Wiccan texts indicate an acceptance of homosexuality. The Principles of Wiccan Belief, presented by the Council of American Witches in 1974, affirm that Wiccans will not deny religious participation based on "sexual preference" (quoted in Cuhulain, 2011: 29). The Farrars are open to homosexual Wiccan practice (1981: 169-170). Sabin affirms that the Wiccan interest in polarity does not entail an exclusive focus on male/female polarity (2011: 32). She writes that "Polarity is expressed whenever two consenting adults come together to make love, and gay sex is as much about enjoying our earthly humanity as heterosexual sex is." (2011: 32).

Much could be written about the struggles to include femininity into the divine in Christianity or the struggle to include homosexuals in Christian communities. But the main point is that these are both *struggles*. They are efforts to introduce types of sexual justice that appear to be contrary to the founding text of Christianity, namely, the Bible. Sexual justice for males and females, as well as for heterosexuals and homosexuals, is not directly and explicitly found in the basic documents of Christianity; it must be read into those documents, by way of complex interpretations. Thus fundamentalists, who insist that the Bible is literally inerrant, will always be able to resist these forms of sexual justice. As long as Christianity is based on the Bible, Christians will have to struggle for sexual justice against the most direct readings of its own primary text. No such struggle is necessary in Wicca, which enshrines sexual justice directly into its theology.

28. Revelation versus Manifestation

The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are religions of *revelation*. As is well-known, these religions are derived from the experiences of religiously privileged individuals (prophets, messiahs, inspired writers) to whom it is alleged that God spoke. These religions say that God revealed special information to these privileged people. This information comes neither from our senses nor from pure reasoning. It is super-scientific and super-logical information that comes from a super-natural source. As such, it is beyond empirical or rational criticism, and it must be accepted on faith. And the people to whom it is revealed are special authorities who must be uncritically obeyed.

At least in the Bible, this revelation includes descriptions of the creation of the universe in Genesis; the divinely revealed Mosaic commandments and laws in the Old Testament; the moral principles laid down by Jesus or by Paul in the New Testament; and the descriptions of the end of the earth in Revelations. Of course, most Christians say that the entire Bible was divinely inspired, and thus has a special epistemic status. Many atheists, especially those motivated by empiricism, object to this special epistemic status. And many atheists object to faith and to the authoritarianism that goes with it.

By contrast, neo-pagan religions like Wicca are not revealed religions; they are religions of *manifestation*. Cuhulain quotes a fellow Wiccan as saying that Wicca is “a manifest religion, as opposed to a revealed religion such as Christianity or Islam. Wicca holds that the God and Goddess are manifest in all of nature, and are accessible to all. . . . Wicca has no prophets or messiahs” (2011: 29). Thus Cuhulain claims that Wicca is democratic rather than authoritarian: “We don’t have prophets; if someone asks what the word of God / Goddess is, we teach them to listen for it. We all have equal access to Divinity” (2011: 14). And Sabin writes that “[t]here is no central church of Wicca” and that Wicca has no sacred scriptures (2011: 13). She writes that Wicca has “no dogma (rules imposed by religious leaders)” and that Wicca is theologically democratic and individualistic (2011: 21). Cunningham says that “There is not, and can never be, one ‘pure’ or ‘true’ or ‘genuine’ form of Wicca. There are no central governing agencies, no physical leaders, no universally recognized prophets or messengers” (2004: ix-x).

For Wiccans, *the ultimate deity* is not revealed by any authority; on the contrary, it is naturally manifest to all: “In Wicca we know that there is a Higher Power, an Ultimate Force, the Archetypal Energy, the Supreme Power, because we see it manifest in Nature and within ourselves each and every day” (Silver Elder, 2011: 18). The ultimate deity, which is non-theistic, is simply the natural creative power of being. It is empirically manifest in the Big Bang, in the evolution of physical complexity in the cosmos, in the thermonuclear fusion in the sun, in the evolution of biological complexity on earth, in the metabolic vitality of animal and human life, and in all forms of desire and will.

For Wiccans, *the god and goddess* are not revealed by any authority; on the contrary, they are naturally manifest in the sexual dimorphism of common in earthly life. Buckland writes that “the Ultimate Deity was equated with both masculine and feminine . . . broken down into a god and goddess. This would seem most natural since everywhere in nature is found this duality” (1986: 20). Cunningham writes that “The Goddess and God are both within ourselves and manifest in all of nature” (Cunningham, 2004: 4). Cuhulain quotes “Wicca holds that the God and Goddess are manifest in all of nature” (2011: 29).

For Wiccans, the *cycles* of nature are divine. These cycles include the yearly solar cycle and the monthly lunar cycle. These cycles are not revealed by authorities; on the contrary, they are manifest to everybody: “Nature’s cycle manifests itself in our daily life and bio-rhythms” (Silver Elder, 2011: 8). These cycles include the *lunar cycle*, which is manifest in the tides and which Wiccans say corresponds to the period of the menstrual

cycles of human females (Silver Elder, 2011: 19; see the Farrars, 1981: 13). The lunar cycle includes the full moons as its holidays. These are celebrated with *esbat rituals*.

The divine natural cycles also include the solar cycles. One solar cycle is experienced daily as the cycle of day and night, waking and sleeping (Silver Elder, 2011: 43). The daily cycle is included within the larger yearly cycle. Cunningham writes that “The yearly cycle of greening, maturation and harvest has long been associated with the sun, hence the solar festivals of Europe . . . are still observed in Wicca” (2004: 13). And Sabin says that “Since Wicca is a nature-oriented religion, it places great emphasis on the changing cycle of the seasons, which Wiccans refer to as the ‘wheel of the year’” (2011: 155). The solar cycle (the Wheel of the Year) includes eight holidays: the solstices and equinoxes plus four intermediate days. These are celebrated with *sabbat rituals*.

For Wiccans, observable natural cycles justify *reincarnation*. Obviously, justification *does not* entail truth (lots of *false* theories are empirically justified). The solar cycle of vegetation is a cycle of repeated life and death; it is a cycle of plant and seed. Although the same plant does not reappear in the next season, there is regeneration at the species level. And this solar cycle is also found in the alternation of animal activity and hibernation. Wiccans use this cyclical pattern to justify reincarnation. Silver Elder writes that “the Wheel of the Year forms the story of birth, life, death and rebirth, the Cycle of Infinity and Reincarnation with the seasonal cycle acting as the metaphor for the regeneration of life” (2011: 23). Of course, reincarnation is not *directly* manifest. However, Wiccans will argue that it is inferred by empirical generalization. Obviously, this generalization is open to criticism; it must and will be criticized in later posts in this series. Here it is sufficient to note that the Wiccan belief in reincarnation is derived *by an inference from nature* (even if it is a faulty inference), rather than by super-natural revelation.

The thesis that Wicca is a religion of manifestation comes into conflict with one of the central aspects of Wicca, namely, it’s use of magic. Magic is not manifest at all; on the contrary, the practice of magic contradicts everything that nature does manifest. Nature manifests all and only those causal relations that can be revealed by science. And the causal relations that have already been revealed by nature to science are sufficient to refute the very idea of Wiccan magic. Appeals to the future of science cannot help: Wiccans cannot say that science will reveal causal relations that support their magical practices. Wiccan magic involves trivial operations on perfectly well-understood ordinary things. Any Wiccan who believes that Wicca is a religion of manifestation has to repudiate magic.

29. Creation Myths

Many religions have creation stories. The Judeo-Christian creation stories are found in the first chapters of Genesis, which is the first book of the Bible. There is no need to repeat the Genesis stories here. It can be agreed that there are some metaphorical or

analogical correspondences between the Genesis stories and our best science. But those analogies assume highly abstract non-literal interpretations of Genesis.

Some Christians do want to reconcile Genesis with our best science. Among Protestants, of the leading exponents of *Evolutionary Christianity* is Michael Dowd. His book, *Thank God for Evolution* (2009), argues that the real meaning of Genesis is entirely compatible with our best physics and biology. Among Catholics, writers like Thomas Berry argue that the scientific creation story is also the Catholic creation story. However, these Christians will always be scientifically limited by their commitment to the Bible.

However, Christian fundamentalists (and many evangelicals) assert that the Bible must be read as literally as possible and that its literal meaning is true. They assert that the creation stories in Genesis are literally true. Of course, any literal or even near literal reading of the Genesis stories directly contradicts our best scientific understanding of the origins and history of the universe. Conservative Christians therefore oppose science. In its place, they offer pseudo-science, such as intelligent design. As the result of this opposition, many scientifically minded people reject Christianity. Many people have been driven to atheism by the irrational insistence of conservative Christians on the literal or near-literal truth of the Genesis creation stories. Fortunately, Wiccans are not Christians.

Wiccans do not subscribe to the Christian creation stories in Genesis. Since they reject the authority of the Bible, they need not try to interpret it either literally or figuratively. The Bible is irrelevant for Wiccans. Nevertheless, Wiccans have their own creation stories. It will be useful to compare them with the scientific account of the universe.

Since Wiccan metaphysics is so deeply interested in energy, and since the Big Bang can be thought of as an explosion of pure energy, Wiccans can happily endorse the idea that our universe began billions of years ago with the Big Bang. Silver Elder summarizes and endorses the Big Bang and the standard evolutionary story of the universe (2011: 37-38). To be sure, Silver Elder is no scientist, and her writing is sloppy. She affirms that “our universe began as a seething mass of energy . . . Within a fraction of a second, this pure energy exploded into matter and eventually grew large enough to encompass All That Is” (2011: 37). She writes that “We are part of the Universe in origin and evolution . . . We are part of this ever expanding energy field” (2011: 38).

The Farrars endorse the notion of a cosmic evolution which includes but exceeds biological evolution by natural selection. They have a metaphysics involving various Neoplatonic levels of existence (material, spiritual, etc.). Evolution is occurring on all these levels. For them, all reality, on all levels, is evolving. Thus: “Evolution . . . does not merely mean Darwinism (though Darwin certainly defined one of the ways, on one of the levels, in which cosmic evolution expresses itself). It is the continuing process by which the ultimate creative force of the universe manifests itself ‘downwards’ through the levels, with increasing complexity, and is itself enriched by the experience of that complexity” (1981: 136). Thus the Farrars affirm the evolution of complexity in the material universe, including the Darwinian theory of the evolution of biological

complexity on earth. MacMorgan is a Wiccan with biological training who insists that, since Wicca is a nature religion, all incompatibilities with science must be excluded from Wicca. She strongly endorses Darwinian evolution and strongly opposes intelligent design (2003: 164-185).

On the basis of these texts, it seems fair to say that Wiccans affirm the scientific story of the origin and history of our universe. They agree with evolution (even if they enlarge it in ways that scientific naturalists cannot endorse). Nevertheless, Wiccans do have an ultimate deity as well as their god and goddess – and these must play some roles in any properly Wiccan story of the origin and history of universe. Wiccans will interpret the scientific story religiously. Cunningham provides an interesting Wiccan interpretation of the scientific story. He is *explicit* that he is using the scientific story to make a myth and that his mythic presentation is *merely poetry* (2004: 119). His creation myth goes like this:

Before time was, there was The One; The One was all, and all was The One.
And the vast expanse known as the universe was The One, all wise, all-pervading, all-powerful, eternally changing.
And space moved. The One molded energy into twin forms, equal but opposite, fashioning the Goddess and God from The One and of The One.
The Goddess and God stretched and gave thanks to The One, but darkness surrounded them. They were alone, solitary save for The One.
So they formed energy into gasses and gasses into suns and planets and moons; they sprinkled the universe with whirling globes and so all was given shape by the hands of the Goddess and God.
Light arose and the sky was illuminated by a billion suns. And the Goddess and God, satisfied by their works, rejoiced and loved, and were one.
From their union sprang the seeds of all life, and of the human race, so that we might achieve incarnation upon the earth.
The Goddess chose the moon as her symbol, and the God the sun as his symbol, to remind the inhabitants of the earth of their fashioners.
All are born, live, die, and are reborn beneath the sun and moon; all things come to pass there under, and all occurs with the blessings of The One, as has been the way of existence before time was. (Cunningham, 2004: 123).

The Cunningham myth looks somewhat like a Neoplatonic creation story in which the emanation follows an arrow of time. Cunningham uses the Neoplatonic term “The One” for the ultimate deity. However, since Cunningham describes The One as “wise”, it is not The One of Plotinus and it is not natural creative power. Indeed, Cunningham’s story looks less Neoplatonic and more Stoic – it looks like the pantheism presented in Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum* (*On the Nature of the Gods*). And yet, on his presentation, The One looks far too much like the Christian God. Given their deep rejection of Christianity, it is doubtful that many Wiccans would accept it. As expected, he also portrays both the god and goddess as designers. His story is far too close to theistic evolution (even if it is not intelligent design). Although the myth presented by Cunningham is far closer to natural science than the myths in Genesis, it is obviously not

acceptable to atheists. It involves scientifically erroneous and theologically idolatrous projections of human and personal features into a process which is entirely inhuman and impersonal.

Of course, it is entirely reasonable for Cunningham to return to his earlier explicit assertion that he is merely making up some poetry. He does not present his story as scientific truth and he is clear that “This is not, I repeat, *not* sacred writ, nor does it consist of revealed writing” (2004: 119). His only intention is to “spark your imagination” (2004: 119). His story is part of his *Book of Shadows*, which is a Wiccan religious diary. Every Wiccan is encouraged to have his or her own individualized Book of Shadows; there is no standard document. And Cunningham urges you to “alter anything for any reason” (2004: 119). Criticisms of his creation story should serve as the basis for improved versions. Obviously, this is entirely different from the Christian approach to Genesis. Christians will not encourage you to re-write the Bible – the Bible fixed forever.

It has been argued that neurotypical human brains have strong tendencies to see all activities in terms of agency. Human sociality depends on the ability to understand other human animals as having minds like your own. For some brains, this tendency to see all activities as manifestation of agency is so intense that it is erroneously over-generalized: some brains project minds into things that have no inner mentality. Some brains may be neurologically hardwired in such ways that they cannot avoid animistic projections. They may be hardwired to see spirits in nature (Guthrie, 1993). If that is right, religious projections will not be stopped by the mere declaration that they are false. Merely pointing out that an optical illusion is an illusion does not prevent the brain from experiencing the illusion as if it were reality. The same holds for more deeply cognitive illusions. If stories involving animistic projections cannot be avoided, then presumably some semi-scientific myth like the one given by Cunningham is superior to the myths found in Genesis.

Any atheist who is inspired either by scientific naturalism or the desire to avoid idolatry will (and should) insist that we must fight against mythical personifications. We are obligated to overcome the errors of our brains. For these atheists, mythical projections, like graven images, are forbidden. If Cunningham is right that Wicca encourages its adherents to have their own Books of Shadows, then an atheistic Book of Shadows would not contain any false or idolatrous projections. An atheistic Wicca is therefore possible. An atheistic Wiccan might use Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos* (1980) as his or her creation story. Or an atheistic Wiccan might use the wonderful books by Eric Chaisson, namely, *Cosmic Evolution* (2001) and *The Epic of Evolution* (2006). Some atheistic Wiccans might even use Ray Kurzweil’s *The Singularity is Near* (2005).

30. Atheist Ceremony: The Cosmic Walk

Once upon a time, back in the 1990s, some Catholics began developing a ceremony now known as the Cosmic Walk. As far as I can tell, the Cosmic Walk was designed by Sister

Miriam Therese McGillis, and first performed at Genesis Farm in New Jersey. These Catholics are working in the tradition of Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, and Chet Raymo. You might call it the tradition of *Catholic pantheism* (which has lots of pagan affinities). For more on the Cosmic Walk, see Taylor (2007: 249-252).

The Cosmic Walk uses a large spiral. This spiral may be drawn into the ground or even laid into the ground using stones or other markers. Or it may be formed using a long rope that is laid out as a spiral on the ground. The spiral is used to illustrate the evolution of the universe. The spiral is a time-line. The central point of the spiral refers to the Big Bang. Using some time scale, points on the spiral are marked with events such as the condensation of matter out of radiation, the formation of the first stars, the formation of the earth, the appearance of life on earth, and salient events in the history of life on earth, leading up to and passing through human history. The end of the spiral is the present. The marked points on the spiral are typically indicated with large unlit candles.

The performance of the Cosmic Walk involves two people: a reader and a walker. As the reader narrates the history of the cosmos, the walker moves along the spiral. As the walker passes a candle, a gong is struck, and the walker lights the candle. There are plenty of variations on this general ceremonial script. Of course, the entire ceremony is watched by an audience, who may also one by one walk the spiral after the candles are lit.

Although the Cosmic Walk has origins in Christian liturgy, it doesn't have to involve any Christian content. It's just a dramatic re-enactment of the evolution of the cosmos. And it can be presented as such. Religious naturalists may present it as the history of natural creative power (*natura naturans*) in our universe. And at least one Unitarian Universalist group presents the Cosmic Walk as a ceremony for atheists.

People form their identities socially. And maybe there's some truth to the meme theory. So atheists, compelled by their own brains to form social identities, pick up some memes from Christianity (de-baptism) and some memes from pantheistic Catholicism (the Cosmic Walk); and some memes from neo-paganism (the solstice and equinox celebrations). One of my theses is that, since Wicca is so highly focused on nature, Wicca contains lots of memes that are easily adapted to the purpose of atheist social-identity formation. The conceptual and practical affinities of religious memes may well lead to the evolution of a highly successful *atheistic nature-religion in America*. Ah, evolution . . .

31. The Logic of Creation

At a very high level of abstraction, Sabin characterizes the god and goddess as symbols for two aspects of natural creative power (*natura naturans*, being-itself as the power to be). She says that "The God represents, among other things, power unmanifest; the spark of life. The Goddess gives this power form" (2011: 117). We experience these two

aspects of natural creative power within our selves as *will* and *reason*. However, atheistic philosophers have thought of will and reason as impersonal aspects of natural creative power, and have used them to explain the existence of all concrete things.

Atheists can use old theological arguments, such as the Cosmological Argument, for their own non-theistic purposes. The Cosmological Argument reasons from the dependencies among things in nature to the existence of some ultimate independent thing. Over the years, there have been many versions of that argument. Aquinas famously gave three versions (the first three Ways in the *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Q. 2, Art. 3). Although theists want the Cosmological Argument to conclude with the existence of the theistic deity (typically, with the existence of the Christian God), the argument does not go to that conclusion. On the contrary, the ultimate independent thing lacks the essential features of any theistic deity. The Cosmological Argument is therefore an atheological argument.

Although there are many versions of the Cosmological Argument, they all share a common form. The common form looks something like this: (1) Some objects depend on other objects. (2) There are many descending dependency chains (chains in which x_0 depends on x_1 , x_1 depends on x_2 , and so on). (3) Dependency chains have no loops of any length (not even length 0). (4) Dependency chains cannot be infinitely descending. (5) Therefore, every descending dependency chain bottoms out in some independent object. (6) All dependency chains bottom out in the same independent object. (7) There exists a single independent object on which all other objects depend.

Since the independent object does not depend on anything, it exists necessarily. And, since it is at the extreme bottom of a series, it is ultimate, it is original. Since any whole depends on its parts, it does not have any parts – it is simple. It does not have any intelligence or psychology; it is not a person. Nor does it transcend nature; on the contrary, it is within nature – it is immanent. The independent object is not any theistic deity and it is certainly not the Christian God. It is merely an ontologically original object.

One common objection to the Cosmological Argument aims to refute the premise (4) that dependency chains cannot be infinitely descending. However, more sophisticated versions of the Cosmological Argument work with infinitely descending chains. Such versions have been developed by Leibniz (1697) and Meyer (1987). Leibniz shows how an infinite regression of causes nevertheless requires some ultimate sufficient reason:

Let us suppose a book entitled *The Elements of Geometry* to have existed eternally, one edition having always been copied from the preceding: it is evident then that, although you can account for the present copy by a reference to the past copy which it reproduces, yet, however far back you go in this series of reproductions, you can never arrive at a complete explanation, since you always will have to ask why at all times these books have existed, that is, why there have been any books at all and why this book in particular. (Leibniz, 1988: 84-86)

According to Leibniz, even if nature has existed forever into the past, it is still possible to ask the *Metaphysical Question*: why is there something rather than nothing? Even if nature contains infinitely descending dependency chains, Leibniz argues that they must bottom out, in the limit, in some original independent object. Any ontological regression converges in the limit to an original object. This original object contains the *ultimate sufficient reason* for all things. Within this original object, being-itself is equivalent to the *Principle of Sufficient Reason* (the PSR). The success of science empirically justifies the thesis that existence is rational. If existence is rational, then being-itself is equivalent to the PSR.

The PSR says that for any proposition P, if P, then there is some reason for P (see Kane, 1986: 123-125). Kane shows that the PSR has been used in scientific reasoning, so that there is scientific justification for the PSR (1976; 1986). Although the PSR may appear to have no creative power, that appearance is incorrect. The natural creative power of the PSR is manifest in the fact that the PSR entails the *Principle of Plenitude* (the PP). The PP says that for any proposition P, if there is no reason for not P, then P. There are two main lines of support for the PP. The first line comes from its use in current physics. Current physics uses Gell-Mann's *totalitarian principle*: "Everything which is not forbidden is compulsory" (Kane, 1986: 130). But the totalitarian principle is equivalent to the PP. Hence all the scientific justification for the totalitarian principle flows to the PP.

Within the nature of the original object, being-itself is equivalent to the Principle of Sufficient Reason, which expresses itself as (which entails) the Principle of Plenitude. The PSR is *natura naturans* unmanifest, while the PP is the original manifestation of *natura naturans*. Leibniz formulates the PP like this: "Everything possible demands that it should exist, and hence will exist unless something else prevents it" (Rescher, 1991: 171). Following Aristotle, it is reasonable to say that all possibilities are the potentialities of actually existing things. If this is right, then the Leibnizian formulation of the PP must be stated more precisely:

The Principle of Plenitude: For every thing, for every potentiality of that thing, if there is no reason to prevent the actualization of that potentiality, then that potentiality will be actualized.

If the earlier analysis of the Wiccan ultimate deity is correct, then the original object is the original self-manifestation of that ultimate deity. It is the ontologically initial appearance of natural creative power. The essence of the original object is the PSR; and this essence entails the PP, which in turn entails the existence of the original object. For the original object is possible; and since there is nothing on which its existence depends, there is nothing that can prevent it from existing; its demand for existence is satisfied by itself. Within the original object, essence and existence coincide. However, the original object is not any theistic deity, and it is certainly not the Christian God. Theism incorrectly projects personality into the original object, and that projection is idolatrous.

On this atheological analysis, the Principle of Plenitude is the original manifestation of natural creative power. This manifestation has an if-then structure: if the antecedent, then the consequent. Natural creative power is the force which moves truth from the antecedent to the consequent. But the antecedent involves reason while the consequent involves will. The if-then structure of natural creative power binds reason and will together into an ontologically productive unity. If the Wiccan god symbolizes will, and the goddess symbolizes reason, then the goddess symbolizes the antecedent of the PP while the god symbolizes the consequent of the PP. The love between the god and goddess symbolizes the Principle of Plenitude itself. Thus the sexually productive interaction of the god and goddess symbolizes the ontological effectiveness of the Principle of Plenitude. It symbolizes the power of the Principle of Plenitude to generate nature. Of course, this means only that the god and goddess are symbols for abstract principles. It would be idolatrous to identify the will with the god or reason with the goddess, or to project a male person into the consequent of the PP or a female person into the antecedent.

An atheist must reject as idolatrous every attempt to project human persons or psychological elements into *natura naturans*. If Wiccans say that there are people (namely, a male person and a female person) operative within the nature of the original object, then they are theistic, they are idolatrous, and atheists must reject that idolatry. However, since Wicca explicitly permits the interpretation of the god and goddess as merely mythological symbols, it seems that Wiccans can avoid that idolatry. If so, then an atheistic Wicca is possible.

On exactly this point it is valuable to contrast Wicca with Christianity. The Christian Godhead may indeed be some abstract object similar to being-itself. However, as the result of Biblical pressures, Christian theologians immediately project persons into their godhead. They project the three persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into the godhead. These are three hypostases – they are three personal reifications of the impersonal. The belief that the Bible is divine revelation compels Christians to make these reifications. Within Christianity, abstract thought cannot overcome the concrete imagery of the Biblical text. To say that the Biblical text is merely metaphorical is to say that Jesus is not Christ. And that, of course, is impossible for any Christian. If this analysis is correct, then idolatry is built right into Christianity. The only way to avoid idolatrous projection is atheism. An atheistic Christianity is absurd; an atheistic Wicca is a real possibility.

32. Evolution by Rational Selection

Almost all atheists are surely aware of Darwinian evolution, which is evolution by natural selection, and which explains the history of life on earth. *Universal Darwinism* is the thesis that evolutionary principles operate beyond earthly biology. Of course, not all things have genes or compete for survival in ecosystems. More general evolutionary theories need not be Darwinian in any narrow-minded or literal sense. Thus Darwinian evolution is a specific type of evolution, it is the specialization of evolutionary principles

to earthly biology. Many atheistic philosophers have developed very general theories of evolution. These thinkers include Spencer, Peirce, Nietzsche, and others. Even Leibniz offers an essentially atheistic creation story in which evolutionary principles bring all things into being.

The previous post used an atheistic version of the Cosmological Argument to argue for the necessary existence of an original object. It was then argued that this original object encodes the Principle of Plenitude: For every thing, for every potentiality of that thing, if there is no reason to prevent the actualization of that potentiality, then that potentiality will be actualized. The Principle of Plenitude serves as the primary principle for an ontological theory of evolution, the theory of *evolution by rational selection*.

Since the original object is independent, it is the first object to which the Principle of Plenitude (the PP) applies. The original object has potentialities, and the PP says that for every potentiality of the original object, if there is no reason to prevent the actualization of that potentiality, then it will be actualized. The potentialities of the original object are ontological or existential potentialities: they are potentialities for the existence of other things. If they are actualized, then other things exist. Such potentialities are found, for instance, in mathematics. The axioms for the natural numbers assert the existence of the original number 0. Those axioms also contain a successor rule that says that if some number exists, then its successor exists. This if-then rule expresses an existential potentiality of every number: according to this rule, the existence of every number entails the existence of its successor. It is the existence of the number 0 which entails the existence of the number 1. This entailment is a necessitation of the next number; it is arithmetic productivity. And for sets, the axioms of set theory say, for instance, that every set produces its power set.

Any potentiality of the original object is some possible version of the original object. So the PP says that for every possible version of the original object, if there is no reason to prevent the existence of that version, then that version will exist. Since there are no other objects on which the original object depends, any reason to prevent the existence of any version of the original object must come from within the original object itself. Rationality opposes all forms of inconsistency or self-contradiction. For any possible version of the original object, if that version modifies the nature of the original object by introducing some inconsistency or self-contradiction into that nature, then the original object contains a reason to prevent the existence of that version, and it will not produce that version. Any version of the original object that is produced by the original object also contains the nature of the original object; it contains within its essence the PSR and the PP. To use a biological metaphor, the PSR and PP are replicated in the offspring of the original object.

It seems reasonable to say that it is self-contradictory for any object to produce any lesser version of itself. Productivity cannot be self-negation. It is self-contradictory (and thus irrational) for any object to produce any other object whose nature is a damaged, mutilated, restricted, or perverted version of its own nature. The reason within any object prevents that object from actualizing any perverted or degraded versions of itself.

Of course, if there are many objects interacting to produce a single object, then those many objects may have their own conflicting reasons, and damage or perversion may arise out of that conflict. A virus and a cell have their own natures; conflicts among the reasons in those natures may lead to harmful mutations in the cell or to the destruction of the virus. However, discussions of conflicts within highly complex systems depend on the following preliminaries.

If the previous analysis is correct, then it is a principle of reason that no object produces any lesser version of itself. Hence the Principle of Plenitude (PP) entails that for every possible version of any object, if there is any way that version is greater than the original object, then that greater version exists. Since the original object is simple, it is minimal with respect to complexity. Complexity is the only scale of greatness on which the original object takes any place. Thus the PP entails that for every possible version of the original object, if that version is more complex than the original object, then that more complex object exists. The offspring of the original object are more complex versions of itself. If the increases in complexity from the original object to its offspring are not minimal, then the productivity of natural creative power skips over some possible increases in greatness. But it is irrational to skip over any possible increase in greatness. Hence every increase in greatness is minimal. From which it follows that every offspring of the original object is minimally more complex. One minimally more complex version of the original object is a whole which contains exactly two copies of the original object as its parts. Call this object Beta.

And now all the evolutionary principles iterate: Beta produces Gamma and Delta. Gamma is derived from Beta by duplicating Beta and then splitting one of its parts; Delta is derived from Beta by duplicating Beta and then splitting both of its parts. All these wholes and parts contain the nature of the original object, that is, the PSR and PP. From continued iteration, a stratified hierarchy of increasingly internally complex objects emerges. These can include wholes with many levels of parts. For instance, Beta might also produce Epsilon, which is derived from Beta by duplicating Beta and then giving one of the parts of Beta two lower level parts of its own. Since the PP is fully general, it entails that every possible elaboration or complexification of the original object eventually appears among the descendents of the original object.

As these descendents appear, their internal relations also become complexified. Order relations appear among the parts, so that the parts are linearly or partially or otherwise ordered with respect to each other. Eventually temporal relations will supervene on linear orders internal to highly complex descendents of the original object, so that some parts in those descendents are moments which are earlier or later with respect to each other. And spatial relations will also eventually appear, so that parts are not merely copresent in some whole, but they are spatial points such that one point is beside another point. Within some complex wholes, elaborate metric structures will appear. As the Principle of Plenitude acts within the descendents of the original object, those descendents will contain space-time manifolds, scalar fields, vector fields, and so on. Cellular automata and lattice-gas automata will appear among these descendents. Proto-

physical systems will appear. Eventually, physical universes will appear within the descendents of the original object.

Generation upon generation, the iteration of the Principle of Plenitude will produce ever more complex physical universes. Within them, highly complicated material structures will appear and interact. These will all contain their own natures, their own rational wills, which strive for their own types of greatness, and which may come into conflict. An example is Darwinian evolution on earth, in which each organism strives to reproduce its kind, or to maximize its own number of offspring, and in which those many strivings cooperate or compete, thus ensuring the survival of the fittest. Thus being-itself eventually manifests itself in evolution by natural selection on the planet earth. The conflicts among the strivings of organisms lead to both good and evil consequences.

Conflict is good insofar as it drives evolution to greater heights of value. For instance, conflicts among the strivings (the rational wills) of organisms drive evolution from the unicellular level up to the appearance of rational animals like human beings. Thus the objective rationality in being-itself successfully wills the existence of things which can orient their own wills by their own reason. Objective reason, which is impersonal and unconscious, becomes personal and conscious, and experiences itself as such.

Conflict is evil insofar as it leads to disease, damage, or death. Since evils emerge from the conflicts among goods, there is no need for any being that is the source of all or even some evils (indeed, getting rid of Satan is one of the best ideas in Wicca). However, given any universe, and all of its parts, the Principle of Plenitude acts within that universe as a whole and within each of its parts. Every universe has many offspring such that the failures of reason in that universe are satisfied by its descendents. Thus any conflicts of reason that take place in one universe are eventually remedied within its descendents. Over the long course of evolution by rational selection, all rational demands are satisfied. For any proposition, if it rationally ought to be true, then it will be true.

The metaphysical theory presented here and in the last post is atheistic. It does not involve any theistic deities. It is consistent with any version of Wicca that regards the god and goddess as merely poetic symbols for abstract powers of being. It is certainly more plausible than the unfortunate creation myth given by Cunningham (2004: 123). And it is also certainly more plausible than the ancient creation myth found in Genesis. It is entirely consistent with our best physical and biological science. Atheists, whether they are interested in Wicca or not, are free to affirm this metaphysical theory.

33. Two Arguments for Evolution by Rational Selection

Although there is some empirical justification for the Principles of Sufficient Reason and Plenitude, much of the discussion of the logic of creation and evolution by rational selection has been highly abstract. It has been a priori; a matter of pure reason. But it is reasonable to demand empirical justification for those metaphysical theories. To that end, two arguments follow for the logic of creation and evolution by rational selection.

The first argument is the *Argument from Self-Organization*: (1) Our universe contains a process of physical self-organization (Chaisson, 2001, 2006). This process starts with simple atoms and builds more complex atoms. (2) Our earth contains a process of biological self-organization (Chaisson, 2001, 2006). This process starts with simple organisms and evolves more complex organisms. (3) Physical and biological self-organization justify a general rule: more complex things are produced from simpler things in some process of self-organization. (4) Our universe is complex. (5) It follows that our universe has been produced from some simpler thing(s) in some process of self-organization. This is a cosmological process of self-organization. (6) We observe that causes are similar to their effect (see Hume, 1990: part II). Generally, objects of one type produce objects of the same or similar type. (7) Therefore, our universe was produced by something similar to but simpler than itself. It was produced by a simpler universe. And this simpler universe was produced by an even simpler universe. (8) Since the series of generations of universes produced by simpler universes does not go back infinitely far, it ends with the simplest possible universe. This is the beginning of the cosmological process of self-organization. (9) Consequently, there is a cosmological process of self-organization. It starts with the simplest universe. It produces a sequence of increasingly complex universes. (10) But this is just the cosmological part of evolution by rational selection. And since the cosmological part of evolution by rational selection depends on the deeper pre-cosmological logic of creation, any reasoning that empirically justifies the cosmological part of evolution of rational selection also justifies the logic of creation.

The second argument is the *Argument from Fine Tuning*: (1) Our universe is finely tuned for life (Barrow & Tipler, 1986). (2) John Leslie has argued that one of the explanations for this fine tuning is that some ethical principles are creatively effective. Some landmarks are: Leslie, 1970, 1979, 1980, 1989. These ethical principles are cosmogonic and benevolent. (3) Because it explains why there is any value at all rather than none, the explanation that that some ethical principles are creatively effective is better than every other explanation for the fine tuning. (4) So, by inference to the best explanation, these ethical principles are creatively effective. To paraphrase Leslie (1970: 286), this means that the existence and detailed nature of our universe are products of a “directly active ethical necessity”. These directly active ethical necessities can be referred to as the *Principles*. (5) If the Principles do not create any universe, then they are clearly not creatively effective. (6) But the Principles are creatively effective. (7) So they create at least one universe. For example, they create our universe. (8) But many universes are better than our universe. And for any universe U, if U ought to exist, then for any universe V, if V is better than U, then V ought to exist (and V ought to exist even more than U). (9) It follows that for any universe U, if the existence of U is ethically required, then for any universe V, if V is an improvement of U, then the existence of V is even more ethically required. (10) So if the Principles are sufficiently powerful to create U, then they must also be sufficiently powerful to create every improved universe. (11) Therefore, our universe is the start of a series of increasingly improved universes. (12) However, there is nothing ethically special about our universe. There is no sufficient reason to start with our universe. (13) The only non-arbitrary starting place for the Principles is the universe that contains the least positive value. (14) The Principles can

now be expressed precisely as two rules: (A) the least positive of all possible universes is actual; and (B) for every actual universe U, if V is an improvement of U, then V is actual. (15) Consequently, the least positive of all possible universes is the start of a series of increasingly improved universes. As universes get better, they become more and more finely tuned for life and for every other type of value. (15) As with the Argument from Self-Organization, this explanation for the fine tuning of our universe empirically justifies both evolution by rational selection and the logic of creation.

34. Wiccan Wheel

The Wheel of the Year involves eight solar holidays (the *sabbats*). The sabbats include the solar quarter days (the solstices and the equinoxes) as well as the solar cross-quarter days intermediate between the quarters. For theistic Wiccans, these days symbolize events in the life-cycles of the god and goddess. Silver Elder (2011: 23) writes that the sun represents the male principle in nature (the Wiccan god) and the earth represents the female principle in nature (the Wiccan goddess).

The sabbats are closely associated with agriculture (with yearly patterns of planting, tending, and harvesting) and animal husbandry (with yearly patterns of animal mating, birth, growth, and slaughter). For Wiccans, these yearly patterns are deified; they are translated into the life-cycle of the god and goddess. The stable earth is represented by the goddess and the variable sun is represented by the god. Although the earth remains constant, the sun waxes and wanes. Hence the god is born, grows, peaks, declines, dies, and is reborn.

Since the Wheel of the Year symbolizes the repeated biological pattern of the solar god, the Wheel also symbolizes the pattern of reincarnation. Silver Elder writes that the Wheel of the Year illustrates “the Cycle of Infinity and Reincarnation with the seasonal cycle acting as the metaphor for the regeneration of life” (2011: 23).

The dramatic interaction of the sun-god and earth-goddess includes both the cycles of fertility and of reincarnation. Thus the old sun-god mates with the earth-goddess so that she becomes impregnated with the new sun-god. After mating, the old sun-god dies. Shortly after his death, the new sun-god is born, grows to sexual maturity, and mates with the earth-goddess. Hence the cycle repeats. Although the cycle appears to involve mother-son incest, Wiccans reject all literal interpretations of the cycle and thus reject the idea that the cycle either depicts or affirms incest (Cunningham, 2004: 71). On the contrary, the sun-god and earth-goddess are merely ideal types or natural forces. At the level of biological types, the same abstract male is always fertilizing the same abstract female. It seems more accurate to say that the cycle depicts a perfectly enclosed male-female pair. It is a complete couple which, for Wiccans, is sufficient for the generation of all things.

As religious holidays, the sabbats are celebrated through various ritual forms. All sabbat rituals share a common framework holding content which varies from sabbat to sabbat.

The common framework is presented in The Farrars (1981: 11-60), Cunningham (2004: ch. 13), Sabin (2011: ch. 10), Silver Elder (2011: 88-105). Here are the stages of the common framework as described by Silver Elder (2011: 88): “Preparation; Opening the Rite; Casting the Circle; Calling of the Quarters and Inviting the Deities; Cakes and Wine; Banishing of the Circle and Closing the Rite.”

After the formal ritual, the sabbat celebration often involves an informal potluck feast. The Farrars encourage every sabbat to turn into a party (1981: 21). Although the details of the sabbat rituals are of little philosophical interest, it is worth pointing out that casting the circle involves drawing or marking out a sacred circle in which the ritual takes place. This circle is typically cast by moving in a *deosil* direction, which is the direction of the movement of the sun across the sky. Hence casting the circle mirrors the solar cycle of the year.

The eight sabbats on the Wheel of the Year are outlined below. Sabin describes the sabbat celebrations (2011: ch. 9). Silver Elder’s entire 2011 is dedicated to them. Each sabbat includes relations between the god and goddess. For the Farrars, these relations are extremely complex, involving avatars of the sun-god as the Oak King and Holly King (1981: 24-28). As Wicca evolved and became Americanized, this complexity seems to have been dropped. By the time of Cunningham and Sabin, the god-goddess interactions are simpler. Here the god-goddess interactions are taken from Cunningham (2004: ch. 8).

Yule (Winter Solstice; about 21 December) – Yule is the shortest day of the year; after Yule, the days lengthen and the sun grows stronger. Thus Wiccans interpret this to mean that the earth-goddess gives birth to the sun-god at Yule. Cunningham says that at Yule “[t]he Goddess gives birth to a son, the God” (2004: 67). The fallow fields are interpreted as the goddess resting after giving birth. For Wiccans, the birth of the sun is in fact rebirth; thus Yule “is a reminder that the ultimate product of death is rebirth” (2004: 67). Yule is celebrated in the traditional pagan ways, with a tree, gifts for children and so on.

Imbolc (about 1 February) – The lengthening days are interpreted as “the recovery of the Goddess after giving birth to the God” (2004: 67). The sun-god is “a young lusty boy”, though he is still immature. Cunningham says that Imbolc is a “sabbat of purification after the shut-in life of winter, through the renewing power of the sun” (2004: 68). Outside of the sabbat ritual proper, celebration of Imbolc involves bonfire parties.

Ostara (Spring Equinox; about 21 March) – At the start of spring, natural creative power is manifest in increased biological activity. The emergence of vegetation during the spring is interpreted as the greater sexual maturity of the god and goddess: “The Goddess blankets the earth with fertility” while “the God stretches and grows to maturity. He walks the greening fields and delights in the abundance of nature” (2004: 68). Natural creative power stirs in animals as well as plants: “the God and Goddess impel the wild creatures of the earth to reproduce” (2004: 68).

Beltane (May Day; about 1 May) – By May Day the creative sexual powers of the god and goddess are fully mature: “They fall in love, lie among the grasses and blossoms, and unite. The Goddess becomes pregnant of the God” (2004: 69). The old pagan celebrations on Beltane often involved dancing around a Maypole.

Litha (Summer Solstice; about 21 June) – The summer solstice is the longest day of the year. On this day “the powers of nature reach their highest point. The earth is awash in the fertility of the Goddess and God” (2004: 69).

Lammas (about 4 August) – Lammas is the first harvest festival, when many agricultural products of the summer initially become available. Since the foremost of these products in the northern hemisphere is corn, it is often thought of as a corn festival. At this time the waning of the sun becomes manifest in the sky. The god loses his strength and “[t]he Goddess watches in sorrow and joy as she realizes that the God is dying, and yet lives on inside her as her child” (2004: 70).

Mabon (Fall Equinox; about 21 September) – At the fall equinox, light and darkness are in balance, but darkness is ascending. The god is preparing to die. Thus “[t]he Goddess nods in the weakening sun, though fire burns within her womb. She feels the presence of the God even as he wanes” (2004: 70).

Samhain (about 31 October) – At Samhain the sun-god dies: “the Wicca say farewell to the God. This is a temporary farewell. He isn’t wrapped in eternal darkness, but readies to be reborn of the Goddess at Yule” (2004: 70). Samhain is the Wiccan new year and is marked with elaborate and varied ceremonies. One way that some Wiccans honor the dead is through Silent Suppers (Cuhulain, 2011: 96; Sabin, 2011: 171). A Silent Supper is meal that is served and eaten in silence, with a place at the table set for the dead. Buckland (1986: 99-101) describes a ritual for burning away weaknesses at Samhain. Participants write down their weaknesses on papers which are then ritually burned.

35. Criticizing Wicca: The Wheel

The Wheel of the Year is a division of the solar year into eight holidays (the solstices, the equinoxes, and four days in-between). Insofar as the days on the Wheel of the Year mark natural points in the orbit of the earth around the sun, the Wheel marks a natural pattern. It marks a natural *logos*. Wiccans use that natural *logos* as a frame which they cover with religious symbolism – they cover it with religious *mythos*.

According to the Wiccan *mythos*, the Wheel represents stages in the lives of the Wiccan god and goddess. Some (but not all) Wiccans think of the god and goddess theistically, as real people. Atheists reject this theism; on the contrary, the god and goddess are merely human projections. At most, they are symbols, icons representing the dynamic polarity of male and female in animal nature and the solar cycle in botanical nature.

And while atheists must reject any theistic interpretations of the Wheel, atheists need not reject the aesthetic-affective dimensions of the Wheel. Any atheist who has ever been overwhelmed by love can appreciate the story of the god and goddess as emotionally beautiful and satisfying poetry. It is entirely consistent with the purest atheism to affirm that love is sacred and holy. For anyone who values earthly nature, the drama of the sun and earth is both beautiful and ethically arousing – it reminds us of our personal and social obligations to the whole earthly ecosystem. It is entirely consistent with the purest atheism to affirm that earthly nature is sacred and holy.

Atheists can certainly use the eight days of the Wheel as purely atheistic holidays (and many atheists and atheistic groups already do). The Wheel of the Year also provides materials for personal reflection. The eight parts of the Wheel can be put into correspondence with the eight stages of human life as described by Erik Erikson. At each sabbat, we can reflect on those stages – on what it means to be an infant, an adolescent, an aged person, a dying person.

The Wheel of the Year provides a great deal of material for atheistic reflection. The regular movement of the sun can be used to symbolize all the laws of nature – it can serve as a symbol for all the patterning in nature. Natural creative power (*natura naturans*) is not irrational; on the contrary, the success of science shows that it is rational. Natural creative power contains the natural *logos* – *nature is rational and reason is natural*. The Wheel of the Year can inspire reflection on the rationality of nature.

The Wheel of the Year can inspire us to think about deep time. The Wheel has been rolling for billions of years from the past and will continue to roll for billions of years into the future. We can mentally roll the Wheel back to the very dawn of life on earth, and then mentally roll it forward through the entire course of earthly evolution. The solar cycle depicted in the Wheel drives all biological evolution on earth. And we can wonder about how the Wheel will roll into the future: what will the shape of life on earth be like? The Wheel compels us to think about our stewardship of earthly life.

The Wheel of the Year is a natural cyclical pattern. As such, it inspires us to think about the deep features of natural cyclicity. The Wheel doesn't just roll; it rolls in one direction, along an arrow of time. And it doesn't just roll through the same patterns. Our best science reveals that as the Wheel rolls on, the contents of its cycles tend to become more complex (Chaisson, 2001, 2006). The cycles of the Wheel do not merely produce another generation of bacteria. On the contrary, those cycles build an enormous biological complexity hierarchy. The Wheel rolls uphill. Will the Wheel always roll uphill?

The Wheel of the Year inspires us to think about general principles of cyclicity. Machines that seem to operate linearly are driven by cycles. The action pattern of every Turing Machine is cyclical. Computers are also wheels. How deep are the principles of cyclicity? Iteration is cyclical. Number lines and hierarchies of sets are generated by cyclical processes. Perhaps all complexity is built by repetition or recursion. Perhaps everything is generated by *algorithmic iteration*. The logic of creation and evolution by

rational selection together constitute a purely atheistic account of the emergence of all natural complexity (including our whole universe). Evolution by rational selection is an example of algorithmic iteration. Hence the Wheel symbolizes the evolutionary process which constructs all complexity. The Wheel symbolizes the self-manifestation of *natura naturans* through the interplay of objective will and objective reason.

Atheists must repudiate any activity in the sabbat rituals that involves the Wiccan god and goddess. But that still leaves some interesting ritual activity for atheists to use. It is entirely consistent with atheism (and with rationalism) to light a candle symbolizing truth, and to draw a sacred circle that includes reason and excludes irrationality. Many religious rites focus on *purification* and *ascetic self-discipline*. For an atheistic nature-religion, those rites would focus on purification of the mind and cognitive self-discipline. Everybody is welcome inside the circle of reason. Just leave your irrationality outside.

36. The Atheistic Wheel of the Year

The Wheel of the Year involves eight solar holidays (the *sabbats*). The sabbats include the solar quarter days (the solstices and the equinoxes) as well as the solar cross-quarter days intermediate between the quarters. For theistic Wiccans, these days symbolize events in the life-cycles of the god and goddess. These days are marked by sabbat rituals.

Atheistic Wiccans, or atheists generally, must reject any theistic aspects of the sabbats. Of course, atheists are free to use the non-theistic aspects of the sabbats. The celebration of the sabbats is consistent with atheism (and with the denial of the Wiccan gods). The sabbats are solar holidays. Scientific naturalism confirms the structure of the sabbats. The earth does orbit the sun and the seasons do follow a cyclical pattern.

Atheists can certainly participate in all the life-affirming aspects of the sabbats. And atheistic Wiccans, or atheists generally, can perform many other rituals or ceremonies on these days. Many atheistic ceremonies are already being done on these days. All sabbats involve gatherings and feasts. And all sabbats symbolize the continued existence of natural life on earth. As such, they are *life-affirming holidays*. The sabbats affirm both the rhythms of human life and the rhythms of the entire earthly ecosystem. As life-affirming holidays, they can play positive roles in atheistic communities.

The list below provides information about non-theistic versions of the sabbat holidays. The sabbat days listed here are for the Northern Hemisphere. For the Southern Hemisphere, the days appear on the opposite places in the solar calendar. The solstices and equinoxes are inverted as are the cross-quarter days (for instance, Beltane takes place on 1 February and Imbolc on 1 May). The agricultural aspects of these holidays (e.g. harvests) are most meaningful for the temperate latitudes (at about 45 degrees). For those in the tropics, the solar variation is smaller and therefore has less meaning. Nevertheless, these celebrations can still be done in the tropics. They should be varied as the participants see fit.

Imbolc (about 1 February).

Imbolc takes place at a time which is often very emotionally difficult; the winter has been grinding on, the cold is at its worst, and the long lack of light leads to depression. For many, it is the worst point of the year. It therefore seems fitting to use Imbolc to remember the Dark Ages, when superstition and the sleep of reason bred monsters. But any recollection of the Dark Ages should have at its end an affirmation of hope. This is both the hope that reason will triumph over irrationality and the hope that brighter and warmer days will soon triumph over the dark and cold. It is a time to emphasize the virtues of patience, resolve, and determination. <<Darwin Day>> (12 February) is close to Imbolc and may be celebrated along with it.

Ostara (Spring Equinox; about 21 March).

Since this is a time at which light triumphs over darkness, the American Humanist Association, through its Secular Seasons Project, suggests marking it with a <<celebration of the Renaissance.>> This is the end of the Dark Ages. This can be celebrated by remembering those who fought for science over religious superstition. It might be celebrated with some ritual banishment of a priestly figure by a figure symbolizing reason or science. Obviously, the Spring Equinox is a time of psychological re-vitalization. This may be ritually recognized in many ways.

Beltane (May Day; about 1 May).

Many non-theistic practices are associated with May Day. One of the best known and most widely practiced involves erecting and dancing around a Maypole. Various atheist groups have participated in May Day Parades. Some atheistic groups celebrate the <<National Day of Reason>> on the first Thursday in May. For atheistic Wiccans, this should be close enough to Beltane to serve as a Beltane ceremony.

Litha (Summer Solstice; about 21 June).

The Summer Solstice is the longest day. Since the light of the sun traditionally symbolizes reason and truth, the Summer Solstice symbolizes the maximal power of reason and truth. On the Summer Solstice, it is therefore fitting to celebrate the Enlightenment. This can be done by perform the <<Cosmic Walk>> as a counterpart to the Advent Spiral. The Summer Solstice is also <<World Humanist Day>>, which can be celebrated in many ways.

Lammas (about 4 August).

Lammas is an initial harvest holiday. Many neo-pagans mark Lammas with feasts involving the fruits, vegetables, and grains available during the height of the summer. Since corn is often first harvested around this time, Lammas is often celebrated as a corn festival. Corn festivals are common and traditional during August throughout the United States. Atheistic Wiccans and atheists generally can obviously celebrate corn festivals.

Beyond feasting, it is hard to find much recent ritual activity at Lammas. Since Lammas is the height of summer, it may serve as a time of reflection on accomplishments or a time for the reflection on the coming harvest, which symbolizes the impermanence of all things.

Mabon (Fall Equinox; about 21 September).

An interesting and complex ceremony for the Fall Equinox is performed in Crested Butte, Colorado. This is the <<Vinotok ceremony, >> which is said to originate in Eastern Europe. This ceremony is also known as *Burning the Grump*.

The Vinotok ceremony takes place over about one week and involves a large cast of characters – it's a large-scale festival performed (so it seems) by most of the town. It might take several pages to describe the elaborate aspects of the Vinotok ceremony. But here it will be useful to focus on the *Green Man* and the *Grump*. The Green Man symbolizes natural creative power expressed in the botanical vitality of agriculture. The Fall Equinox is the start of the harvest. At this time, obviously enough, the crops are grown, the leaves are falling, and thus the Green Man is dying. To ensure his return in the spring, someone must be sacrificed in his place. The sacrificial scapegoat is the Grump.

The Grump symbolizes all human negativity. The Grump is a wooden figure of a man with a hollow interior. Over the course of the ceremony, people write their complaints and grievances on paper and put them into the Grump. One might also write down things that hold us in bondage or burdens from which we seek to be relieved (e.g. bad habits, addictions, personal failings, and so on). The Grump put on trial and found guilty (perhaps the charge is that he holds us back from realizing our highest ideals). The Grump is then taken to the town square and burned. This climax of the festival involves considerable partying. Upon the sacrifice of the Grump, the Green Man returns.

Atheistic Wiccans, as well as atheists generally, ought to be able to perform and enjoy something like this ceremony. It can function as a powerful psychological purification ritual, in which we seek release from our bonds and burdens. It is interesting to note the parallels between Burning the Grump and the Burning Man festival held in the Black Rock Desert. But the significance of Burning Man is a topic for another time. Burning the Grump resembles the burning ritual described by Buckland (1986: 99-101). While Buckland puts that burning ritual at Samhain, Mabon seems more appropriate.

Samhain (about 31 October)

Samhain is traditionally a time to remember and honor the dead. At this time there are many well-established ceremonial structures for dealing with death. These include the *Day of the Dead* in Mexico and elsewhere. One way that some Wiccans honor the dead is through *Silent Suppers* (Cuhulain, 2011: 96; Sabin, 2011: 171). A Silent Supper is meal that is served and eaten in silence, with a place at the table set for the dead. Atheistic Wiccans, or atheists in general, can obviously hold Silent Suppers. For

children, all the usual North American Halloween celebrations and activities can be done. One of the psychological functions of Halloween is to help children deal with their fears. It is also a good time to teach children about superstitions. Children may learn that ghosts or other frightening powers are not real, but merely projections of our own fears.

Yule (Winter Solstice; about 21 December)

Many atheist groups have Winter Solstice activities. Atheists can certainly perform all the usual Yule practices (setting up a tree, giving gifts to children, and so on). The mythology of Santa can be used in a positive way. It is customary to tell young children the Santa myths and to allow or encourage them to believe those myths. It is also customary to tell older children that Santa is merely an illusion. Atheists can certainly use these customs to very good ends: all gods and goddesses are like Santa; they are pleasing fictions.

Many Waldorf schools perform a ceremony known as the <<Advent Spiral.>> This ceremony is primarily a ceremony for children, with parents watching. It involves a large spiral laid on the ground or floor. The spiral must be large enough for people to walk from its outer end into its center. Some versions of the Advent Spiral use a double spiral, so that people can walk into the center along one spiral and out of it along the other. The spiral is laid out with evergreen boughs or perhaps with stones. Luminariums (small candles in holders) may be set at regular intervals along the spiral. At the center of the spiral, there is a chair. The ceremony is performed in darkness. It starts with a child holding a lighted candle walking into the spiral and sitting on the chair. Other children are lined up at the outer end of the spiral with unlit candles. One by one they walk into the center of the spiral, where they light their candles from the central candle. After the candle is lit, the child walks out of the spiral. The Advent Spiral symbolizes the growing of the light from the Winter Solstice. The use of the spiral and the lights is clearly similar to the Cosmic Walk. This similarity motivates the performance of the Cosmic Walk at the Summer Solstice.

37. Reincarnation

Although reincarnation is often thought of as an Eastern doctrine, it has a surprisingly large following in the West. The Pythagoreans affirmed reincarnation. Plato affirms it in his Myth of Er (*Republic*, 614b-621d) and Plotinus affirms it in the *Enneads* (III.2-4, III.6.6, VI.7.6). Versions of reincarnation seem to be endorsed by classical American thinkers like Emerson and Thoreau. As for modern America, reincarnation beliefs appear to be surprisingly common (see the Pew 2009 Religion and Public Life Survey).

Reincarnation is a common doctrine among Wiccans. The Farrars say that “Almost all witches [Wiccans] believe in reincarnation” (1981: 113). Buckland talks about it (1986: 25-28). Sabin reports that “most Wiccans will tell you that they believe in reincarnation” (2011: 31). And Cunningham says that “reincarnation is one of Wicca’s most valuable lessons” (2004: 73). Silver Elder discusses it (2011: 56-57). She writes that “It is the

Soul or, the Spirit body that transcends the earthly physical realm to be re-manifest within the cycle of birth, life, death, and re-birth” (2011: 38).

According to Cunningham, reincarnation is not revealed by any super-natural agency, but is inferred from the observation of natural fertility cycles. Thus reincarnation is manifest in the lawful patterns of nature: “reincarnation is as real as a plant that buds, flowers, drops its seed, withers, and creates a new plant in its image” (2004: 77). Of course, this botanical fertility cycle corresponds to the solar cycle. So Cunningham writes that “our very lives are symbolically linked with the endless cycles of the seasons that shape our planet” (2004: 76). Silver Elder says that reincarnation is manifest by the solar cycle, that is, by the Wheel of the Year: “the Wheel of the Year forms the story of birth, life, death and rebirth, the Cycle of Infinity and Reincarnation with the seasonal cycle acting as the metaphor for the regeneration of life” (2011: 23). Silver Elder also says that the daily sleep-wake cycle is a metaphor for reincarnation (2011: 43).

The Farrars say “The theory of reincarnation holds, briefly, that each individual human soul or essence is reborn again and again, in a series of bodily incarnations on this earth” (1981: 116). Cunningham writes that “when the physical body dies we do not cease to exist, but are reborn in another body” (2004: 73). Sabin says that reincarnation is “the soul returning again to earth in a new body or form after death” (2011: 31). But reincarnation is not limited to being reborn on earth. Buckland suggests that you might be reincarnated on some other planets or worlds: it is possible that “we not only experience lives here on Earth, but also on other planets . . . Perhaps we go through the cycle here having already been through it a dozen times or more on other worlds” (Buckland, 1986: 26).

The basic Wiccan reincarnation doctrine seems to be this: A human person is composed of a soul and body (this is *soul-body dualism*). The soul is some kind of divine spark from the ultimate deity (or god and goddess). Thus Cunningham writes “The soul is ageless, sexless, nonphysical, possessed of the divine spark of the Goddess and God” (2004: 73). Although the body dies, the soul cannot be destroyed. After the body dies, the soul travels to some spiritual place where it prepares for its next incarnation (Cunningham, 2004: 75; Silver Elder, 2011: 56-57). After this preparation, the soul enters a new human body. The Farrars say that it enters the fetus at conception (1981: 121).

The cycle of reincarnation aims at self-perfection and is repeated over and over again until the soul becomes perfected. Cunningham says “Wicca teaches that reincarnation is the instrument through which our souls are perfected. One lifetime isn’t sufficient to attain this goal; hence, the consciousness (soul) is reborn many times, each life encompassing a different set of lessons, until perfection is achieved” (2004: 73). Cuhulain says that the purpose of reincarnation is “to continue the process of perfecting ourselves” (2011: 17). Buckland writes discusses the purpose of reincarnation like this: “your job is to progress; to strive your hardest towards perfection” (1986: 27). Buckland uses an educational analogy to illustrate the process of self-perfection through multiple lives:

A very good simile for [reincarnation] is the grades of a school. You enter school in a low grade and learn the basics. When you have mastered these you graduate, take a short vacation, then come back into a higher grade to learn and experience more things. So it is in life. In each life you have a certain amount to learn and to experience. When you have done that, you graduate (e.g., you die). To come back into a higher grade, you are reborn in a new body. (1986: 26)

Once the soul is perfected, the Farrars say that it advances to some higher level of spiritual reality that is beyond our detailed comprehension (1981: 116). Cunningham is more explicit: “after rising upon the spiral of life and death and rebirth, those souls who have attained perfection break away from the cycle forever and dwell with the Goddess and God. Nothing is ever lost. The energies resident in our souls return to the divine source from which they originally emanated” (2004: 76). Cunningham’s version of Wicca is highly Neoplatonic. For Cunningham, reincarnation climbs great chain of being. This is Neoplatonic: after the soul is emanated by the One, the soul returns to the One.

Although Cunningham tries to interpret Wicca using old Neoplatonic ideas, his Neoplatonic notion of that the purpose of reincarnation is to reunite the soul with the One does not seem consistent with other Wiccan doctrines. It is not consistent with the Wiccan conception of nature as a perpetual cycle (which Silver Elder refers to as the “Cycle of Infinity” (2011: 23)). And Sabin writes that “Wiccans aren’t trying to get off the wheel” (2011: 12). She says that Wiccans are not trying to escape from the cycles of nature: “Wiccans believe that they actively participate in turning the wheel – in nature, essentially – while practitioners of some other religions try to transcend it” (2011: 12). This opposes Cunningham’s view of reincarnation as Neoplatonic return. And Cunningham contradicts himself: after all, he said our lives are linked with the “endless cycles” of the earthly seasons. Neoplatonic return can’t be right. It is certainly possible for self-perfection to continue forever, through infinitely many reincarnations, always rising to higher and higher levels of perfection. You could have as many reincarnations as there are numbers.

For Wiccans, reincarnation is associated with compensatory justice: you are rewarded or punished in your next lives for what you did in your past lives. This is commonly known as *karma* although in Greek-Roman thought it was known simply as *justice* (and Plotinus uses the Greek term *adrasteia* to refer to it (*Enneads*, III.2.13)). There is little need to go into the details of the Wiccan theory of karma here (e.g. the Threefold Law).

Although the details of the Wiccan ethics of reincarnation are of little philosophical interest, there is an important ethical point that must be said: any reincarnation theory, when coupled with the doctrines of self-perfection and justice across lives, is surely morally superior to the Christian notion of the afterlife as spent either in eternal heaven or eternal hell. For an earthly life to be punished forever in hell is infinite injustice. No finite human being deserves infinite pain. And this is true for heaven as well: to be rewarded forever in heaven is also infinite injustice. No finite human being deserves

infinite pleasure. The Christian theory of the afterlife entails infinite injustice. Reincarnation is morally superior. And here it is worth noting that the Christian philosopher John Hick rejects the Christian doctrines of heaven and hell in favor of a reincarnation-resurrection theory that is surprisingly similar to the Wiccan theory of reincarnation (Hick, 1976: chs. 15, 20, 22).

Wiccans attempt to construct evidence-based arguments to justify reincarnation. They attempt to empirically justify reincarnation (e.g. *deja-vu*, alleged memories of past lives, explanations of the injustices of this life, etc.). Here it must be noted that Christians do not make any efforts to empirically justify the theory of the general resurrection of the body; it is simply asserted as a matter of faith based on the Bible. Unfortunately for the Wiccans, their theory of reincarnation is not consistent with natural science. And it is foolish to try to mount some defense based on some alleged gaps in our present scientific knowledge. All the science that is needed to refute reincarnation has been available for a long time. And purely logical arguments against reincarnation have been well-known for a long time (see Tertullian, 1997). And philosophical arguments against soul-body dualism also refute Wiccan reincarnation. There is no reincarnation.

Nevertheless, reincarnation is not the only theory that says we have multiple lives. The Buddhist theory of *rebirth* also says that we all have many lives. It does not involve any soul that travels from body to body. It need not even involve having future lives here on earth; your future lives may exist in other universes. The Buddhist theory of rebirth suggests a way to have multiple lives that is consistent with scientific naturalism. But before talking about rebirth, it will be necessary to talk about the soul.

38. The Soul is the Form of the Body

According to the Wiccan theory of reincarnation, your soul leaves your body at death and enters a new body at conception. The Wiccan theory of reincarnation thus presupposes that human beings are soul-body composites. It is a type of *soul-body dualism*. Cunningham writes “The soul is ageless, sexless, nonphysical, possessed of the divine spark of the Goddess and God” (2004: 73). Since Cunningham identifies the soul with consciousness, this soul-body dualism is a kind of mind-body dualism: “the consciousness (soul) is reborn many times” (2004: 73). Silver Elder writes that “non-physical matter such as the Soul, or Self cannot be destroyed or transmuted allowing us to evolve in wisdom over many life times” (2011: 57). Obviously, it’s nonsense to talk about non-physical matter. At most these Wiccans are thinking of some sort of immaterial thinking substance. Many philosophers have argued that the soul is an indestructible *immaterial thinking substance*. Among these, Descartes is the most famous; but the idea goes back to Aquinas at least (*Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Q. 75-102). It may go back even further.

Against soul-body or mind-body dualism, many philosophers have argued for *monism*. This is also known as *physicalism* or *materialism* about persons. This materialism states that if something is a person, then it is a body. Modern science contains a very precise

and powerful *Success Argument* for the materialist theory of persons. It goes like this: (1) For every function F, if any person can do F, then there is some part of the body of that person whose activity is both necessary and sufficient for the performance of F. All your digestion is done by your guts; all your breathing is done by your lungs; and all your thinking is done by the part of your body that computes (your brain, your nervous system, your immune system). Everything you do is done either by some part of your body or by your whole body (which is an improper part of itself). (2) If everything you do is done by some part of your body, then *you are your body*. Therefore (3) you are your body. This argument is general: every person is identical with his or her body.

Materialism is successful. Of course, there is a large literature arguing for the materialist theory of persons. You can start with Paul Churchland's old but wonderful book *Matter and Consciousness* (1985). And here it's worth pointing out that the fact that we don't know everything about the brain or about consciousness does not imply that there is any room for an immaterial thinking substance. There is no empirical justification for the existence of any immaterial thinking substances. Consequently, it is irrational to affirm that they exist. When Cunningham and Silver Elder assert that immaterial thinking substances exist, they are wrong. However, the theory that the soul is an immaterial thinking substance is not the only theory of the soul. There are other theories of the soul.

Aristotle said the soul is to the body as form is to matter (*De Anima*, 412a5-414a33). On the basis of this analogy, he declared that *the soul is the form of the body*. The Aristotelian theory of the soul as the form of the body has recently received much greater attention due to computers. The Aristotelian idea that the soul is to the body as form is to matter becomes computationally interpreted as the idea that the soul is to the body as a program is to a computer. Every cell in the body is performing a biological computation at the molecular level. The cellular program is mainly encoded in its genes. But the body is just a network of interacting cells; hence the body is also performing a biological computation. The form of this computation is the *body-program*. The body-program is the form of the body; the body-program is the soul. The soul is the *logos* of the body – it is the *algorithm* of the body. Tipler writes that “the human ‘soul’ is nothing but a specific program being run on a computing machine called the brain”(1995: 1-2). And Barrow & Tipler explicitly identify the soul with the body-program:

an intelligent being -- or more generally, any living creature -- is fundamentally a type of computer . . . the really important part of a computer is not the particular hardware, but the program; we may even say that a human being is a program designed to run on particular hardware called a human body, coding its data in very special types of data storage devices called DNA molecules and nerve cells. The essence of a human being is not the body but the program which controls the body; . . . A living human being is a representation of a definite program rather than the program itself. In principle, the program corresponding to a human being could be stored in many different forms. (Barrow & Tipler, 1986: 659)

As the form of the body, the soul is an immanent universal (it is a *universal in re*). It does not exist as an independent substance. And just as a program without a computer

does not compute, so a soul without a body does not live or think. Of course, since the soul is a form, it can be multiply instantiated. It can be instantiated in other natural human bodies besides your body. Or it could even be instantiated by an artificial robotic body, or by an artificial software body in some virtual reality simulation of your body. More abstractly, it could be instantiated by a purely mathematical structure. To be sure, since any such structure is purely mathematical, it does not think or live – it merely exists. Your soul can exist even if your body does not; but it cannot exist apart from an instantiation. Your soul is a form, and every form is realized or instantiated by some object.

[Stress over and over again that the soul is not psychological – it's not your mind or your personality. It's not your consciousness.]

For precision, you might try to argue that souls are encoded in genomes. You might say that every possible human genotype encodes some human soul. The encoding compresses the instructions for building and running a human body into a series of nucleotides. This is an interesting idea, since the genotype is wholly present in almost every living cell in the body. Old philosophers (like Plotinus and Anselm) used to argue that the soul is integrally omnipresent in the body – it is wholly present in every part of the body. The genotype comes close to this old-fashioned notion. And the genotype remains pretty much invariant through your whole life. Essences are invariants; hence your genotype is your essence. If this is the correct theory of the soul, then any two people who share the same genotype share the same soul. For example, monozygotic twins and clones share the same soul. This is an entirely scientific conception of the soul. Of course, you may want to add lots more information to the soul. And you're entirely free to do so.

The theory that the soul is the form of the body, modernized using computer science, is consistent with current natural science. This is a scientific theory of the soul. As an immanent universal, the soul has a place in the naturalistic ontology sketched in an earlier post. There is nothing super-natural about the soul as the form of the body. And there are good evidence-based arguments for the existence of immanent universals. Of course, some nominalists, positivists, and materialists cannot agree with the existence of any universals at all. But not all atheists belong to those groups. Atheists can be Aristotelians (or even Platonists), and can affirm that the soul is the form of the body.

39. From Aristotle through Buddha to Nietzsche

Among all the classical theories of life after death, the one that seems to be most consistent with naturalism is the ancient Buddhist concept of *rebirth*. This concept is developed in Theravada Buddhism. Theravedic Buddhism is an atheistic (or non-theistic) religion. Rebirth is linked to the Theravedic doctrines of *impermanence* and *no-self*. These doctrines imply that there are no permanent substances that endure either through one life or across different lives. There are no immaterial thinking substances (no

Cartesian minds) that pass from life to life or body to body. Rebirth is not transmigration:

As there is no permanent, unchanging substance, nothing passes from one moment to the next. So quite obviously, nothing permanent or changing can pass or transmigrate from one life to the next. It is a series that continues unbroken, but changes every moment. The series is, really speaking, nothing but movement. It is like a flame that burns through the night: it is not the same flame nor is it another. A child grows up to be a man of sixty. Certainly the man of sixty is not the same as the child of sixty years ago, nor is he another person. Similarly, a person who dies here and is reborn elsewhere is neither the same person nor another. It is the continuity of the same series. (Rahula, 1974: 34)

As an illustration of rebirth (which is not reincarnation), consider the *eternal return of the same*. The eternal return (also known as *eternal recurrence*) is the theory that physical reality has a cyclical pattern. The same pattern of events repeats itself over and over. The repetition is exact – there is no variation from cycle to cycle. Eternal recurrence is an old idea. The ancient Greek philosopher Eudemus tells his students: "If one were to believe the Pythagoreans, with the result that the same individual things will recur, then I shall be talking to you again sitting as you are now, with this pointer in my hand, and everything else will be just as it is now" (Kirk & Raven, 1957: frag. 272).

More recently, eternal recurrence was popularized by Nietzsche. And Nietzsche, as is well-known, is an atheistic philosopher. Nietzsche uses his character *Zarathustra* to talk about eternal recurrence. *Zarathustra* has two animals, an eagle and a snake. They tell him that they understand his theory of eternal recurrence:

Behold, we know what you teach: that all things recur eternally and we ourselves with them, and that we have already existed an infinite number of times before and all things with us. You teach that there is a great year of becoming, a colossus of a year: this year must, like an hour-glass, turn itself over again and again, so that it may run down and run out anew. So that all these years resemble one another, in the greatest things and in the smallest, so that we ourselves resemble ourselves in each great year, in the greatest things and in the smallest. And if you should die now, O Zarathustra: behold, we know too what you would then say to yourself . . . "Now I die and decay" you would say, "and in an instant I shall be nothingness. Souls are as mortal as bodies. But the complex of causes in which I am entangled will recur -- it will create me again! I myself am part of these causes of the eternal recurrence. I shall return, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent -- not to a new life or a better life or a similar life: I shall return eternally to this identical and self-same life, in the greatest things and in the smallest, to teach once more the eternal recurrence of all things." (Nietzsche, 1978: III: 13/2)

If the eternal return of the same is true (which is *not* to say that it is true), then your life is just one member of a two-way infinite series of exactly similar lives. On every natural

cycle, you are born, you live, you die; and on every next cycle, you will be born again, you will live exactly the same life again, and you will die again. There is no immaterial thinking substance (no Cartesian mind) that moves from life to life. Of course, all these distinct lives share exactly the same pattern. Each of these lives is a series of stages like a movie is a series of photographs or like a book is a series of pages. And each stage is a body that exists at exactly one instant of time. All of these bodies share the same form. If the soul is the form of the body, then they all share the same soul. All your past and future recurrence twins all share the same genotype. The soul is just a pattern that all your past and future bodies share. But there is no immaterial thinking substance that moves from body to body. All your lives are entirely material processes.

40. On the Eternal Return of the Same

The *classical versions* of eternal recurrence say that recurrence occurs *within our universe*. Those classical versions say that there is a cyclical pattern of events in our space-time. Since the classical theory of eternal recurrence makes claims about our universe, it is open to scientific study. And it is almost certainly false. There is no recurrence within our universe. However, that does not refute the theory of eternal recurrence.

Here is a *multiverse version* of eternal recurrence that is consistent with science: (1) our universe exists; (2) for every universe, there exists an exactly similar predecessor universe; and (3) for every universe, there exists an exactly similar successor universe. This theory says nothing about the events in our universe. Perhaps our universe starts with a Big Bang and then runs through its entire history until all entropy is maximal. If that's right, then that same pattern occurs in every predecessor and successor universe. This theory says that there is a two-way infinite series of exactly similar universes.

Since all these universes are exactly similar, their contents are exactly similar. Your life exists in our universe; but if something exists in some universe, then it is a member of a two-way infinite series of exactly similar *counterparts* in the other universes. The term "counterpart" signifies a technical philosophical concept, developed most extensively by the recent American philosopher David Lewis (1986: ch. 4). Counterpart theory is deeply fascinating, but there's no need to get into it too deeply here.

The multiverse version of the eternal return entails that your life is a member of a two-way infinite series of exactly similar lives in exactly similar universes. For every one of your lives, there exists an exactly similar predecessor life. For every one of your lives, there exists an exactly similar successor life. You will be reborn over and over again, to live your life over and over again. However, this rebirth is not reincarnation – there is no immaterial thinking substance (no Cartesian soul) that travels from counterpart to counterpart. There is no transmigration of souls. Nor is there any continuity of memory – you do not remember your past lives in any meaningful way. Of course, you do remember your past lives in the entirely trivial sense that remembering what you did

yesterday is the same as remembering what you did on the corresponding day of every one of your past lives.

And there is no personal identity across all your counterparts. Taken together, your counterparts don't make up the stages in the life or career of some big person. You are not identical with any one of your past or future selves. They are distinct people who are exactly similar to you in every way. To use some logical jargon, they are qualitatively identical to you, but they are not numerically identical to you. Your life does not persist through recurrence; you do not survive into the next cycle. Your life is merely repeated, and the form of your life is exactly re-instantiated. Your biography is the single universal shared in common by all your lives. But that universal is not you.

This theory of eternal recurrence does not involve any theistic deities. On the contrary, it says that nature is fully self-sufficient. Since nature is uncreated, it needs no creator. It always has been and it always will be. So this theory of eternal recurrence is entirely compatible with the most rigorous atheism. And the thesis that you have infinitely many counterparts does not involve any immaterial thinking substance that passes from each previous counterpart to its next counterpart. It is entirely consistent with the most puritanical materialism. Of course, this theory agrees with the Aristotelian doctrine that the soul is the form of the body. Your body has a form – it runs a biological program. And that program will run over and over again.

This theory of eternal recurrence is also consistent with naturalism. It does not involve any super-natural agencies. It is an entirely natural theory. It is even a purely mechanistic theory. Nature is just a big loop. It is a looping process that has always been running and always will be running. The ultimate natural pattern, the *logos* of natural creative power, is a big looping program. It always has and always will be running.

This theory of eternal recurrence is consistent with atheism, with materialism, and with naturalism. But what about rationalism? Rationalism permits the existence of any objects that are found in empirically justified theories. Rationalism doesn't guarantee that these things exist; it merely states that it is rational to say that they exist. Unfortunately for the eternal return, it doesn't seem like there are any good arguments for it. Unless some good evidence-based argument for it is found, it's not rational to believe in the theory of eternal recurrence. And eternal recurrence, with its sterile repetition of the same, probably isn't what an advocate of rebirth wants anyway.

Despite its failures, the eternal return is a good illustration of a theory of rebirth that is consistent with atheism (as well as most other doctrines that inspire atheists). It suggests that there may be good lines of reasoning for more desirable types of rebirth. There may be types of rebirth that can be included in an atheistic nature-religion.

41. Rational Rebirth

Kurt Godel (1906-1978) was an Austrian-American logician and mathematician. He is best known for his incompleteness theorems and his work in axiomatic set theory. However, he also produced some deeply interesting philosophical arguments. Some of these are found in his unpublished papers and letters. One of these is an argument for life after death (for rebirth) given in a letter written in 1961 to his mother, Marianne Godel:

In your last letter you pose the weighty question whether I believe we shall see each other again [in a hereafter]. About that I can only say the following: If the world is rationally organized and has a sense, then that must be so. For what sense would it make to bring forth a being (man) who has such a wide range of possibilities of individual development and of relations to others and then allow him to achieve not one in a thousand of those? That would be much as if someone laid the foundation for a house with the greatest trouble and expense and then let everything go to ruin again. But do we have reason to assume that the world is rationally organized? I think so. For the world is not at all chaotic and capricious, but rather, as science shows, the greatest regularity and order prevails in all things; [and] order is but a form of rationality. (1961: 429-431)

How is another life to be imagined? About that there are of course only conjectures. But it is interesting that modern science is the very thing that provides support for them. For it shows that this world of ours, with all the stars and planets that are in it, had a beginning and, in all probability, will have an end. But why then should there be only this one world? And since we one day found ourselves in this world, without knowing how [we got here] and whither [we are going], the same thing can be repeated in the same way in another [world] too. (1961: 429-431)

The paragraphs from Godel's letter contain an argument. This is *Godel's Argument for Rebirth*. One way to analyze it looks like this: (1) Nature produces humans; that is, nature produces us. (2) If nature produces us but does not allow us to realize all our potentials, then nature is not rational. (3) From 1 and 2 it follows that, if nature does not allow us to realize all our potentials, then nature is not rational. (4) However, science shows that nature is rational. (5) Therefore, nature allows us to realize all our potentials. (6) We do not realize all our potentials in our earthly lives. (7) Either we have future lives in which we will realize all our potentials or we do not. (8) If we do not have future lives in which we will realize our potentials, then nature does not allow us to realize all our potentials. (9) However, nature does allow us to realize all our potentials. (10) Therefore we have future lives in which we will realize all our potentials. (11) While it is not likely that these future lives will appear in this universe, it is possible that there will be other universes after this universe ends. (12) If this possibility is not actualized, then nature does not allow us to realize all our potentials and is not rational. (13) But nature is rational and does allow us to realize all our potentials. (14) Consequently, we will have lives in other universes and through those lives we will realize all our potentials. This is clearly an argument for rebirth, since other future versions of our lives must appear in those future universes.

The mathematician Hao Wang was a close friend of Godel. Wang reports that Godel was interested in the construction of a “rational religion” (1987; 2) and characterized Godel’s philosophy as *rationalistic optimism* (1987: 218). Assuming that reason is not self-negative, the most rational way for anything to actualize its potentialities is also the most optimistic way. Granted this optimistic premise, your future lives will realize all your positive potentials. The most optimistic way can be spelled out by two rules. These two rules define an iterative algorithm (so that any process directed by these rules is an example of algorithmic iteration). The two rules are as follows:

- The *Initial Rule* states that you have an *initial life*. Your initial life is just your present earthly life. Your initial life runs biologically from conception to death. It exists in your initial society in your initial ecosystem in your initial universe.
- The *Successor Rule* states that for every one of your lives, for every way to improve that life, you have a *better successor life* that is improved in that way. Starting with your initial life, the successor rule defines an endlessly ramified tree of ever better lives. Every successor life exists in a better successor society, ecosystem, and universe.

These two rules define an endlessly ramified tree of lives. The lives in the tree are stratified into *ranks*, and the tree contains as many ranks as natural numbers. The zeroth rank contains your present life; the first rank contains all the future versions of your present life; each next rank contains all future better versions of all the lives in the previous rank. For every natural number *n*, there is an *n*-th rank of lives. These ranks can be extended to the infinite using a Limit Rule; but that’s too technical for discussion here.

These rules define the theory of *rational rebirth*. The theory of rational rebirth follows from the logic of creation and evolution by rational selection. Rational rebirth is driven by natural creative power (it is driven by *natura naturans*, expressed through the dynamic interaction of objective will and objective reason). Rational rebirth exemplifies the concept of rebirth in Theravada Buddhism. There is no personal identity that binds all your lives together. On the contrary, all these lives are *counterparts* in the sense defined by David Lewis (1968, 1986: ch. 4). The theory of rational rebirth does not involve any immaterial thinking substance that travels from universe to universe – it involves no Cartesian minds. To use some old-fashioned jargon, it is not transmigration, it is *palingenesis*. Of course, if the soul is the form of the body, then each of your lives can be an instance of your soul; all your lives can be realized and run the same body-program. There are no memories of past lives; you cannot remember your past nor anticipate your future. So what’s the point? The point is that nature will realize all your positive potentialities. Your nature will be fully actualized. Nature contains the fullness of your person.

Rational rebirth is linked by resemblance to the Wheel of the Year. On the one hand, rational rebirth is an instance of algorithmic iteration; the two rules for rational rebirth define a cyclical pattern of action that generates your tree of lives. On the other hand, the Wheel of the Year is abstracted from the cyclical patterns of life and death in earthly nature. Bringing these two hands together, the Wheel of the Year can symbolize rational rebirth. The cyclical pattern of rational rebirth is the *Great Wheel*. One way to fill out the symbolism is to use the spring equinox to symbolize birth and the fall equinox to

symbolize death. The light half of the year (from the spring to fall equinoxes) represents life; the dark half of the year represents the time between lives. During this time, there is no persistent self that exists. The self is merely an abstract pattern (the form of the body) that is carried by the Great Wheel, from lifetime to lifetime, from universe to universe.

Since rational rebirth does not involve any theistic deities, it is entirely consistent with atheism. The Great Wheel is driven by natural creative power (*natura naturans*). And while natural creative power is divine, it is not a theistic deity. An atheistic nature-religion can include rational rebirth as its doctrine of life after death. The Pew Religious Landscape Survey states that 18% of atheists believe in life after death; those atheists are free to adopt rational rebirth. Since rational rebirth does not conflict with science, and since it does not involve any super-natural entities, it is also entirely consistent with scientific naturalism. Rational rebirth is probably not consistent with strong forms of positivism. And skeptics will say that there is not enough evidence for it. However, atheism is distinct from skepticism and positivism. While positivists and skeptics may be forbidden to do speculative metaphysics, atheists are free to do as much speculative metaphysics as they want (so long, of course, as it does not involve any theistic deities).

The Pew Religious Landscape Survey states that earthly reincarnation is affirmed by 24% of Americans. Anybody who believes in earthly reincarnation can be offered rational rebirth as a *more reasonable* alternative. (And to say that it is more reasonable does *not* imply that it is true.) The *mythos* of earthly reincarnation points to the *logos* of rational rebirth. If you are dealing with somebody who believes in earthly reincarnation, you may want to try to dialectically lead them to the more reasonable theory of rational rebirth. You might win a friend and avoid making an enemy. Atheistic or rational Wiccans can affirm rational rebirth instead of earthly reincarnation. And if such Wiccans are willing to see the god and goddess as merely symbols for objective will and reason, then they can see the interplay between the god and goddess as symbolism for the Great Wheel. Rational rebirth captures the Wiccan idea that the purpose of reincarnation is self-perfection, that is, the actualization of all the positive potentialities of the soul, over many lifetimes.

The Pew Religious Landscape Survey states that 10% of atheists pray at least weekly; those atheists are free to pray to the Great Wheel. The Great Wheel is not a god or goddess; it is not a theistic deity at all; nor is it even a deity of any kind. It is merely an abstract cyclical pattern, an iterative algorithm. The content of an atheistic prayer to the Great Wheel might simply express the desire that it will carry your pattern forward, so that you will be reborn. Facing the grief of separation by death, two parting lovers might express their love in the prayer that the Great Wheel will carry them on together forever, that they will love again. As a response to an existential crisis, such atheistic prayers may be comforting. There is absolutely no reason why atheists should be denied such comfort. And any atheistic world-view which hopes to gain mainstream acceptance and to serve as a meaningful way of life for many people will have to provide such comfort. An atheistic nature-religion would thus be part of a positive and life-affirming atheism.

42. Rites of Passage

rituals for birth, marriage, death (describe Christian, Wiccan, Humanist)

use the wheel of the year to symbolize rational rebirth in funerals

43. On Spiritual Exercises

The Latin word *spiritus* means breath. From this root word, English gets its word *spiritual*. Today the term spiritual is covered with many layers of woo, so that many atheists are likely to want to reject any notion of spirituality. But spirituality can be woo-free – the original meaning of the term *spiritus* can be recovered. Breath is physiological; it is physical; it is natural. Thus exercises involving breathing are spiritual exercises.

And here the term *exercise* also has many layers of meaning. An exercise, in Greek, is *askesis*. *Askesis* suggests asceticism – it suggests the denial of carnal pleasures, the repudiation of the body, life-negation. But the root meaning of *askesis* can also be recovered: an *askesis* is a life-affirming practice aiming at self-empowerment.

Spiritual exercises (*askesis*) are practical activities for mental self-empowerment. They are intended to facilitate successful achievement by increasing the degree to which the self is mentally or emotionally prepared to perform. Spiritual exercises are not magic. Spiritual exercises are distinct from magic because they focus on causing changes in the self while magic focuses on causing changes in the external world.

Spiritual exercises typically involve mental preparation for performance through *visualization* or emotional preparation for performance through *arousal regulation*. Visualization involves working with mental imagery while arousal regulation involves conscious control of physiological and emotional arousal (it involves neocortical control of the limbic system and autonomic nervous system).

Arousal regulation is often done when the self is confronted with a challenge in which the outcome is uncertain, valuable, and not amenable to skill. Successful performance through such challenges often requires fine-tuning of arousal. On the one hand, arousal that is too high is experienced as *anxiety*. Excessively high arousal may impede performance. If the self is too strongly aroused, then arousal regulation techniques can be used to decrease arousal. On the other hand, arousal that is too low may be experienced as *depression* or *despair* of success. Excessively low arousal can also impede performance. If the self is too weakly aroused, then techniques can be employed to increase arousal.

Although there are many types of spiritual exercises, Wiccans and many other groups focus on three many types: meditation, visualization, and breathing. The British Wiccans like the Farrars and Buckland either do not discuss these techniques at all or mention them only briefly. These techniques seem to develop in American Wicca. These spiritual exercises are very briefly described below:

Breathing. Breathing exercises involve the conscious regulation of inhalation and exhalation to regulate arousal or to induce trance states. The Farrars very briefly discuss

breathing in the context of certain rituals (1981: 230-231). Cunningham discusses Wiccan breathing techniques (2004: 86-87). Sabin discusses Wiccan breathing techniques for facilitating visualization and for inducing trance states (2011: 55, 70-71).

Meditation. Meditation involves the self-regulation of conscious activity. It may be done in many different ways and with many different objectives. Cunningham describes the use of meditation in Wicca to decrease arousal while increasing alertness (2004: 87). Sabin describes meditation practices that involve “concentrating on an image or desired outcome while in a trance state” (2011: 75). She gives a detailed ritual procedure for using meditation to decrease arousal prior to taking a test (2011: 76-77).

Self-Hypnosis. Self-hypnosis involves various relaxation techniques and the use of affirmative thoughts or words to modify emotion or behavior. It typically involves going into a deeply relaxed quasi-trance state followed by the repetition of statements that aim to affirm some positive goal. Sabin briefly mentions the use of affirmations: “Affirmations are positive statements that you repeat over and over to yourself” (2011: 47).

Visualization. Visualization techniques involve creating, manipulating, and destroying mental images. Cunningham deals extensively with visualization (2004: 88-90). He gives four detailed visualization exercises. The first exercise involves visualizing a single image for several minutes. The second exercise begins with visually memorizing the appearance of some physical thing and then mentally focusing on the image of that thing for five minutes. The third exercise involves the deliberate mental construction of a detailed visual image while keeping your eyes closed. The fourth exercise involves the deliberate mental construction of a detailed mental image while keeping your eyes open. Sabin also deals extensively with visualization (2011: 47-51). She develops several visualization exercises like the ones described by Cunningham.

Although it is easy to cover these spiritual exercises with many layers of unscientific or anti-natural meaning (that is, with woo), there is no need to do so. These exercises are essentially secular. They have been widely used outside of any religious context and independent of any religious origins. They are widely used and studied in medicine, in sports, in the performing arts, in law enforcement and even in the military. Many scientific studies have been done to assess the degree of effectiveness of spiritual exercises; they generally confirm that such exercises can reliably regulate arousal and enhance performance. The secular aspects of these spiritual exercises are described below:

Breathing. Breathing techniques are often used to manage performance anxiety or to decrease arousal (e.g. by athletes and as part of tactical arousal control in law enforcement). Musicians make extensive use of breathing to manage performance anxiety.

Meditation. Secular versions of meditation are widely used in sport and medicine. They are widely recommended for the relief of psychological distress and to mitigate

addictions or other maladaptive behaviors. These secular meditation techniques are typically adopted from Buddhist mindfulness techniques. They have been extensively studied (e.g. Bishop, 2002; Ostafin et al., 2006). Meditation does not require belief in any theistic deity. Many atheists have discussed their uses of meditation (Harris, 2005: ch. 7; Sponville-Compte, 2006; Walter, 2010: ch. 8).

Self-Hypnosis. Secular versions of self-hypnosis are widely used and studied in sports and medicine. Self-hypnosis techniques are effective and reliable. There is evidence that they reliably reduce anxiety and fear (e.g. in cancer or cardiac patients), that they reliably reduce bedwetting and migraines in children. Studies confirm that self-hypnosis provides valuable assistance to help people lose weight, stop smoking, pass through grief.

Visualization. Psychologists have found evidence that visualizing successful performance of some task or achievement of some goal increases motivation and effort and can reliably lead to better performance (Vasquez & Buehler, 2007). The use of visualization to enhance athletic performance has been widely studied and has been shown to enhance certain types of performance (e.g. Whelan, Mahoney, Meyers, 1991; Sheikh & Korn, 1994). Chess players make extensive use of visualization techniques (indeed, chess experts are so adept at chess visualization that they can play multiple simultaneous games of chess while blindfolded and thus operating entirely on mental imagery).

Many theists appeal to God to enhance their performances. These appeals are often done through petitionary prayer. Obviously, atheists will deny that those appeals to God have any direct effect on success (that is, God does not help the petitioner). However, such appeals can decrease arousal or reduce performance anxiety, and thereby have an indirect positive effect on performance. It would be useful for atheists to have non-theistic replacements for any theistic techniques whose real goals are arousal regulation.

Spiritual exercises like breathing, meditation, self-hypnosis, and visualization are non-theistic. Since they do not involve any theistic deities, they can be employed by atheists. They can socially and culturally compete with theistic performance-enhancement techniques (thus replacing, for instance, petitionary prayer). Atheistic Wiccans can perform these spiritual exercises without any references to any gods or goddesses. Or, if an atheistic Wiccan prefers to think of the god as a symbol for the will and the goddess as a symbol for reason, these spiritual exercises can be thought of as enhancing the rational expression of the will. They facilitate the actualization of positive potentialities. And they can be included in an atheistic nature-religion or within an atheistic spirituality.

44. The Illusion of Control

Many Wiccan practices involve *energy*. Here the term “energy” is used as a Wiccan term of art rather than as a scientific term: it is an alleged *mysterious energy*, rather than the energy studied in physics. This energy does not exist in nature or elsewhere. The Farrars use electro-magnetic metaphors to talk about (mysterious) energy (1981: 107-

110). However, the Farrars do not seem to use the term “energy”. The term does appear in Buckland (1986: 14-16). Energy plays more prominent roles in later American Wiccan writers. The main idea is that all energy originates from the Wiccan ultimate deity. Cunningham writes that “All natural objects . . . are manifestations of divine energy” (2004: 92). Hence Wiccans like Cunningham stress that the energy involved in Wiccan practices is physical and natural rather than super-natural. He stresses that “[t]he energy and magical powers at work in Wicca are real. They aren’t of some astral plane. They’re within the earth and ourselves” (2004: 90).

For Cunningham, the energy used in Wiccan practices is immediately felt as the metabolic energy of the body: “We daily deplete our store of energy and replenish it through the air we breathe, the food we eat” (2004: 90). This energy is closely related to the arousal and activation of the autonomic nervous system: “This energy is the same power we’re filled with when we’re angry, nervous, terrified, joyous, or even sexually aroused” (2004: 92). For Buckland, the energy in Wiccan practices also comes from the body: “Witches have always believed in this power coming from the body” (1986: 14).

Cunningham presents a ritual intended to demonstrate the existence of this energy. You rub your palms together for about twenty seconds and then hold them about two inches apart. After you do this, he asks: “Feel them tingling? That’s a manifestation of power . . . It’s flowing out from your palms as you hold them apart” (2004: 90). After you learn to sense this energy, Cunningham says that you can use visualization to manipulate it. He says you should “visualize jolts of energy” passing from one palm to another (2009: 90). He then recommends visualizing the energy as forming a sphere between your palms. He says you can learn how to manipulate this “bit of energy that you’ve released from your body” (2004: 91). You can then learn to direct this energy out of your body: “When you feel yourself bursting with power, hold out your right (projective) hand and direct energy from your body, through your arm, and out your fingers. Use your visualization. Really see and feel it streaming out” (2004: 93). Obviously, our bodies do generate energy. And equally obviously, everything Cunningham says about it is false. The only way to externalize somatic or emotional energy is by activating your muscles.

Sabin offers an elaborate system of energy exercises (2011: chs. 3 & 4). She describes the energy exercises involve rubbing hands and directing energy from the hands (2011: 43-45). She describes exercises intended to enable the practitioner to feel the energy in non-human things like crystals and trees (2011: 45-46). She develops detailed “grounding” exercises for sending excess energy into the earth (2011: 51-58) as well as detailed “shielding” exercises for protection from excess energy or negative energy (2011: 59-64). She frequently discusses techniques for “raising” energy (e.g. 2011: 52, 208). The result is a complex theory of energy that has no empirical basis – it is a pseudo-science.

It is intriguing to note that much of Sabin’s theory of energy is a fairly accurate theory of activation in the autonomic nervous system. Her *negative energy* corresponds roughly to activation of the sympathetic nervous system, especially by social conflict or performance anxiety. It is arousal of the fight-or-flight circuitry. Her *positive energy*

corresponds roughly to activation of the parasympathetic nervous system, especially as it seeks to inhibit sympathetic fight-or-flight responses. Perhaps more deeply, these energies correspond roughly to activations in the limbic system, especially the amygdala. The distinction between positive and negative energies appears to be the result of projecting limbic-marking outside of the body (see Saver & Rabin, 1997). And the belief in mysterious energies may be the result of the projection of autonomic activation outside of the body.

Just as real science is the basis for real technology, the pseudo-science of energy is the basis for the pseudo-technology of magic. Buckland writes that Wiccans have “developed ways to increase [energy], collect it, and use it to do what we term magick” (1986: 14). Sabin writes that Wiccans “believe that they can bend and use energy to bring about change, which is what magic is all about” (2011: 43). These Wiccan energy exercises, and the magical procedures that make use of this energy, are designed to produce *illusions of control* (Langer, 1975). These illusions can decrease anxiety and increase confidence.

It has been argued that these are *adaptive illusions* that can facilitate performance, especially in the face of situations over which the self has no control. It is said that illusions of control can motivate the self to continue to act despite the fact that action almost certainly has no effect on the outcome. These illusions are cognitive biases that amplify the probability of success high enough to make it appear rational for the self to continue to act. They amplify the probability of success sufficiently far above the probability of failure that the self can continue to act instead of collapsing in despair. One large function of religion may be to regulate (induce, maintain, inhibit) illusions of control personally and socially.

Since illusions of agency and control are illusions, they conflict with the imperative to avoid all deception (thou shalt not deceive, not even thyself!). Since many atheists are motivated by this imperative, it is not likely that any atheistic religion could ever have any practices that produce illusions of control. However, if these illusions are adaptive, then atheism may be maladaptive, and can hardly be expected to flourish. The psychological demand for the illusion of control, and the inability of atheism to satisfy that demand, may be one of the most significant practical problems for atheism to solve. The illusion of control will be discussed further in the forthcoming discussion of magic.

45. Criticizing Wicca: Magic

Many Wiccan books extensively discuss magic. They offer many definitions of magic (e.g. Buckland, 1986: 222-223; Sabin, 2011: 195-196). Cuhulain offers these definitions from other authors: “Magic is a joyous exceptional experience which leads to a sense of well-being.”; “Magic is the science of the control of the secret forces of nature.”; “Magic is a comprehensive knowledge of all nature.”; “Magic is the art of affecting changes in consciousness at will” (2011: 27). And Cunningham defines it like this: “Magic is the projection of natural energies to produce needed effects” (2004: 21).

These definitions are so vague that they are useless. The only way to understand it is to proceed by the way of example. Magic is a catalog of *spells*. A spell is a procedure or algorithm: “A spell is a set of actions done in a specific sequence to manifest your intent. . . . it is a recipe to bring about change” (Sabin, 2011: 197). Thus Wiccan magic includes the spells listed in Wiccan books. It includes at least the spells presented in Farrar & Farrar (1981); Bucklands (1986); Cunningham (2004); Sabin (2011).

One of the main philosophical questions about magic is whether or not it has any *reliability* (that is, whether or not the spells included in Wiccan books have any effectiveness above chance). Those who assert that spells do have such reliability are *realists* about magic. Cunningham is a realist about magic. He writes that “Magic is effective in causing manifestations of needed change. This isn’t self-deception. Correctly performed magic works, and no amount of explaining away alters this fact” (2004: 23). Sabin writes that “Wiccans believe that magic is real, that it works” (2011: 29).

Cunningham illustrates the alleged effectiveness of magic as follows: “Say I need to pay a hundred-dollar phone bill but don’t have the money. My magical goal: the means to pay the bill” (2004: 23). To achieve this goal, he outlines a magical procedure (a spell). The spell involves candles, herbs, paper, and ink. Cunningham writes that the spell uses “a good selection of money-drawing herbs” (2004: 23), thus indicating that he believes that certain plants have powers to attract money to people. After the spell is performed, “Within a day or two, perhaps a week, I’ll either receive unexpected (or delayed) money, or will satisfy other financial obligations in a manner that frees me to pay the bill.” (2004: 24). Of course, Cunningham offers no data to justify this claim. He does not offer a detailed list of trials of this money-spell along with its rate of success and failure.

The lists of spells in Wiccan books is enormous; spells are offered for allegedly changing almost any given situation in to almost any desired situation. Sabin writes that there are spells “for things like finding a new job or protecting your home” (2011: 18). It should be noted that spells include procedures for gaining information.

Life confronts everybody with practical problems (getting money, finding love, overcoming illness, protecting your house). For many of these problems, luck plays a central role in the outcome. When a person is confronted with such problems, magic enables the person to perform some easy operations. The performance of these operations make it look like the person is using some skill to solve the problem. Apart from its psychological effects on the person who performs it, magic has no influence at all on the solution to the problem. Those who practice magic do not even bother to test its objective effectiveness. The reason is simple: the purpose of magic is not to increase objective effectiveness.

Magic is a pseudo-technology based on the pseudo-science of energy. Magic makes it appear as if an event that involves mainly chance is one that involves mainly skill. The purpose of magic is entirely to produce the *illusion of control*: “By encouraging or

allowing participants in a chance event to engage in behaviors that they would engage in were they participating in a skill event, one increases the likelihood of inducing a skill orientation, that is, one induces an illusion of control” (Langer, 1975: 313).

The illusion of control appears to be an adaptive illusion: “a nonveridical perception of control over an impending event reduces the aversiveness of that event. . . . A temporary loss of control is anxiety arousing. A chronic feeling of no control is characterized by passivity and giving up in the face of failure” (Langer, 1975: 323). The illusion of control may help people avoid learned helplessness (Langer, 1975: 325). *Learned helplessness* is a defective and depressed condition of agency that results when a person comes to believe that their actions have no power to solve their problems. Long fruitless searches for jobs, money, lovers, children, or social status may all produce learned helplessness; any activity that induces an illusion of control can counteract learned helplessness, and help a person to continue to act in the face of adversity generated by randomness or complexity. Thus magic, by inducing illusions of control, can help people function. It can make an agent more confident, and more willing to continue to try to solve a problem, rather than just giving up. Thus magic may be beneficial for agency.

Unfortunately, the illusion of control is indeed illusory, and no rational person seeks self-deception. Such self-deception can result in harmful consequences to the self and to others. Any rational Wiccan will aim to avoid magic entirely. Some Wiccans clearly separate the Wiccan religion from the practice of magic. Buckland writes: “Witchcraft [Wicca] is first and foremost a religion. Worship of the Lord and Lady is therefore the prime concern of the Witch. Magick is secondary to that worship. . . . If all you want to do is to work magick, then you do not need to become a Witch to do it” (1986: 221; see 15). Sabin writes: “If you’re exploring Wicca only so you can learn magic, don’t waste your time. Wicca is a religion, and you don’t need it to do magic. Magic exists outside of religion. Wicca provides one of many paths to magical practice, but magic is not its central theme. Some Wiccans don’t do magic at all” (2011: 23-24). However, the Farrars (1981) and Cunningham (2004) do not seem to clearly separate Wicca from magic. And many Wiccan books seem to focus very little on the religion and very much on magic.

46. Criticizing Wicca: Magic is Unreliable

Any procedure for changing an initial situation (the start) into a desired situation (the goal) can be tested for its *effectiveness*. As used here, effectiveness is a matter of degree, so that procedures can be more or less effective. The simplest way to measure the effectiveness of a procedure is to divide the number of successful trials by the total number of trials.

To help keep things clear when analyzing magic, it will be useful to introduce the following precise terms of art: A procedure is *tested* in a group of people if its effectiveness has been measured within that group and it is untested otherwise. A procedure *has some reliability* if its known effectiveness is better than chance and *has no*

reliability otherwise. A procedure is *sound* in a group of people if it is among the most reliable procedures known within that group and it is *less than sound* or *unsound* otherwise. Obviously, every sound procedure has been tested. Although every sound procedure has some reliability, the best we can do in many cases may not be much better than chance. Although sound procedures must have some reliability, they need not have much reliability. The *technical expertise* of any group is the collection of all sound procedures known within that group.

The term *spell* is used here for any procedure that is presented as magical in any Wiccan text. Wiccan texts offer elaborate catalogs of spells. The set of surveyed spells includes the spells presented in Farrar & Farrar (1981); Bucklands (1986); Cunningham (2004); Sabin (2011). The texts that present the surveyed spells do not present any data to measure their effectiveness; all the surveyed spells are presented as untested. And I am not aware of any tests of any surveyed spells.

For those spells that are untested, if Wiccans or others *cannot* provide evidence for reliability that meets the same epistemic standards as the evidence for the reliability of our technologies (which Wiccans use too), then it is *cognitively wrong* for Wiccans or others to assert that the spells have any positive reliability. And if they cannot provide evidence that meets the same standards as the evidence for the reliability of our best technologies, then it is cognitively wrong for Wiccans or others to assert that the spells are sound.

All surveyed spells compete with (or are offered as alternatives to) procedures which have known positive reliabilities or which are sound. All surveyed spells make use of operations and objects whose technical properties and relations are already well-understood. Since the well-understood technical properties and relations of those operations and objects do not reliably produce any of the effects listed in the surveyed spells, it is reasonable to conclude that all surveyed spells have zero reliability. Of course, the fact that this conclusion is reasonable does *not* entail that it is true – it must be tested.

But the fact that it is reasonable to say that the surveyed spells have no reliability *does* entail that *nobody has any reason to test those spells*. Of course, Wiccans may test them if they like; but they cannot complain that others are obligated to test them in order to deny their reliability or to deny their soundness. Skeptics are under no obligation to test the spells in order to make the entirely rational claim that they have no reliability and no soundness. Even without testing them, it is rational to deny that they have those features. If Wiccans want others to test the spells, then it is up to the Wiccans to give reasons.

If you use a car, a cell phone, a computer, or any product of advanced technical expertise, then you have every reason to say that the surveyed spells have no reliability. And you contradict your own behavior if you insist otherwise without providing evidence which meets the same epistemic standards as the evidence used to make the technologies you use. Here actions speak louder than words: if you use a cell phone, then you don't really

believe that spells work. On the contrary, you place your faith in science and technology. The purpose of magic is purely psychological: to induce the illusion of control.

47. Criticizing Wicca: Magic is Unethical

Many Wiccans practice magic. Skeptics, rationalists, and naturalists may all be tempted to try to use science to refute the effectiveness of magic. Although such refutations do persuade some people, they often fail to accomplish anything: despite the best efforts of scientific debunkers, magical thinking persists and flourishes.

Another way to think about magic is ethically. Wicca contains an ethical maxim known as the Wiccan Rede: if it harms none, do what you will. The most reasonable way to interpret the Rede is this: if an act causes no harm, then it is permissible; if an act causes harm, then it is forbidden. It will be argued that Wiccans cannot ethically offer or use any type of magic that has not met the highest standards of empirical justification.

As a term of art, say a practice is *sound* if and only if its reliability has been certified by evidence which meets the same epistemic standards as the evidence used to make our best technologies. A practice is *unsound* otherwise. Since magical spells are practices (they are procedural activities intended to produce external effects), they can be evaluated for their soundness or unsoundness. Our best technologies are sound; when we use them, they sometimes fail – they cause damage. But that damage is not *moral harm*. Moral harm is damage done by an ethically impermissible or forbidden act.

If there were any sound spells, then they would just be examples of our best technical practices. They would not be spells anymore (except perhaps through historical association). For instance, if some herb were used in some Wiccan ritual, and the herb reliably did produce the claimed effects, at the same level of reliability used for any ethically permitted medical treatment, then the practice of using that herb would simply enter into standard medicine. I am not aware of a single Wiccan spell that has ever been tested for its effectiveness or reliability; there are no known sound Wiccan spells.

Offering Sound Spells. Suppose, contrary to present fact, that there were some sound Wiccan spells. If a writer offers a sound spell, then that offering meets the highest standard of rational practice. Offering such a spell is merely describing one of our best technologies. To offer it is consistent with the rationality of the writer, so that it causes no harm to the writer as a rational animal. If somebody suffers some negative consequences as the result of using a sound spell which the writer offered, then the writer could not have done any better – the writer has met the highest epistemic standards – so the writer is not morally responsible for that suffering, and has caused no harm to others. Since offering a sound spell causes no harm, it is permitted by the Wiccan Rede.

Offering Unsound Spells. As far as I know, there are no sound Wiccan spells; all Wiccan spells are unsound. Now consider the ethical aspects of offering an unsound spell. If a

writer offers an unsound spell, then the writer is causing harm both to himself or herself and to others who may perform it.

Harm Caused to the Self. First, consider how the writer is causing harm to himself or herself. If the writer offers an unconfirmed spell, then he or she is violating his or her obligation to his or her own rationality; he or she does violence to his or her own reason. But reason is that which is most sacred within any person; to harm your own reason is to harm the sacred depth of your own nature. To do violence to what is most sacred within yourself is to cause the deepest possible harm to yourself. It is to cause yourself *ontological* harm.

Harm Caused to Others. Second, consider how the writer of an unsound spell causes harm to others. If somebody suffers some negative effects as the result of using an unsound spell which the writer offered, then the writer is responsible for that suffering, so that the writer has caused harm to others. The negative effects can include everything from mere disappointment to loss of life. Because the writer did not do his or her best to prevent possible negative effects, the mere possibility of negative effects is sufficient for this harm.

Since offering an unsound spell is harmful both to the one who offers it and to the ones to whom it is offered, it is forbidden by the Wiccan Rede.

As an illustration of the harm caused by offering an unsound spell, consider the spell for attracting money offered by Cunningham (2004: 23-24). By presenting and advocating magic like this, Cunningham is putting people in harm's way. He is exposing people to risk and ruin. His money spell might tempt a weak-minded person into spending money that he or she does not have, on the unconfirmed belief that playing with candles and herbs will bring needed funds later. Such weak-minded person has thus been exposed to financial risk and perhaps led to financial ruin. It is immoral for Cunningham to present his spell without any evidence for its effectiveness. It causes harm by exposing people to risk.

Using Sound Spells. Now consider somebody who uses the spells presented in Wiccan books. Suppose that, contrary to present fact, there were some sound spells. If a person uses a sound spell, then that use meets the highest standard of rational practice, including the highest ethical standards. To use the spell is ethically permissible; any damage that arises from using it is morally acceptable (it is not *moral* harm). The use of a sound spell is morally equivalent to the use of some technology that has met the highest standards of testing. Sound technologies sometimes fail; when they do, those failures are unfortunate but not *morally* harmful. The use of a sound spell is consistent with the rationality of the one who uses it; there is no violation of rationality. And if others are damaged by the failure of a sound spell, the person who performs it is not responsible for that damaged, so that the person performing the spell has not morally harmed others. Since using a sound spell is not harmful, it is permitted by the Wiccan Rede.

Using Unsound Spells. As far as I know, there are no sound Wiccan spells; all Wiccan spells are unsound. Now consider the ethical aspects of using an unsound spell. If a person performs an unsound spell, then the performer is causing harm both to himself or herself and to others who may be affected by that performance.

Harm Caused to Self. If a person performs or uses an unsound spell, then by that use that person does violence to his or her own reason. To use the spell is to do violence to that which is most sacred in any rational animal. If you use such a spell, you do violence to the sacred depths of your own nature; you therefore cause yourself *ontological* harm.

Harm Caused to Others. If a person performs an unsound spell, and if others are harmed by its failure, then the one who performed that spell is responsible for that harm, so the performer has harmed others. The mere possibility of failure is sufficient for this harm.

Since performing an unsound spell is harmful both to the one who performs it and to any others affected by its performance, it is forbidden by the Wiccan Rede.

On the one hand, if a spell is sound, then Wiccans (and others) are permitted to offer it or to use it. Such a spell is merely part of our best technology. On the other hand, if a spell is not sound, then Wiccans (and others) are forbidden to offer or to use it.

Since at present there are no sound spells, it is inconsistent for Wiccans to either offer or perform such spells. It is unethical and it ought not to be done. It must be stressed that the *mere possibility* of harm makes the offering and use of spells unethical. Those who offer or who perform such spells *place people in harms way*. And that's wrong.

48. Visualization

Visualization is the mental generation of images of desired future states of affairs. If you want to achieve some goal, then you imagine yourself on the way to achieving it, or closer to achieving it, or as having achieved it. You may imagine yourself as going through the operations needed to achieve it. For example, if you are going to perform in some sports contest, you may mentally rehearse your moves; if you are going to have a job interview, you may mentally rehearse successful versions of your interview.

Visualization is discussed by Wiccan writers like Cunningham (2004: 88-90) and Sabin (2011: 47-51). According to Sabin, the Wiccan use of visualization is linked with the theory of spiritual energy: "There is a magical idea that 'energy follows thought.' What that means is that if you create and see something in your mind, that image attracts energy, and whatever you're picturing begins to become a reality" (2011: 47). She writes that "The more often you visualize something, the more real it becomes in your mind. And the more real it becomes in your mind, the more real it is elsewhere too" (2011: 48). Sabin is correct to point to the utility of visualization for sharpening mental focus on some goal; but she is wrong to suggest that visualization has any causal power beyond its power to cause changes in the self. There is no good evidence for the claim that spiritual

energy exists; nor that it follows thought; nor that the more real something becomes in your mind, the more real it becomes outside of your mind. Those principles are irrational.

Fortunately, the irrational metaphysics of visualization is irrelevant. It is another example of Wiccan writers taking something that has some validity, and coating it with woo. There is no need for this: the woo is irrelevant, and it can be ignored both by atheistic Wiccans and by anybody else. There is good evidence that visualization works. It is a reliable technique for focusing the mind on desired goals. For example, it has been used in athletics to facilitate superior performance. However, it is essential to stress that visualization works by *and only by* causing changes in the minds of those who employ it. It does not involve any non-natural spiritual energies; it involves only the natural energies of the nervous system. It is like any other *askesis* that focuses on self-optimization. It is away of arousing and directing the will towards some goal. It can help produce the feeling of control, allay anxiety, generate motivation, and arouse resolve in the face of adversity.

The images produced in visualization do not represent presently existing situations in our universe. They represent future possible situations in our universe, or perhaps merely situations in other possible universes. For any metaphysics that affirms the existence of all possible universes, all visualized images are veridical – they all represent some situation that actually exists somewhere in the totality of possible universes. And for any metaphysics that affirms the existence of some but not all possible universes, it follows that some but not all visualized images are veridical. The theory of modality (of possibility and actuality) that is used here is inspired by both atheism and neo-paganism. This theory was developed in the logic of creation and evolution by rational selection. It says that all positive potentials of all things will be actualized. So, for any thing, for any one of its positive potentials, there is some actually existing universe in which that potential will be realized.

The theory of evolution by rational selection entails that if you visualize the actualization of one of your positive potentialities, then your visualization is veridical – you are visualizing something that will exist. The content of your visualization (the image you are seeing in your mind) accurately represents a real situation that will be actualized by evolution by rational selection. It may never exist in our present universe; it may only exist in some future universe. But evolution by rational selection eventually actualizes all positive potentials of all possible things. However, as your visualization drifts away from the actualization of your positive potentials, then it drifts away from truth. What you are visualizing becomes less and less likely to happen in any future.

For truthful visualization, it is essential to focus on your own positive potentials. To visualize what is for the best for yourself and for all the larger contexts in which you live is to focus on what will eventually come to pass. By focusing on that, you are focusing on reality. Such focusing ought to arouse confidence that your will is aligned with the objective will of nature and that your rationality is aligned with the objective reasoning in

nature. Any actions that result from your properly focused will are actions that will eventually be successful, whether in this universe or some future universe.

Visualization of negativities, which are self-destructive or destructive for the contexts in which you live, is visualization of self-negation. Since wills do come into conflict, that is, since there is evil in the universe, your negative visualizations may come to pass; however, they are dead ends, which will be eliminated by evolution by rational selection. To visualize the actualization of your negative potentials may indeed sharpen your will to bring them into being so that you eventually do bring them into being; but, if they are brought into being, they destroy themselves. Visualization of the negative merely hastens its removal from the ever expanding system of natural positivities. It can only lead you faster to the self-destruction of your career on this earth in this universe.

Visualization may appear to lead to passivity: if you want something, then all you have to do is to visualize it, and eventually it will happen. However, if all you're doing is visualizing some desired situation, then you are not moving towards it. Visualization does not have any power to cause any situation to become more real. If all you are doing is visualization, then it is highly likely that what you are visualizing is not one of your positive potentialities, and is not likely to become actual at all. If all you are doing is visualization, then it is highly likely that your desire is not aligned with your will and that your visions do not correspond to any reality in any universe. If you are only visualizing something, then that very fact is a sign that you are lost, and that you should visualize and strive for something else.

The degree to which your visualization is true corresponds very closely to the degree to which you are striving to realize the visualized situation. The purpose of visualization is to focus the will towards a definite goal; the purpose of visualization is to arouse, sustain, and amplify the will as it strives towards its goals. By working towards your goals, you necessarily bring yourself closer to them, whether they are actual in this universe or in some future universe. If your striving in this universe fails to produce any results in this universe, then your goal is merely actual in some future universe, and your striving brings you closer to that future situation. So long as you are visualizing your positive potentials, any resulting feeling of control is not an illusion of control; it is veridical. And you know that you are visualizing your positive potentials because those are the ones that you are also actually striving towards and working towards, with all your might.

Since visualization involves the construction of a mental image that is similar to or that corresponds to some desired state of affairs, and since sympathetic magic also involves the construction of similarities or correspondences, someone may try to argue that visualization is a type of sympathetic magic. However, there is an essential difference: visualization takes place entirely within the self (within the brain); it therefore clearly advertises itself as being concerned with internal control and internal self-discipline. It is an inner ascesis, it is the brain working on itself. By contrast, sympathetic magic involves the exercise of the will outside of the self; it induces the illusion of control, and through outward action it seeks to produce the appearance of external causality where

there is none. Thus visualization is not sympathetic magic; it is a rationally appropriate self-discipline of the will.

Visualization is a form of rational hope; it is a way of rationally projecting the will into the future. As rational hope, visualization surpasses belief. For even if you believe that some negative situation P will come to pass, you can hope that P will not come to pass. And, so long as it is not absolutely certain that P will come to pass, it is rational to hope that P does not come to pass. Conversely, even if you believe that some positive situation will not come to pass, you can rationally hope that it will come to pass.

Since visualization does not involve any theistic deities, atheists of all types are free to use it. Atheistic Wiccans can use visualization; but atheists who are not Wiccans can also use it. It can be part of an atheistic nature-religion. Since visualization has some basis in empirical fact, at least some skeptics should be able to use it. And since visualization is rational, rationalists can use it. Visualization does not involve anything super-natural; if they exist at all, other possible universes are entirely natural things. Scientific naturalism does not raise any objections to visualization. Visualization is a sound method for self-optimization; it is a sound method for focusing the will to actualize its positive potentials.

49. Athenic Wicca

My approach to Wicca has been critical. For philosophers at least, and hopefully for any rational person, criticism is based on careful analysis; it points to both the good and to the bad, to the true and to the false. It cannot be one-sided; it must strive to be fair.

One of the goals of philosophical analysis is to look for deep structure underneath surface structure. When such analysis is applied to religion, its task is to look for the conceptual and rational *logos* underneath religious *mythos*. This series of posts has worked to look beneath the Wiccan *mythos* for its *logos*. Contrary to those who without thinking dismiss Wicca as entirely made of woo, this series indicates that Wicca is not *merely mythos*; on the contrary, it has a *logos*, it contains a logical deep structure.

Unfortunately, this *logos* is all too often covered with layer after layer of *woo* – with wishful thinking, pseudo-science, anti-rational or even mentally disturbed thinking. Some Wiccans may be offended by the term woo, which seems derogatory. To them it must honestly be said that their own books and websites present doctrines that are manifestly indefensible by people who use modern technology and that, frankly speaking, many of those books and websites seem to prey on the emotionally vulnerable and mentally unstable. The promotion of magic is especially both cognitively and ethically offensive.

And yet the woo in Wicca is not necessary; it serves certain psychological functions which can be served honestly. An entirely woo-free Wicca is possible. If an ancient honorific name is needed for this approach to Wicca, it might be called *Athenic Wicca*, after Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Of course, atheistic Wiccans might just prefer to

call it atheistic Wicca. The core structures of a woo-free Wicca might look something like this:

1. *The Ultimate Deity.* On the mythic surface, the Wiccan ultimate deity is presented in theistic language. But most Wiccan texts already describe the ultimate deity in rational terms. The ultimate deity is just the ultimate immanent creative power of being. It is wholly immanent and natural. It is *natura naturans*. Many atheists have argued for the reality of natural creative power. Atheistic Wicca affirms the reality of the ultimate deity; however, it rejects all theistic or mythic attributes of this ultimate deity – it is not God.

2. *The God and Goddess.* On the mythic surface, the Wiccan god and goddess are spirit-people. But there is no evidence for the existence of such people. Atheistic Wiccans reject all spirit-people as idolatrous projections. But the symbolism of the god and goddess points beyond itself to a deep structure under the mythic surface. The deep structure is two abstract powers of being. *Natura naturans* expresses itself as objective will and objective reason. Objective reason is symbolized by the goddess and objective will by the god. But they are not spirit-people; they are merely symbols for abstract natural powers.

3. *The Wheel of the Year.* On the mythic surface, the Wheel symbolizes the life-cycle of the god and goddess as a productive couple. When the Wheel is rationalized, it symbolizes all the cycles of nature; ultimately, it concretely represents the abstract algorithmic iteration in the logic of creation and evolution by rational selection. The Wheel symbolizes the logical action of the Principle of Sufficient Reason as it generates all natural complexity.

4. *Reincarnation.* According to reincarnation, souls pass from body to body here on earth. This is the transmigration of souls. And transmigration is mythic. It is a concrete way of referring to something more abstract. This myth of transmigration points beyond itself towards rebirth. Rebirth is palingenesis – it is the recreation of a counterpart of the self in some other universe. It is expressed more clearly in Theravedic Buddhism and it gains some empirical justification from the arguments of Kurt Godel. While transmigration is *mythos*, palingenesis is *logos*. As rational rebirth, it is supported by the logic of creation and evolution by rational selection. Atheistic Wicca affirms rebirth.

5. *Personal Activities.* Wiccan writers describe various techniques for self-empowerment. Such techniques include meditation (mindfulness), breathing, visualization, and other techniques for arousal regulation and self-optimization (self-mastery, self-discipline, *askesis*). The Wiccan writers typically cover these techniques with a thick coating of woo. However, these techniques have scientific foundations. If any technique for work on the self is empirically supported, then atheistic Wiccans are free to use it. And such techniques should be used. Through these techniques, the rational manifestation of the will of the self is maximized. Thus *natura naturans* is maximally manifest through the self.

6. *Social Activities.* Atheistic Wiccans celebrate the sabbats without any theistic baggage. Such celebrations can involve many different types of social ceremonies and rituals. And atheistic Wiccans can perform ceremonial activities in sacred circles. One might cast a circle against woo, summon the various cognitive and practical virtues, and so on. But it seems best to leave the details of such practices to Wiccan groups.

Even if a woo-free Wicca is possible, it is hardly clear that it can ever happen. There seems to be a culture of woo in Wicca. Book after book, website after website, presents wishful, confused, and delusional thinking. Since none of that is essential, it is tragic. The depth of woo in Wicca is likely to lead either to its degeneration into New Age nonsense or to its social collapse as its new practitioners find that the woo accomplishes nothing. And as Wicca grows, the woo is surely going to attract the critical attention of other religious groups as well as scientists and skeptics. Wicca may die of woo. And that would be deeply unfortunate, since it would mean the death of an alternative to Abrahamic religion in the West. Anyone interested in seeing alternatives to the dominant Abrahamic religions in the United States ought to encourage Wicca to get real, get serious, get clean.

50. Atheistic Nature-Religion

Once upon a time, Carl Sagan predicted the appearance of an atheistic nature-religion: “A religion old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge” (1997: 50).

Many disparate groups are working to make this statement come true. These include naturalistic pagans, humanistic pagans, religious naturalists, pantheists, and others. Some of these groups or movements are non-theistic or even atheistic. Atheistic religions already exist. They include eastern religions like Theravedic Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, and Confucianism. And atheistic religions are possible in the west – there are many non-theistic strains in ancient neoplatonism and Stoicism.

Anyone who thinks that an atheistic religion is impossible remains totally in the grip of theism. Theists, after all, want you to think that theistic religion is the only type of religion; they want to claim all the benefits of religion for themselves, and paint atheism as utterly lacking in those benefits. Theists want you to think that without God there is no meaning in life, no objective morality, no prosocial organization, no life after death. And theists also want you to think that without God, you can't do metaphysics. Theists want you to think that if you want any of those things, then you need to be a theist. *And it is remarkable how many atheists agree with the theists on all these points!* Yet on all these points, theists are wrong, and so are the atheists who agree with them. Atheistic religions can provide all those benefits – without idolatry and consistent with our best natural science. That is, they can provide them without theistic deities, without God, and with science.

An atheistic religion does not shirk from ultimate questions but instead welcomes them and aims to answer them with non-theistic metaphysical accounts. One such account, the metaphysics of *natura naturans*, developed through the logic of creation and evolution by rational selection, was offered in these posts. Surely there are other accounts. An atheistic religion does not have to propose any single account as dogmatic truth; on the contrary, it should encourage the perpetual examination of arguments pro and con.

An atheistic religion does not deny the existence of the sacred, the holy, or the divine. On the contrary, it affirms that they are natural properties – there are many things and powers in the natural world that are sacred, holy, and divine. But an atheistic religion rejects all idolatry: there are no sacred, holy, or divine persons. Thus an atheistic religion also rejects all personal revelation. Revelation comes from nature; and nature reveals itself to us through our natural senses and our natural reasoning powers. Since there are no holy persons there are no holy books or holy doctrines. Nor is there any faith in books or doctrines. The sacred in nature is described by science, by rational metaphysics, by mathematics, and by logic. It is always open to revision and never fixed.

An atheistic religion provides attractive social events and ceremonies. It provides ceremonies for rites of passage (naming, marriage, death). But it also provides prosocial ritual activities, in which many people can joyously participate, which are aesthetically and emotionally satisfying, and which strengthen positive and productive social bonds. If the sacred is found in nature, then it seems most plausible that the ceremonies of an atheistic religion will be linked to natural events. One such system of ceremonies consists of the eight solar holidays that make up the Wheel of the Year.

An atheistic religion cannot agree that our highest ideals like goodness, justice, reason, and truth are merely subjective or conventional. On the contrary, it affirms that these ideals determine objective systems of value; it affirms that there is some system of morality that is objectively valid, that is mind-independent, that is independent of all times and places and of all particular human cultures. This system is rationally justifiable. An atheistic religion thus affirms that there are rationally defensible universal standards of human behavior. And these standards do not come from any god, but from rationality itself, manifest in social animals on this earth. The best of this morality is worthy of being passed on, from generation to generation, and constantly improved, from generation to generation.

An atheistic religion does not surrender the conceptual or practical territory claimed by theistic religions. On the contrary, it claims that territory for itself, and it seeks to reconstruct it non-theistically, without any gods or idols. It does not surrender the concept of the soul or the concept of life after death, but it seeks to re-interpret those concepts in ways that are rationally defensible and consistent with our best science. It does not accept the theistic claims that meaning and salvation are possible only through god. On the contrary, it seeks to boldly define its own soteriologies, and to link them with positive personal and social practices, in ways that provide prosocial and personal hope. It seeks to develop life-affirming theories of ultimate existential value without god. The Buddhist theory of rebirth, expressed here as rational rebirth, is non-

theistic. Surely there are other ways to develop non-theistic and rationally defensible soteriologies.

An atheistic religion does not surrender personal practices to theism. Instead, it develops its own system of positive personal practices, and, when it develops those practices, it develops them only insofar as their claimed effectivities are scientifically justified. For example, an atheistic religion does not agree that prayer requires gods to which to pray; it seeks to develop its own concepts of prayerful practice. The practices mentioned here have included breathing, meditation, self-hypnosis, and visualization. These are all effective within their own bounds; and there are many others besides these. Nor does an atheistic religion allow the language of these practices to belong to the theists. On the contrary, an atheistic religion claims terms like “spiritual” for itself, and defines them godlessly.

An atheistic religion does not avoid socially binding doctrines, but it bases its doctrines on the search for ideal values, such as goodness and truth, and as the result of basis it places at its foundation a method for establishing socially binding doctrines. The only dogmatic constitution which any atheistic religion can have is one that contains nothing but method. It is plausible to think that this method will be some synthesis of the methods found in science and in the law. It must be a method which allows novel doctrines to be proposed, and which constantly subjects current doctrines to rational testing, and which disposes of old doctrines which fail to meet the best available standards of truth and goodness. Nor does this method require that there ever be one best doctrine. This method facilitates the construction of a stratified and pluralistic system of doctrines, ranked from less justified to more justified, and arranged as mutual alternatives in each rank.

An atheistic religion does not seek to be left alone; it seeks to be socially engaged. It seeks to build its own institutions, to have its own professional celebrants and counselors. It does not allow theistic religion to wholly own the territory of social assistance, charity, and help to those who suffer. It aims to socially and politically overcome injustice and suffering, and to realize the good here on earth as much as humanly possible.

A future atheistic religion may well compete with theism for all the psychological and social benefits that religion provides. For every personal and social service provided by theistic religions, someday, it may be possible to turn to atheistic religions. And, just as non-theistic science has done a better job of understanding the universe than theistic science, so it may be argued that non-theistic religions will do a better job of satisfying real human religious needs than theistic religions. Modern science has done a good job getting the gods out of nature; it's time to get the gods out of religion too.

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