

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Grounding Non-Theological Morality: The Victorian Secularist Movement, Secular Ethics, and Human Progress

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This article examines the formation of British Secularist ethics in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The Secularist movement, initiated by George Jacob Holyoake in 1851, was a primarily artisan working-class social movement that sought to ground social ethics upon a rational, scientific, and non-theological foundation. This article examines how the quest for a science of morals informed Secularist expectations and judgements. In this article, I trace how the idea of a rational science of ethics was integrated into the secularist movement. I begin by briefly situating the Secularist movement within the wider moral and epistemological debates of the mid-Victorian period. I address the implications that atheism had on the development of Secularism, and on its contemporary reputation and respectability. I then examine how Holyoake sought to establish the non-theological grounds of morality and the tensions that arose from debates between Secularists regarding the necessity of atheism to Secularism. Finally, I argue that despite significant fissures within the movement created by the question of the necessity of atheism, Secularism nevertheless evinced a high degree of conceptual unity concerning the nature and grounds of morality.

No subject captured the Secularist imagination as frequently and as contentiously as morality (Royle 1974). Secularism was a movement of artisan and lower middle-class freethinkers initiated in 1851 by the tinsmith turned Owenite lecturer, George Jacob Holyoake. Holyoake intended Secularism to be a positive expression of freethought that transcended atheism, and could provide both atheist and believer with an ethical system independent of scripture and theology. The belief that individual and social conduct could be best regulated without theology was one of the movement's primary justifications for its existence. For vehement critics of Secularism like Rev. Brewin Grant, morality was impossible without the aid of revelation and the guidance of religion, and "all that Secularism does, is to take away one of the motives [for moral conduct], namely, the remembrance that God watches over us, and that he judges us" (Grant and Holyoake 1853, 41). This article addresses how Secularists thought about the grounds of moral conduct, and their vision of Secularism as an alternative to theologically-grounded systems of morality.

Secular ethics were, ultimately, utilitarian. Influential utilitarian theorists Jeremy Bentham and James and John Stuart Mill conceived of a world of individuals equally capable of improvement through the proper application of rational legislation and reformed governing institutions

(Snyder 2006; Pitts 2005; Zastoupil 1994; Mehta 1989). This system appealed to the freethinkers because it offered an empirical method for assessing goodness. The freethinkers grounded their epistemology in the doctrine of necessity—the idea that character is shaped by natural laws. Utility was thus a means of understanding and applying those laws. Occasionally, freethinkers waxed rapturous over the "coming glory" utilitarianism promised: "When it comes, poverty and vice, which are twins, will perish, and on their thrones will reign virtue and wealth, the natural offspring of intellect and heart, and the rightful rulers of the world" (*National Reformer* 1862, 1). However, this rhapsodic faith in utility was rooted in a more fundamental faith in the idea that the proper application of the scientific method would provide certain, rational grounds for morality. This article examines how the quest for a science of morals informed secularist expectations and judgements. In this article, I trace how the idea of a rational science of ethics was integrated into the secularist movement. I begin by briefly situating the secularist movement within the wider moral and epistemological debates of the mid-Victorian period. I address the implications that atheism had on the development of Secularism, and on its contemporary reputation and respectability. I then examine how Holyoake sought to establish the non-theological grounds of morality and the tensions that arose from debates between secularists regarding the necessity of atheism to Secularism. Finally, I argue that despite significant fissures within the movement created by the question of the necessity of atheism, Secularism

nevertheless evinced a high degree of conceptual unity concerning the nature and grounds of morality.

Religion, Science, and Duty

Victorian moral thinking was marked by flux, experimentation, and controversy. The fecundity of nineteenth-century experimentation in moral philosophy occurred amid prominent fears that the transition to a modern, industrial and urban society had resulted in the loss of the vital foundations of ethics. These moral anxieties were intimately related to the problem of progress and coincided with a widely-shared belief among theorists, ranging from the utilitarian and liberal John Stuart Mill to Tory intuitionists like William Whewell, that scientific systems of knowledge would lead to ascertaining the true grounds of morality, unleashing dramatic human progress (Snyder 2006). The blending of scientism and ethics was thus not only the terrain of secular or non-theological moralists. Grounding ethics in science was urgent for all those individuals convinced, either optimistically or pessimistically, that Christianity faced terminal decline in Britain. To situate Secularist moral ideas accurately, we must address some of the more important issues that faced leading nineteenth-century moralists, and expose the connections between faith, knowledge, and obligation that formed the dominant contours of Victorian ethical discussions.

Stefan Collini (1991) has productively characterized Victorian ethical thought between 1850 and the 1890s as a culture of altruism. Altruism, a term coined by Auguste Comte and introduced into English by G. H. Lewes in 1852, was constructed as a scientific triumph over Christian moral pessimism (Hilton 1992). Against what he saw as the Christian emphasis on humanity's innate sinfulness and selfishness, Comte believed he had shown that cooperation, love, and sympathy were fundamental, natural human characteristics (Collini 1991; Dixon 2008). The cultural ascent of altruism was part of a response to a crisis of faith experienced by a number of theorists who no longer found Christianity to be an acceptable foundation for ensuring that individuals would fulfil their social duties. (Collini 1991; Tjoa 1977).

The artisan radicals of the Secularist movement were not as influential as their middle-class compatriots such as Mill, Leslie Stephen, or Herbert Spencer. However, Secularist ethics was entrenched in the same language of duty that defined elite liberal ethical theory. For example, in *The Origin and Nature of Secularism* (1873), Holyoake declared that "he who maintains that mankind can be largely improved by material means, imposes on himself the responsibility of employing such means, and of promoting their use as far as they can, and trusting to their efficacy" (Holyoake 1873, 103). The true grounds of ethical philosophy were those which made the individual embrace altruism, or service to others: "a man is not a man while under superstition, nor is he a man when free from it, unless his mind is built on principles conducive and incentive to the service of man" (Holyoake 1873, 107).

The problems that attended the search for certain and sustainable ethical structure were complex and diffuse, and were consequently closely and hotly contested. In

the middle decades of the century, when Secularism first emerged as a distinct movement, ethical debates were primarily framed as a contest between J. S. Mill's utilitarian and empirical "school of experience," and the moral intuitionism of William Whewell, Sir William Hamilton, and H. L. Mansel. For Mill, the primacy of experience meant the necessary rejection of all *a priori* knowledge and the assertion that all knowledge was generated by sensations and the mental recognition of consciousness (McRae 1974).

In his conflicts with the intuitionists, Mill set out to dismantle a set of interlocking claims arising out of mathematics. Intuitionists grounded their moral philosophy in a view of causation that was based on natural necessity. In particular, they appealed to the inconceivability of an uncaused cause. The intuitionists approached epistemology as a process of dispensing with confusions to reach an understanding of the root, natural necessity of a causal chain. The question here turned on the nature of causation. For the intuitionists, a cause created its effects rather than merely preceding them. For Mill, this was rubbish. He argued that the intuitionists mistook our experience of causality for the cause itself. Applying this debate to moral philosophy, Mill attacked notions of an absolute free will and the idea that moral knowledge could be intuited. For Mill, the root appeal to effective causes resulted in prejudice becoming the only ground for ethics. In contrast, he argued in favour of a naturalistic and inductive method that was itself rooted in an atomistic naturalism. Mill sought a social and moral science that could be used to build further facts upon facts, resulting in the accumulation of general principles. Applied to utilitarianism, this meant inductively establishing a hierarchy of pleasures to which one could appeal in order to infer right actions (Ryan 1970; Ryan 1979; Snyder 2006): "human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification ... It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact, that some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone" (Mill 1861, 210–211).

A vital part of the naturalism that infused the thinking of Mill and his contemporaries, most notably Herbert Spencer, was an interest in applying the lessons of science, particularly evolutionary science, to ethics. Comte was instrumental in this project. His hierarchy of the sciences, grounded in his laws of the three stages of development, offered his readers a foundation for constructing a social science that could govern human conduct (den Otter 1996). Comte's philosophy of science was enormously influential among mid-century radicals like Mill, Harriet Martineau, G. H. Lewes and others. The popularity of Comte's evolutionary schema helps explain why Darwin's evolutionism came to have an important role in ethical debates after 1859.

All of the nineteenth-century efforts to apply science to ethics were predicated upon determining how right

conduct could be compelled in a social structure where the old bonds of traditional religion binding individuals to communities had been broken. The benefits of right conduct and the disadvantages of immorality were pitched at the level of society, although the object of reform and persuasion was the individual. This individualism was vital to the context of Victorian Secularist ethical debates. Secularism was thoroughly civil-libertarian in its politics. Its leaders and its membership were driven by a broad antipathy to authority, particularly religious authority (Royle 1974). Their antipathy to clerical authority was especially acute in terms of the nature of morals and right conduct. The right to establish moral conduct through the free use of individual reason was vital to the Secularist project, a project that endures to this day. In addition to the decline of traditional and Biblical authority that motivated elite Victorian ethicists, the Secularists were driven to articulate a secular ethics in response to historical prejudices that equated unbelief with immorality.

A Moral Society of Atheists

Secularism never stood a chance of avoiding critical scrutiny over the issue of morality. Despite strenuous efforts by Holyoake to distinguish Secularism from mere atheism, the charge of infidelity—and with it, immorality—dogged the Secularist movement. Matters were not helped by Charles Bradlaugh, Holyoake's successor as national leader of the movement, insisting that atheism and Secularism were indistinguishable. But even if Bradlaugh and his faction had remained silent, Secularism's roots in working-class infidelity and Owenism offered fodder to its critics, who were quick to accuse Secularists of irreligious moral delinquency. Faith in a providentially-designed life and afterlife regulated by a divine economy of salvation and punishment was a bulwark of traditional Christian society. To many among the orthodox, atheism posed a direct threat to society's theological foundations. Secularism was only a new expression of the traditional threat posed by infidelity.

The existence of atheists, their morality, and their toleration were intersecting problems. In the English context, John Locke famously excluded atheists from religious toleration. For Locke, “the taking away of God, tho but even in thought, dissolves all” (Locke 1689, 51). Atheists could not be trusted to keep promises, covenants, and oaths, which Locke called “the Bonds of Humane Society” (Locke 1689, 51). The eighteenth century witnessed the appearance of the first published self-avowals of atheism (Kors 1990; Berman 1988). Their appearance marked the decline of debates over the existence of atheists, but it did not end the controversy over godless morality. Thomas Chalmers and other evangelical reformers continued to equate atheism with immorality on the grounds that atheists had no fear of the divine economy of rewards and punishments, and from the late eighteenth century, the growth of industrialism fueled orthodox fears that the new urban working-class—freed from the social regulatory bonds of parish life and traditional authority—was manufacturing godlessness alongside industrial wares. These fears reached a pinnacle with the release of the 1851

religious census, which found that only about fifty percent of the population attended church on Sundays. Fears of an “unholy city” helped to spark programs of home evangelization seeking to revitalize Christianity, and with it Christian morals (Brown 2009).

Religious fears of social disorder fueled by industrialization and urbanization were exacerbated by the apparent atheism and riotous violence of the French Revolution. Orthodox critics and Church and Crown conservatives attacked pro-revolutionary radicals as agents of atheistic chaos. Richard Carlile's generation of post-Napoleonic ultra-radicals and Owenite socialists were painted with the same brush. Because Holyoake emerged from within Owenism as a leading artisan freethinker, his attempt to formulate Secularism as a substantive category (Rectenwald 2016), as something more than atheism, was immediately and inevitably attacked by many divines as nothing more than a new disguise for the same old anti-social godlessness (Grant and Holyoake 1852).

Holyoake's project was, however, about more than base obfuscation. He wanted Secularism to be inclusive, and imagined it as a non-theological method of securing social ethics that did not demand that its adherents abandon their theological beliefs: “Our principles have disposed us to look for neutral ground of human duty, and by freeing us from Sectarian prejudice, have enabled us to occupy it. We will work with all who will for the Secular welfare. We trepan no man. None who work with us for Secular welfare need think with us on other points” (Grant and Holyoake 1853, 10). However, the lack of moral respectability associated with unbelief meant that Holyoake had to navigate a narrow passage between his sincere theoretical commitment to an inclusive, non-theological ethics, and linguistic expedience to render his system palatable to people who were not already non-believers. Clerical opponents such as Brewin Grant clearly meant to exploit Holyoake's difficulty: Grant implied that Secularism *was* atheism, and Holyoake's efforts to distinguish the terms were nothing more than dissimulation. For Grant, Secularism's non-scriptural claim to moral authority amounted to nothing more than a rudderless and atheistic materialism:

Their bright gospel is black fate; their spiritual theory is promise; their practical principles are annihilation; their faith is this life; their works are the decomposition and recomposition of matter. They did not give this life; they cannot guide us in it, that we may walk in it uprightly, honestly, clearly; they think they can only destroy our hope of another, and mock us with a material dependence on materialism, which is the only cause of material destruction (Grant and Holyoake 1853, 117).

Articulating the Grounds of Secular Morality

While many Victorians, orthodox and heterodox alike, were anxious about the consequences of de-Christianization (Von Arx 1985; Brown 2009), the Secularists viewed supposed Christian decline as an opportunity to elevate non-theological ethics. Principally, they turned to utilitarianism

and an Owenite-cum-Comtean hierarchy of knowledge that had the scientific study of society at its pinnacle. Even without the language of altruism, service and inter-personal obligations were at the centre of Secularist ethical thought. In the *Principles of Secularism* (1871), Holyoake defined Secularism as “the study of promoting human welfare by material means; measuring human welfare by the utilitarian rule, and making the service of others a duty of life” (1871, 11). Like Comte, Holyoake saw Secularism as distinct from Christianity because it emphasized “the promotion of human improvement by material means, and making these agreements the ground of common unity for all who would regulate life by reason and ennoble it by service” (1871, 11).

After 1852, Comtean positivism was slowly wedded to a native English utilitarianism as a dominant language for radical and heterodox ideas about the non-theological grounds of ethics (Wright 1986). However, when dealing with the Secularist movement, we cannot ignore the seminal importance of Owenism. The social theory that Robert Owen developed in the 1810s embraced a view of moral necessitarianism influenced particularly by William Godwin, but also drew upon a larger eighteenth-century tradition that encompassed David Hume, Joseph Priestley, Jeremy Bentham and other utilitarian theorists (Royle 1974, 23, 44). Owenite views of necessity were broadly consonant with the Comtean doctrine of altruism and indicate how the Comtean views came to be integrated after 1852. Owen juxtaposed the freedom of the will and the doctrine of moral responsibility with necessity. Free will was “a wicked, an ignorant, and an artificial character,” and the perceived ubiquity of this “artificial character” among world religions made them “the most formidable obstacle to the progress of every kind of mental improvement” (Owen 1835, 193). In contrast, Owen believed necessity revealed that “the whole character of man, physical, mental, and moral, is formed *for* him; and formed independently of any power which he can exert” (1835, 50). For Owen, the “proper business of human life is to form man to attain the highest degree of physical, intellectual, and moral perfection; to remove from around him every impediment to the acquisition of happiness; and to create new circumstances which shall contribute most essentially to promote his permanent enjoyment” (1835, 55). With his idea of a “new moral world,” Owen sought the eradication of want (and, therefore, material suffering) and the physical, mental, and moral improvement of the human species (1842). Understanding necessity means understanding *nature*. For Owen, moral evil stemmed from ignorance of nature.

Owen applied his ethical epistemology to religion. He viewed the world’s existing religions as a reflection of human immaturity: “the religions founded under the name of Jewish, Budh, Jehovah, God, or Christ, Mahomet, or any other, are all composed of human laws in opposition to nature’s eternal laws” (1842, 72). Further, “unity and harmony could never be found in any religion or codes of laws founded on the mistaken notion that instincts were free-will” (1842, 73). Part of Owen’s new view of society was the hope of establishing a new rational religion

that would resolve the tensions he saw in theological religion. In the late 1830s, as Owen pressured the movement to shift its resources towards the founding of the Queenwood community, missionary and lecturing efforts were deemphasized, and lecturers were advised to refrain from attacking Christianity. This move did not go over well with the more thoroughly irreligious Owenites (Royle 1974, 49–70).

In the early 1840s, Holyoake joined other freethinkers who objected to Owen’s proposed rational religion. Holyoake drew a firm distinction between religion and morality and rejected Owen’s idea that “religion” was, at its heart, a synonym for truth:

Ask the world what is truth, and you will have to pause longer than Brutus did in the Roman forum for a satisfactory reply. A thousand and one sects send up a thousand and one, or more likely two thousand and two replies. Then if truth is religion, how various, changeable, and infinite it is! To offer it after this as the guide of men is like making the chameleon the standard of colour ... But if truth is not religion, is it anything we do know? Inquire what is morality—all agree in defining it as the sense and practice of such duties as best promote the common and universal good. That utility is the basis of morality is acknowledged, and that the essence of utility is *truth*, must be admitted. Then truth, if any second name is required for it, should be called the essence or grand element of morality, which has a venerable, healthy, and undying reputation; which is always and everywhere comprehensible, and kind, and worthy, above all things, of honour, regard, general acceptance, and love from the human race (Holyoake, 1842, 170).

In the early 1840s, radical freethinkers appeared convinced that moral progress merely required the end of religion. They sometimes pushed their rhetoric to extremes. For example, Thomas Paterson declared that “every man who reasons is an unbeliever, for reason exposes the chimeras of theology—and shows that religion is the chief source of our calamities, and, as a consequence, that it is at variance with morality” (1843, 137). While clearly burdened by an excess of hyperbole, Paterson’s declaration is useful for his bold statement of the self-sufficiency of human reason as a foundation for ethics: “a reasoning being cannot be incapable of his duties, or of perceiving what he owes to beings who are necessary to his happiness—and reason naturally leads him to a knowledge of the morality most essential to mankind—and what an advantage, on the side of morals, has he who reflects and reasons, to whom who believes it to be right never to reason” (1843, 137).

Charles Southwell elaborated the wider social benefits of atheism. He declared that “in those countries where there is least religion there is most morality—where priests are despised virtue is respected—and where hell seems almost forgotten, the delights fabled of heaven seem actually realised upon earth” (Southwell 1843, 27). Southwell was fixated on the negative elements of religion and

equated religion with vice: “the fact is, whatever shape religion assumes, its nature is invariably antagonistic to knowledge. The most religious individuals generally, and the most religious nations universally, are the least wise, therefore the most vile” (1843, 27). In contrast, “a nation of atheists would be governed by the law of reason.” The law of reason would be synonymous with a moral law since “nothing moral can be unreasonable, and nothing reasonable can be immoral” (1843, 27).

Over time, Holyoake came to believe that the mere dissolution of religion was insufficient for supplying an alternative moral system to Christianity. Between Holyoake’s 1842 ascension to the editorship of the *Oracle of Reason*—a vehemently atheistic periodical whose founding editor Charles Southwell was arrested for blasphemous libel, occasioning Holyoake’s editorial takeover—and Holyoake’s elaboration of Secularism in the early 1850s, Holyoake wrestled with how to ground his conception of morality. While he was certainly influenced in his thinking by his entry into the world of middle-class radicalism, Holyoake’s Owenism must not be ignored as an important aspect informing his desire to conceive of a positive freethought. His first extended programmatic foray into positive freethought appeared in *Rationalism: A Treatise for the Times* (1845). Holyoake situated this effort in “the conviction that Mr. Owen’s views are capable of a new statement” (1845, 5). *Rationalism* had two aims: first, to establish that morality is subject to natural laws and is therefore open to empirical and scientific understanding; and second, to connect knowledge of the natural laws of morality to the process of self-improvement. Both of these aims owed direct debts to Owen and Mill. Holyoake, however, was more sensitive to the difficulties that these goals represented to the reformer. Holyoake’s “new statement” of Owen’s system hinged upon mitigating the totalizing implications of Owen’s articulation of necessity—the power of circumstances to determine character. Holyoake wanted to maintain the power of circumstances upon character formation, while explicating a clear path to individual moral self-improvement.

Holyoake’s effort to mitigate Owen’s hard necessity was clear from the outset of *Rationalism*. He opened with the “general fact” that “the opinions and actions of men result from their original susceptibilities, and the external influences which *affect* them.” From this general fact, Holyoake inferred that “self-knowledge and self-improvement are the primary duties of each person in pursuit of intelligence and happiness.” This pursuit of intelligence and happiness “suggests to each individual wariness of conduct” and “teaches him that in the worst circumstances there is hope of amendment or chance of dignity.” The hope for improvement consequently “justifies reliance on human endeavour and assimilates progression to a science.” Progression as a discernible science demanded that “man, society, and nature generally” ought to be “especial objects of study—the better to bring all these relations of humanity into harmony with happiness and progression” (1845, 9–10).

Holyoake tempered Owen’s rigid determinism by stressing that knowing the natural laws of moral progress would

provide properly educated individuals with the power to choose to follow those natural laws:

The vulgar impression is, that if circumstances made us what we are at birth, and have since influenced us beyond our controul [sic]—then we are the perpetual playthings of fate—that to be the blind instruments of the day is our destiny—that for us to act is as superfluous as it seems impossible ... They overlook the strong fact, that in the hour when the order of things gave us life we received a nature capable of progressive improvement—that every moment of existence increases our consciousness, our intelligence, and our power ... Though we inherit the dull materials of mediocrity or the happy elements of genius, we soon find that progression depends on culture, that the weak by exercise are made strong, that vast capacity narrows by disuse (1845, 16–7).

Holyoake’s attempt to mediate determinism and free will was not unique. J. S. Mill took a similar, if more theoretically robust turn in *The System of Logic* (1843). Mill allowed that humans are subject to natural laws of causation. However, he simultaneously insisted upon freedom of the will. He did so for two reasons: his disdain for the pessimism of Calvinist determinism; and because he objected to Owen’s hard view of necessity on the grounds that it limited individual self-improvement (Snyder 2006). In Holyoake’s objections to Owen, the former mirrored and was likely influenced by Mill’s *System of Logic*. Holyoake accepted the libertarian idea that “of any given number of objects presented to a man’s notice he can *choose* which he likes” while retaining his belief that “what a man *likes* depends upon his natural and acquired taste and on the strength of the evidence before him” (1845, 19).

Holyoake also followed Mill in identifying “the dangerous fallacy of fatalism,” which Holyoake saw as an important target for Secularism (Holyoake 1845, 20; Royle 1974). Necessity, properly speaking, held that an event “will be the infallible result of the causes which produce it.” For Mill, the problem was that most believers in necessity slipped from this position to the fatalistic conclusion that “there is no use struggling against it [the caused event]; that it will happen however we may strive to prevent it” (1843, 840). For Holyoake, fatalistic determinism offered a “blind” conception of human consciousness which “submits to destiny” while “the philosophical necessarian [sic] moulds it.” The ability to mould character meant that freethinkers had an ethical obligation to do so: “this inference at once directs man’s attention to himself and to education as the sources of dignity and enjoyment,” and “imposes high *personal* duties on the individual.” These high personal duties were constitutive of a “self knowledge” that Holyoake believed was “the key stone of the arch of intellect.” Proper education was, therefore, “not only the minister to capacity but also the means of moral elevation” (Holyoake 1845, 20–1).

Liberal radicals like Mill and Holyoake depended upon the capacity of individuals to improve themselves to

become rights-bearing political subjects (Snyder 2006). However, unlike Mill, Holyoake's social position was relatively precarious. His quest for respectability may have influenced his formulation of necessity. Secularist objections to Christian ideas of free will, moral responsibility, and the doctrine of atonement left freethinkers open to accusations that they advocated moral license. In 1853, Rev. J. H. Rutherford argued that Christian belief in "the consciousness of responsibility" refuted Holyoake's Owenite dogma "that man is the creature of circumstances." For Rutherford, conscience was "evidence of a higher and holier judge of human character", and "remorse, as a phenomena of our moral nature, ... is at once a proof of the existence of moral evil, and a premonition of future judgement" (Rutherford and Holyoake 1854, 43). Brewin Grant believed that repudiating our duties to God meant losing the only sure safeguard of moral behavior, and that Holyoake and other Secularists repudiated the name of atheism to "propitiate public feeling" while "Christ and his Apostles, and glorious army of Martyrs, bought our safety at a dearer rate, and the motives of the Gospel, its present spiritual aids, the powers of the world to come, inspire men with a true heroism of endurance, without waiting for a safe place and secure time" (Grant and Holyoake 1853, 55–6).

Despite Grant's uncharitable characterization, it is clear that Holyoake was interested in more than dissimulation. Holyoake sought a scientifically certain foundation for ethics that flowed from his rejection of the absolute responsibility of unmitigated free-will as well as deterministic fatalism. He gave his system a number of names before settling upon Secularism. Naturalism, Rationalism, Cosmism, and Secularism were all expressions of Holyoake's search for a moral "code in itself" that he set against "an Almighty Policeman keeping perpetual surveillance above, converting the world into a vast penitentiary and we frail and unhappy mortals into wretched prisoners, so sunk in moral degradation as never to be worth of a moments trust, ... as gloomy as it is debasing" (Holyoake 1845, 23). In contrast, "from the higher philosophy of Rationalism a man learns that in no obscurity is he hidden ... that his doings ever tell for society's advancement or his own deterioration ... [and] if he will be a worm he knows he shall leave behind the slimy tract marking his groveling course—but pursuing useful objects he may like the stars shed a lustre over the earth" (1845, 23).

While the freethinkers agonized about respectability and right conduct, it was the foundations of morality that were their primary concern. With theological ethics "when men did well we knew not why, save and except by reference to God's good grace, which however good, is always fleeting and uncertain" (1845, 25). For Holyoake, Rationalism provided certainty because "one can trace integrity to its source and noting the influence which nurtured it, mark its ascension in a mathematical line, and foretell its culmination with the accuracy of an astronomical calculation" (1845, 25).

Holyoake's project of presenting Secularism as a neutral ground amenable to both believers and unbelievers was

hampered by the presence of a significant and influential number of Secularists who viewed Secularism and atheism as mutually dependent. On March 10 and 11, 1870, Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh began a debate at the New Hall of Science over the question of atheism and Secularism. Holyoake maintained that Secularism was distinct from atheism and argued that Secularism was "built partly upon the results obtained" by atheist and freethinking societies. But he insisted that Secularism "proposed to go farther than that—to be distinct from them—to be affirmative instead of negative—to act upon what free inquiry had discovered—to occupy the ground criticism had won—to set up principles of nature in the place of principles of theology, and found, if possible, a kingdom of reason, for those who found the kingdom of faith inadequate and unreliable" (Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870, 3). In response, Bradlaugh rooted his argument in a criticism of what he viewed as a fundamental tension in Holyoake's definition of Secularism. Specifically, Bradlaugh noted the difficulty in defining Secularism as a proposition independent of either theism or atheism while simultaneously characterizing it also as a kingdom of reason for those for whom "the kingdom of faith [is] impossible" (Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870, 14). This tension, for Bradlaugh, explained the necessity of atheism to Secularism. Bradlaugh used Holyoake's own 1853 arguments against Brewin Grant to elaborate his point. Specifically, if the laws of health, morality, knowledge, and material prosperity demanded that secularists deny "a Special Providence, and [foster] a distrust of it," then it followed that "before you can be a Secularist, to take the position Mr. Holyoake takes, you must reject all supernatural supervision, reject all Theistic control, and if that is not in reality and fact being an Atheist ... then I confess I have yet to learn the meaning of the words" (Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870, 15). The distance between Bradlaugh and Holyoake on this foundational point was significant. However, it is important to note that the debate did not turn on the question of moral foundations. Common ground existed in moral theory between Bradlaugh's and Holyoake's strains of Secularism.

I argue that Secularism's ethical conceptual unity was grounded on two often overlooked aspects of Secularist thought. First, there was a substantive project at play throughout Secularism. Even Bradlaugh—who is conventionally dismissed as labouring under little more than a crude anti-theism—proposed a positive alternative to religion, though Bradlaugh's views were much less refined than Holyoake's. Both Holyoake and Bradlaugh grounded secular ethics in utilitarianism, and an Anglicized Comtean positivism. Second, Holyoake's positive freethought was not as ecumenical as either Holyoake himself nor some scholars (Rectenwald 2016) believe it to have been. In the 1870 debate about the nature and meaning of Secularism, Bradlaugh declared that Holyoake's definition suffered from a logical problem. Specifically, Bradlaugh objected to what he understood as Holyoake's claim that "Secularism occupies ground independent alike of Theism and Atheism" (Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870, 11). For Bradlaugh:

Theism, if it claims anything, claims to be everywhere. How you can take the ground outside of everywhere, I do not know. The Theist claims that there is no thought, no phase of thought, that is not determined by Deity. You have to challenge this initial groundwork before you can make any way with your Secularism at all (Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870, 12).

Bradlaugh's criticism should be heeded. Holyoake may not have demanded that Secularists be atheists, but by proposing to regulate the foundations for ethical behaviour, he made fundamental claims about the nature of ethics that have serious theological implications. The major difference between Holyoake and Bradlaugh is that Bradlaugh believed that Christianity must be destroyed to prepare the ground for Secularism. In contrast, Holyoake's view was that Christianity would be destroyed only after the ground it occupied was overtaken by Secularism's non-theological ethics.

Unity and Disunity in Secular Ethical Discourse

The question of the necessity of atheism marked a central conflict within Secularism that persisted throughout the nineteenth century. Holyoake's conciliation and cooperation with liberal Christians was opposed by the bombastic atheism of Southwell and Bradlaugh. While this division was far from trivial, if we track the debate we find that there was a great deal of shared ground regarding the foundational nature of secular ethics.

It is informative to track the articulation of moral theory within the Secularist press in the years after Holyoake's *Reasoner* folded in 1872 and the division between the National Secular Society (N.S.S.) and the British Secular Union (B.S.U.) in 1877: namely, between Bradlaugh's *National Reformer* and the *Secular Review* edited by Charles Watts. The schism that overtook the Secularist movement in 1876, was precipitated by the arrest of Charles Watts, a Secularist leader and sub-editor with Bradlaugh of the *National Reformer*. Watts was arrested after a Bristol bookseller named Mr. Cook added lewd illustrations to copies of Watts's edition of Knowlton's contraception pamphlet *The Fruits of Philosophy, or the Private Companion of Young Married People* (1832). Irreligion had long been associated with sexual indecency, and historical associations between religious doubt and sexual license were further solidified in the minds of the orthodox by ultra-radical and Owenite attacks on traditional marriage (Schwartz 2013; Budd 1983). Watts chose to plead guilty rather than fight the obscenity charge. Bradlaugh and his ally Besant were outraged by Watts's unwillingness to become a martyr for free speech. While there is some ambiguity about the degree to which freethinkers approved or disapproved of contraception material—Holyoake had advertised Knowlton's pamphlet alongside Robert Dale Owen's Malthusian pamphlet *Moral Physiology* (1830) in the *Reasoner* since 1846 (Budd 1977)—the Knowlton affair nevertheless fomented a schism that spoke to the diversity that existed within Secularism.

Bradlaugh's defense of Knowlton was consistent with his prior activism. In 1861, he had formed the Malthusian

League with George Drysdale (Royle 1980, 254). However, the subject of sex and contraception was always fraught for freethinkers. The opprobrium directed at Bradlaugh and Besant stemmed in part from the fear that their actions threatened Secularist respectability (Schwartz 2010; Budd 1977; Royle 1980; Rectenwald 2016). As Schwartz has demonstrated, for many freethinkers, particularly freethinking women like Harriet Law, distancing themselves from sexual libertarianism was an important defensive manoeuvre for protecting reputations already rendered suspect by their freethought (2010, 186). Moreover, Secularism's socialist roots meant that some freethinkers viewed Malthusian ideas of contraception suspiciously, seeing it as middle-class condescension and surveillance. Malthusian doctrines carried the implication that the poor were responsible for their own poverty, a line of thinking that ran against the grain of the necessitarian tradition carried over from Owenism. Neo-Malthusian contraception ideas were thus liable to rattle some freethinkers, particularly those like Holyoake who had emerged from the ranks of Owenite socialism. Holyoake, for example, maintained a more morally conservative vision of Secularism but nevertheless, he defended the distribution of neo-Malthusian information on the grounds of free speech. He rejected Bradlaugh's promotion of Knowlton, and Holyoake's failure to unseat Bradlaugh as president of the N.S.S. during the Knowlton affair occasioned the split-away formation of the B.S.U. (Rectenwald 2016, 97).

Sexual ethics were a volatile aspect of wider conflicts within freethought. I agree with Rectenwald in characterizing sexual morality as a place where tensions within the movement regarding other, more fundamental issues, specifically the necessity of atheism, ossified (Rectenwald 2016, 97). The split in the Secularist movement over matters of sexual and moral respectability should not, however, blind us to the high degree of conceptual unity within Secularist ethical thought.

What we are seeking here is evidence of either a substantive difference of moral vision after 1877, or some larger unity of moral theory and its foundations complicated by the fraught divisions of the atheism and contraception questions. Throughout the Secularist press of the 1870s, there was a sense that morality was an issue distinct from religion. Religion did not sufficiently address the foundational principles of morality. Providence was represented in the Secularist press as incorrectly locating the source of morality in God. For example, in the *National Reformer* we find the idea that the "obligation" of faith in providence was predicated on the *a priori* belief that "the will of God best indicated what is conducive to goodness and happiness in mankind." This belief was *a priori* because "prior to according belief to the precepts of any religion, we must, to judge sanely, hold conceptions of goodness and happiness, by which to test their soundness." Morality, therefore, was a higher order of knowledge, a "science of natural obligations" to which "religious obligation ... would ... be but a branch." This morality, with its utilitarian emphasis on happiness as goodness, proceeded on the basis of empirical evidence. In contrast, obligations that

depended “upon external testimony” and emerging from an “obligation towards God, or as essential to their own happiness in another life” provided for the believer “no rule for determining what extension of the same principle would be inadmissible” (J. R. 1873, 53). The implication was that the only valid point of moral reference was happiness in this life, assessed by worldly or secular measures.

We find a similar argument from Annie Besant, writing as Ajax, in the *National Reformer* in 1875. Secularism was again represented as a higher order of morality. In contrast to Holyoake’s appropriation of Comte’s motto that nothing can be destroyed until it is replaced, Besant argued that Secularism was destructive of religion because “you cannot plant flowers in ground which is full of weeds, until you have pulled up and destroyed the weeds.” The process of replacement was subsequent to the destruction of the existing moral system. This negative emphasis was then abandoned in favour of an explicit embrace of utilitarianism. Besant declared that “our morality is tested only ... by utility in this life and this world; with any other life, with any other world we have nothing whatever to do.” Besant allowed that Christian and Secularist morality frequently coincided but, in an echo of Holyoake’s argument from 1845’s *Rationalism* pamphlet, these two systems of morality “spring from different roots.” While Secularism was predicated upon science, the Christian was only “unconsciously Utilitarian” (Ajax 1875, 72).

Secularists strived to present secular morality as more severe and demanding than Christian ethics. Further, all abrogation of happiness in this life in favour of another life was held by the Secularist to be “distinctly immoral, and [deserving of] stern reprobation” (Ajax 1875, 72). The secularists’ emphasis on what was worldly meant that “asceticism, in any shape, is immoral” but Besant made it explicit that this should not be conceived as advocating base hedonism. Instead, Secularists adopted a qualitative view of happiness that was in line with J. S. Mill’s revision of the crudely quantitative calculus of Bentham (Donner 1991). Secularism therefore demanded that “obedience to physical law is incumbent on every Secularist, and impurity of life, uncleanness, excess of any description, are all sins against Secular morality” (Ajax 1875, 72).

We can see unity of ethical purpose in the divergent branches of Secularism in the thinking of one of Holyoake’s closest allies, Charles Watts. In an 1875 article in the *National Reformer*, Watts emphasized this-worldly morality, declaring that “the theory of Secularism is simply that this life and this world in which we live demand and will reward our utmost cultivation” (1875, 67). Watts affirmed the moderated Owenite necessitarian doctrine first articulated by Holyoake in *Rationalism*. Human nature, “no less than nature in general, is the subject of unvarying natural laws” and Secularism therefore “regards Science as the true Providence; and affirms that by the study of Man, and the application of the results of that study, this Providence can be wrought to confer ever richer and richer boons on our race” (1875, 67).

Watts’ positivist emphasis on a science of man embraced utilitarianism as the path to moral knowledge. Crucially, Mill’s qualitative method of utilitarian calculation was

adopted by both Besant and Watts. Interestingly, Watts’s qualitative view of utility was derived from a comparison rather than an immediate juxtaposition with Christianity:

As for the controversy between virtue and happiness, which is in great measure a mere contest as to words, it is also an old one. We know how the great name of Epicurus was almost from the first degraded by his opponents as a mere synonym for the pursuit of coarse sensuous pleasures, in the term Epicureanism. But why should this happiness, which Utilitarianism teaches us to seek in common, be spoken of as something mean? The great object of Christian life is to gain eternal happiness in Heaven, and we do not find that such happiness is supposed to be conceived only with sensuous joys; on the contrary, it is assumed to involve all the most sacred emotions and aspirations, to include all the beatitudes. It is such happiness, in so far as it shall prove to be attainable, that Secularism seeks to realise, not in Heaven but on Earth, not in Eternity but in Time, not for elect individuals here and there, but for all Mankind (Watts 1875, 68).

In addition to appealing to the value of higher pleasures, Watts invoked the universality of Secularist ethics. Watts rejected Calvinist election in favour of the universality of empirical ethical knowledge which provided “a pregnant rule of life informing and swaying all our plans and actions.” Once empirical ethical knowledge was recognized, “we emerge altogether from the old gloom of ignorant selfishness into the broad light of humane existence” (1875, 68). Watts ended on an intriguing flourish which renders clear his proposition that Secularism represented a higher moral sphere than Christianity. Recognizing and accepting the universal implications of utilitarianism meant, “in the languages of the Christians, we are born again; it is our Secular regeneration” (1875, 68). For Watts, this regeneration marked Secularism “as the true religion of Humanity” (1875, 68).

If we attend to the way moral theory was expressed in the Bradlaugh camp after the division between the N.S.S. and the B.S.U., we see that the utilitarian doctrine remained in full force. However, in the later decades of the century we do see a change in emphasis. The focus on natural laws of behaviour was abandoned in favour of utility as a socially constructed measure of the good. Thus, we find an explicit rejection of the infallibility of the utilitarian test in favour of rendering the test adequately functional: “the standard, though not infallible, is sufficiently reliable for everyday life, and rationalists seek each day to improve the efficiency of the standard by enforcing generally more accurate knowledge of life-conditions” (Bradlaugh 1886, n.p.). A similar shift away from a strict utilitarianism is evident in Holyoake’s view in his collection of remembrances about his career, *Bygones Worth Remembering* (1905), Holyoake recalls his objection to Mill’s view that there was a utilitarian benefit to dissimulating unbelief and taking legal oaths. For Holyoake, “truth is higher than utility, and goes before it” (1905, 31). However, Holyoake

declines to elaborate what the criterion for determining this truth might be. It is possible that Holyoake was, late in life, inclined to accommodate some intuitionist sense of morality, but the point is left unclear.

The apparent change of emphasis around the nature of the utilitarian test did not, however, upend either the empiricist element nor the assertion that secular morality provides a surer test than did religion. Joseph Symes, an ally of Bradlaugh's states the point clearly:

Thus the Secularist is far better off morally than his neighbours. Most of them are pledged to superstition and bound by intellectual and moral trammels. He is not thus bound. He feels bound only to do what is right, that is, what human experience declares to be useful; whereas the Christian is bound to follow his infallible guide, whether experience condemns it or not. The Secularist no more expects infallibility in morals than in art, science, and language. These grow with the growth of the race, whereas infallibility would kill all. Let the Christian then make his empty boast of his creeds and codes, and ascribe to his God the contemptible and shocking morals of his Bible; let him taunt the Secularist with having no moral code. His taunt, on the one hand, is as pointless as his boast on the other. If his Bible were destroyed it would not alter his life; in all that is noble, civilised, and enlightened, he is a Secularist, though he professes to follow the *dicta* of an ancient book. If Secularism were destroyed civilisation would be destroyed; if Christianity were dead the world in a few years would no more miss it than it misses the religion of the ancient Britons (Symes 1879, 327).

Symes' argument echoed Besant's (1875) declaration that the Christian is unconsciously a utilitarian. Symes made this case even more forcefully by declaring that the Christian was in all that substantially mattered, already necessarily a Secularist. However, the foundational point remained: the scientific morality, founded upon utilitarianism and named Secularism, was the *real* realm of moral thought.

While Bradlaugh and Holyoake's gestures toward intuitionism must be taken seriously, indications of non-utilitarian thinking tend to appear as partial or contradictory invocations in the works of both figures. Bradlaugh is a good case study. In 1861, he took part in two debates with the Rev. Woodville Woodman. The first debate was held between February 18 and 21 and published as *The Existence of God: A Discussion Between Rev. Woodville Woodman and "Iconoclast"* (Woodman and "Iconoclast" 1861a). The latter was held between October 21 and 29, and published as *Is the Bible a Divine Revelation?* (Woodman and "Iconoclast" 1861b). In the latter debate, Bradlaugh defended a notion of truth that could imply an intuitionist perspective. He argued: "that is right which tells you to practice, wisdom, truth, honesty, and virtue; not because God says it, or because the devil waits on you if you don't; but because it is good and right to do it" (1861b, 89). Bradlaugh does not,

in this passage, explain from where this view of the good arises except to declare that his church of humanity worships at the "temple of reason, the temple of fact" (1861b, 89). However, in the report of the preceding debate from February, Bradlaugh's understanding of fact and truth is clearer. In the opening exchanges of the debate he forthrightly rejects Woodman's "God-idea" by insisting that "I do not admit that man has got any ideas except such as are the result from the appearance of his sensitive faculties" (1861a, 8). It is unlikely that Bradlaugh underwent a substantial transformation in his epistemological outlook in the intervening months between the debates. The apparent invocation of intuitionist doctrines is more likely to be a rhetorical flourish than a substantial rethinking of the foundations of Secularist belief.

Watts' *Secular Review* presented a characterization of morality that demonstrates the continuity in moral thought between the Bradlaugh and Holyoake branches of freethought. The founding principles of the B.S.U. stated that "human improvement and happiness" were the primary goals of the society. Therefore, "that conduciveness to human welfare is the criterion of morality, and its determination is independent of any supernatural belief" (*Secular Review and Secularist* 1877, 230). The ends of morality remained located in this world. The key distinction was the explicit effort to distinguish Secularism from the reality or non-reality of God:

Secularism intrinsically does not contend against the Existence of the Deity, but against dishonouring conceptions thereof; not against the Inspiration of Scripture, but against the binding force of what is inapplicable to human welfare; not against a Future Existence, but against the idea of it which excludes the hope of improvement and honestly-earned happiness (*Secular Review and Secularist* 1877, 230).

The question of the necessity of unbelief remained the major point of distinction between those Secularists who followed Bradlaugh, and insisted on the necessity of atheism, and those who followed Holyoake. However, the tension appeared in many ways to be one of degree rather than real difference. Holyoake and the B.S.U. represented Secularism as an independent category, separate from religion. By rendering Secularism independent of theological questions, Holyoake denied the necessity of conflict between Secularism and religiosity, while Bradlaugh tackled this conflict head on.

Conclusion

The moral theory of the Secularists retained a high degree of unity despite the schism of the 1870s. There were significant disagreements over matters of tactics, respectability, and the problems of moral conduct. We must not dismiss their significance. Many freethinkers saw these disagreements as vitally important. Mill criticized Holyoake for his conservatism in matters of sexuality in an 1848 letter, stating: "the root of my difference with you is that you appear to accept the present constitution of the

family and the whole of the priestly morality founded on and connected with it" (1848, n.p.). Despite their differences, all Secularists remained committed to a scientific, empirically grounded system of morality. Ultimately, the Christian moral system was deemed inferior to the higher, more scientific moral system of Secularism. The project of Secularism depended upon an expansive view of morality. The "party of experience" thus sought the empirical data of utilitarian morality, data that the Secularist was obligated to disseminate:

Let Secularists take measures to compile a liturgy that shall really prove to be a public service and a benefit to the world. Such a book is all the more necessary, because public morality—despite the stale platitudes of the Christian Press and Christian Pulpit—clearly stands in need of what Professor Huxley considers a necessity—namely, to be 'governed and guided' by some high standard of ethics. There is not a Christian country in the world that is not infinitely inferior in temperance, probity, and purity to many 'heathen' lands we could name. The Secular Reformation is not to be confined to emancipating the world from the thralldom of priests and their evil inventions; it aims at providing man with a rule of life by which that life shall be made happy, benevolent, and good; and this rule or system can only be derived from the cumulative knowledge and wisdom of teachers of every age and every clime (MacHugh 1879, 82).

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