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Gandhi, Newton and the Enlightenment¹

Akeel Bilgrami

Salman Rushdie once said, no doubt under duress, that secular humanism was itself a religion, thereby selling short both religion and secular humanism in one breath. I reckon (this is a conjecture) that he made that equation so that he could repudiate the charge of apostasy. One cannot, after all, be committing apostasy if one is only opposing one religion with another. Under the threat of execution, one may be allowed a confused thought, but with a clear mind no one with even a vestigial understanding of the mentalities and the realities of religion or the aspirations of secular humanism would be tempted by Rushdie's equation.

Though his equation itself may be quite wrong, I do now want to briefly pursue with some variation, a theme it opens up.

What I want to ask is really a familiar question, and trace some of the philosophical attitudes and intellectual history that make it familiar, the question whether there can be in the secular a form of continuity with something in the religious, in my view a continuity which actually stood for a particular form of humane radical politics that was very early on thwarted by a very specific notion of scientific rationality, which in this lecture I will call a "thick" notion of scientific rationality. By constantly appealing to this notion of scientific rationality, a dominant orthodox strand in thinking about the Enlightenment has consistently tarnished a certain kind of radical questioning of this orthodoxy with charges of irrationalism. It is worth exposing a sleight of hand in all this.

A good place to begin is with Gandhi, a humanist and secularist yet by open declaration opposed to the Enlightenment and also avowedly a Hindu, even if by the lights of high Hinduism, a highly heterodox one. I will be focusing (and focusing selectively) only on Gandhi's thought and writing and not his political interventions during the long freedom movement. What Gandhi says about the Enlightenment as well as, what he often omnibusly called, "the West," relates closely to his view of science.

In careless moments, Gandhi often said that it was a *predisposition* of science from its earliest days that it would lead to a way of thinking that was disastrous for politics and culture in ways that he outlined in great detail. This notion of a predisposition is obscure because general claims about the predispositions of something like science (something that is at once a theoretical pursuit as well as a practice, something that is defined in terms that are at once conceptual, methodological, and institutional) are hard to pin down and study, let alone confirm or refute, if they are intended to be empirical hypotheses. So, in this

lecture, I will instead sympathetically read his hunch about such a predisposition by situating it in a certain intellectual history. At the end of this exercise, it will emerge that a far better way to put his point would be in terms, not of an empirical hypothesis about 'science' as a self-standing human cognitive enterprise, but rather to see it as a critique of a certain very specific notion of scientific 'rationality'.

The notion of rationality as it governed our thought about history and politics and culture has in the past—famously—taken an idealized form, with a progressivist or developmental, conception of these subjects; and for a few decades now that has been under a thoroughly critical scrutiny, as is the notion of modernity with which it is so often coupled. Much more often than not the *telos* that defines the progressivist trajectory is in terms of an envisaged ideal or *end-point* and the dialectic by which the end is (or is to be) realized is the large subject of the relevant historiography. Yet it is sometimes more fruitful to focus on the *beginnings* of such a sequence, since it may give a more truthful sense of the notions of rationality that are at stake than those defined by an idealized statement of the normative end. So I will argue.

In general, a sequence, especially when it is consecutively narrativized and dialectically and cumulatively conceived, as progressive ideals are bound to conceive it, cannot have started from the beginning of thought and culture itself. If a sequence is to aspire to conceptual and cultural significance (as the very idea of progress suggests) it cannot have *its* beginnings at the very beginning of conceptual and cultural life. That would trivialize things — evacuate the notion of sequence of any of the substance and significance that progressivist narrative aspires to. It cannot be that we have been converging on this significant end from the random inceptions of our intellectual and cultural existence. One assumes rather that there were many strands at the outset, endless false leads, but then at some point (what I am calling the *beginning* of the progressivist trajectory) we got *set* on a path, which we think of as the *right* path, from which point on the idea of *cumulative* steps towards a broadly specifiable end began to make sense, a path of *convergence* towards that end. Accumulation and convergence, then, don't start at the beginning of thought, but rather they start at some juncture that we think of as the *start* onto a *right* path.

This has many implications for historiography, some of them highly critical. Just to give you one example, I think, it implies a real difficulty for philosophers such as Hilary Putnam when they say that scientific realism is true because it is the only explanation of the fact that there is a *convergence* in scientific theories—that is to say, the posits of science must be real because it is only their reality which would explain the *cumulative* nature of the claims of scientific theories over time. What is the difficulty with this that I have in mind? It is this. Here too, the fact is that these converging and cumulative trends have not existed since the beginning of theorizing about nature. In fact Putnam would be the

first to say that it is only sometime in the seventeenth century that we were set on the right path in science and from then on there has been a convergence that is best explained by the corresponding reality of what the converging scientific theories posit. But now a question arises. *What makes it the case that that is when we were set on the right path? What is the notion of rightness, here? If we have an answer to this last question (about what makes the path the right path at that starting point), then that notion of rightness would already have established scientific realism and we don't need to wheel in scientific realism to explain the subsequent convergence.*

Well, my subject is not the merits of such well known arguments nor even scientific realism but the point I am making is generalizable to efforts that characterize modernity in progressivist terms, indeed it is even generalizable to interesting recent efforts to characterize modernity in sequential terms that are *not* progressivist.¹ These too cannot avoid the hard question of the sequence's starting point, which may have the greater power to illuminate than the sequence itself.

So let me explore these beginnings briefly by recording the detailed affinities between Gandhi's ideas about science and the metaphysical and political and cultural anxieties that first surfaced at the very site and time of the new science as it first began to be formulated in the seventeenth century in the West. There are many passages in Gandhi's dispatches to *Young India* and also in some passages in his book *Hind Swaraj*² that suggest a line of argument something like this.

Sometime in the seventeenth century we were set on a path in which we were given the intellectual sanction to see nature as—to use a Weberian notion—“disenchanted.” This coincided with the period of the great revolutionary changes in scientific theory, so Gandhi crudely equated it with science itself and its newly and self-consciously formulated experimental methods. And he saw in it a conception of nature whose pursuit left us disengaged from nature as a habitat, and which instead engendered a zeal to control it rather than merely live in it. And my claim is that these criticisms by Gandhi have extraordinarily close and striking antecedents in a tradition of thought that goes all the way back to the second half of the seventeenth century in England and then elsewhere in Europe, *simultaneous* with the great scientific achievements of that time. It goes back, that is, to just the time and the place when the outlook of scientific “rationality” that many place at the defining centre of what they call the “West,” was being formed, and it is that very outlook with its threatening cultural and political consequences that is the target of that early critique.

It should be said emphatically right at the outset that the achievements of the “new science” of the seventeenth century were neither denied nor opposed by the critique I have in mind, and so the critique cannot be dismissed as Luddite reaction to the new science, as Gandhi's critique is bound to seem, coming

centuries later, when the science is no longer “new” and its effects on our lives, which the earlier critique was warning against, seem like a *fait accompli*. What the critique opposed was a development in outlook that emerged in the philosophical surround of the scientific achievements. In other words, what it opposed was just the notion of what I am calling a “thick” rationality that is often described in glowing terms today as “scientific rationality.” What do I have in mind by calling it a “thick” notion (a term I am recognizably borrowing from Clifford Geertz)?

To put a range of complex, interweaving themes in the crudest summary, the dispute was about the very nature of nature and matter and, relatedly therefore, about the role of the deity, and of the broad cultural and political implications of the different views on these metaphysical and religious concerns. The metaphysical picture that was promoted by Newton (the official Newton of the Royal Society, not the neo-Platonist of his private study) and Boyle, among others, viewed matter and nature as *brute and inert*. On this view, since the material universe was brute, God was *externally* conceived with all the familiar metaphors of the “clock winder” giving the universe a push from the *outside* to get it in motion. In the dissenting tradition—which was a *scientific* tradition, for there was in fact no disagreement between it and Newton/Boyle on any serious detail of the scientific laws, and all the fundamental notions such as gravity, for instance, were perfectly in place, though given a quite different metaphysical interpretation—matter was *not* brute and inert, but rather was shot through with an *inner* source of dynamism responsible for motion, that was itself divine. God and nature were not separable as in the official metaphysical picture that was growing around the new science, and John Toland, for instance, to take just one example among the active dissenting voices, openly wrote in terms he proclaimed to be “pantheistic.”³

The link with Gandhi in all this is vivid. One absolutely central claim of the freethinkers of this period was about the political and cultural significance of their disagreements with the fast developing metaphysical orthodoxy of the “Newtonians.” Just as Gandhi did, they argued that it is only because one takes matter to be “brute” and “stupid,” to use Newton’s own terms, that one would find it appropriate to conquer it with nothing but profit and material wealth as ends, and thereby destroy it both as a natural and a human environment for one’s habitation. In today’s terms, one might think that this point was a seventeenth century predecessor to our ecological concerns but though there certainly was an early instinct of that kind, it was embedded in a much more general point (as it was with Gandhi too), a point really about how nature in an ancient and spiritually flourishing sense was being threatened and how therefore this was in turn threatening to our moral psychology of engagement with it, including the relations and engagement among ourselves as its inhabitants.

Today, the most thoroughly and self-consciously secular sensibilities may recoil from the term “spiritually,” as I have just deployed it, though I must confess to

finding myself feeling no such self-consciousness despite being a secularist, indeed an atheist. The real point has nothing to do with these rhetorical niceties. If one had no use for the word, if one insisted on having the point made with words that we today can summon with confidence and accept without qualm, it would do no great violence to the core of their thinking to say this: the dissenters thought of the *world* not as brute but as *suffused with value*. That they happened to think the source of such value was divine ought not to be the deepest point of interest for us. The point rather is that if it were laden with *value*, it would make *normative* (ethical and social) demands on one, whether one was religious or not, normative demands therefore that did not come merely from our own instrumentalities and subjective utilities. And it is this sense of forming commitments by taking in, *in our perceptions*, an evaluatively “enchanted” world which-being enchanted in this way-*therefore moved* us to normatively constrained *engagement* with it, that the dissenters contrasted with the outlook that was being offered by the ideologues of the new science.⁴ A brute and disenchanting world could not move us to any such engagement since any perception of it, given the sort of thing it was, would necessarily be a *detached* form of observation; and if one ever came out of this detachment, if there was ever any engagement with a world so distantly conceived, so external to our own sensibility, it could only take the form of mastery and control of something alien, with a view to satisfying the only source of value allowed by this outlook—our own utilities and gain.

We are much used to the lament that we have long been living in a world governed by overwhelmingly commercial motives. What I have been trying to do is to trace this (just as Gandhi did) to its deepest *conceptual* sources and that is why the seventeenth century is so central to a proper understanding of this world. Familiarly drawn connections and slogans, like “Religion and the Rise of Capitalism”, are only the beginning of such a tracing.

In his probing book, *A Grammar of Motives*, Kenneth Burke says that “the experience of an impersonal outlook was empirically intensified in proportion as the rationale of the monetary motive gained greater authority....”⁵ This gives us a glimpse of the sources. As he says, one had to have an impersonal angle on the world to see it as the source of profit and gain, and vice versa. But I have claimed that the sources go deeper. It is only when we see the world as Boyle and Newton did, as against the freethinkers and dissenters, that we understand further why there was no option but this impersonality in our angle on the world. A desacralized world, to put it in the dissenting terms of that period, left us no other angle from which to view it, but an impersonal one. There could be no normative constraint coming upon us from a world that was brute. It could not move us to engagement with it on *its* terms. All the term-making came from us. We could bring whatever terms we wished to such a world; and since we could only regard it impersonally, it being brute, the terms we brought in our

actions upon it were just the terms that Burke describes as accompanying such impersonality, the terms of “the monetary” motives for our actions. Thus it is, that the metaphysical issues regarding the world and nature, as they were debated around the new science, provide the deepest conceptual sources.

The conceptual sources that we have traced are various but they were *not* miscellaneous. The diverse conceptual elements of religion, capital, nature, metaphysics, rationality, science, were *tied together* in a highly *deliberate* integration, that is to say in deliberately accruing worldly *alliances*. Newton’s and Boyle’s metaphysical view of the new science won out over the freethinkers’ and became official only because it was sold to the Anglican establishment and, in an alliance with that establishment, to the powerful mercantile and incipient industrial interests of the period in thoroughly predatory terms—terms which stressed that how we conceive nature may now be transformed into something, into the *kind* of thing, that is indefinitely available for our economic gain by processes of extraction, processes such as mining, deforestation, plantation agriculture intended essentially as what we today would call “agrobusiness.” None of these processes could have taken on the *unthinking* and yet *systematic* prevalence that they first began to get in this period unless one had ruthlessly revised existing ideas of a world animated by a divine presence. From an *anima mundi*, one could not simply proceed to take at whim and will. Not that one could not or did not, till then, take at all. But in the past in a wide range of social worlds, such taking as one did had to be accompanied by ritual offerings of reciprocation which were intended to show respect towards as well to restore the balance in nature, offerings made both before and after cycles of planting, and even hunting. The point is that, in general, the revision of such an age-old conception of nature was achieved in tandem with a range of seemingly miscellaneous elements that were brought together in terms that stressed a future of endlessly profitable consequences that would accrue if one embraced this particular metaphysics of the new science and built, in the name of a notion of rationality around it, the institutions of an increasingly centralized political oligarchy (an incipient state) and an established religious orthodoxy of Anglicanism that had penetrated the universities as well, to promote these very specific interests. These were the very terms that the freethinkers found alarming for politics and culture, alarming for the local and egalitarian ways of life that some decades earlier the radical elements in the English Revolution such as the Levellers, Diggers, Quakers, Ranters, and other groups had articulated and fought for. Gandhi, much later, spoke in political terms that were poignantly reminiscent of these radical sectaries and, in *Hind Swaraj* and other writings, he wrote about science and its relations to these political terms in ways that echoed the alarm of the somewhat later scientific dissenters.

These scientific dissenters themselves often openly avowed that they had

inherited the political attitudes of these radical sectaries in England of about fifty years earlier and appealed to their instinctive, hermetic, neo-Platonist, and sacralized views of nature, defending them against the conceptual assaults of the official Newton/Boyle view of matter. In fact, the natural philosophies of Anthony Collins and John Toland and his Socratic Brotherhood (and their counterparts in the Netherlands drawing inspiration from Spinoza's pantheism, and spreading to France and elsewhere in Europe, and then, when strongly opposed, going into secretive Masonic Lodges and other underground movements) were in many details anticipated by the key figures of the radical groups in that most dynamic period of English history, the 1640s, which had enjoyed hitherto unparalleled freedom of publication for about a decade or more to air their subversive and egalitarian views based on a quite different conception of nature. Gerard Winstanley, the most well known among them, declared that "God is in all motion" and "the truth is hid in every *body*" (my italics).⁶ This way of thinking about the corporeal realm had for Winstanley, as he puts it, a great "leveling purpose." It allowed one to lay the ground, first of all, for a democratization of religion. If God was everywhere, then anyone may perceive the divine or find the divine within him or her, and therefore may be just as able to preach as a university-trained divine. But the opposition to the monopoly of so-called experts was intended to be more general than in just the religious sphere. Through their myriad polemical and instructional pamphlets, figures such as Winstanley, John Lilburne, Richard Overton, and others reached out and created a radical rank and file population which began to demand a variety of other things, including an elimination of tithes, a leveling of the legal sphere by a decentralizing of the courts and the elimination of feed lawyers, as well as the democratization of medicine by drastically reducing, if not eliminating, the costs of medicine, and disallowing canonical and monopoly status to the College of Physicians. The later scientific dissenters were very clear too that these were the very monopolies and undemocratic practices and institutions which would get entrenched if science, conceived in terms of the Newtonianism of the Royal Society, had its ideological victory.

Equally, that is to say, conversely, the Newtonian ideologues of the Royal Society around the Boyle lectures started by Samuel Clarke saw themselves – without remorse – in just these conservative terms that the dissenters portrayed them in. They explicitly called Toland and a range of other dissenters, "enthusiasts" (a term of opprobrium at the time) and feared that their alternative picture of matter was an intellectual ground for the social unrest of the pre-Restoration period when the radical sectaries had such great, if brief and aborted, popular reach. They were effective in creating with the Anglican establishment a general conviction that the entire polity would require orderly rule by a state apparatus around a monarch serving the propertied classes and that this was just a mundane reflection, indeed a mundane *version*, of an *externally* imposed divine authority which kept

a universe of brute matter in orderly motion, rather than an *immanently* present God in all matter and in all persons, inspiring them with the enthusiasms to turn the “world upside down,” in Christopher Hill’s memorable, eponymous phrase. To see God in every body and piece of matter, they anxiously argued, was to lay oneself open to a polity and a set of civic and religious institutions that were beholden to popular rather than scriptural and learned judgement and opinion. They were just as effective in forging with the commercial interests over the next century, the idea that a respect for a sacralized universe would be an obstacle to taking with impunity what one could from nature’s bounty. By their lights, the only obstacles that now needed to be acknowledged and addressed had to do with the difficulties of mobilizing towards an economy geared to profit. No other factors of a more metaphysical and ideological kind should be allowed to interfere with these pursuits once *nature* had been transformed in our consciousness to a set of impersonally perceived “*natural resources*.”

It was this scientific rationality, seized upon by just these established religious and economic alliances, that was later central to the colonizing mentality that justified the rapacious conquest of distant lands. The justification was merely an extension of the connections that I have outlined to colonized lands, which too were to be viewed as brute nature that was available for conquest and control—but only *so long as one was able to portray the inhabitants of the colonized lands in infantilized terms*, as a people who were as yet unprepared—by precisely a *mental lack* of such a notion of *scientific rationality*—to have the right attitudes towards nature and commerce and the statecraft that allows nature to be pursued for commercial gain. It is this integral linking of the new science through its metaphysics with these attitudes that I am calling the “thick” notion of scientific rationality.

There is a fair amount of historical literature by now on the intellectual rationalizations of colonialism, but I have introduced the salient points of an *earlier pre-colonial period’s* critique here in order to point out that Gandhi’s criticisms had a very long and recognizable tradition going back to the seventeenth century *in the heart of the West* which anticipated in detail and with thoroughly honourable intent, those lamentable developments around the thick notion of scientific rationality. What he called, perhaps confusedly, a ‘predisposition’ of science itself, is exactly what was being expressed in these prescient anxieties that these early freethinkers were voicing about how these alliances around a certain outlook generated by the new science was “thickening” what should otherwise have been an innocuous (and “thin”) conception of science and rationality.

Once that point is brought on to center stage, a standard strategy of the orthodox Enlightenment against fundamental criticisms raised against it, it is exposed as defensive posturing. It would be quite wrong and anachronistic to dismiss this initial and early intellectual and perfectly *scientific* source of critique, from which later critiques of the Enlightenment derived, as being

irrational, unless one is committed to a very specific orthodox understanding of the Enlightenment, of the sort I am inveighing against. It is essential to the argument of this lecture that far from being anti-Enlightenment, Gandhi's early antecedents in the West, going back to the seventeenth century and in recurring heterodox traditions in the West since then, constitute what is, and rightly has been, called "the Radical *Enlightenment*."⁷ To dismiss its pantheistic tendencies that I cited, as being unscientific and in violation of norms of rationality, would be to run together in a blatant slippage the general and "thin" use of terms like "scientific" and "rational" with just this "thick" notion of scientific rationality that we have identified above, which had the kind of politically and culturally disastrous consequences that the early dissenters were so jittery about. The appeal to scientific rationality as a defining feature of our modernity trades constantly on just such a slippage, subliminally appealing to the hurrah element of the general and "thin" terms "rational" and "scientific," which we all applaud, to tarnish critics of the Enlightenment such as Gandhi, while ignoring the fact that the in their critique the opposition is to the thicker notion of scientific rationality, that was defined in terms of very specific scientific, religious, and commercial alliances.

Were we to apply the *thin* conception of "scientific" and "rationality" (the one that I imagine most of us in this room embrace), the plain fact is that *nobody* in that period was, in any case, getting prizes for leaving God out of the world-view of science. That one should think of God as voluntaristically affecting nature from the outside (as the Newtonians did) rather than sacralizing it from within (as the freethinkers insisted), was not in any way to improve on the *science* involved. Both views were therefore just as "unscientific," just as much in violation of scientific rationality, in the "thin" sense of that term that we would now take for granted. What was in dispute had nothing to do with science or rationality in that attenuated sense at all. What the early dissenting tradition as well as Gandhi were opposed to is the *metaphysical* orthodoxy that grew around Newtonian science and its implications for broader issues of *culture and politics*. This orthodoxy with all of its implications is what has now come to be called "scientific rationality" in the "thick" sense of that term and in the pervasive cheerleading about "the West" and about the "Enlightenment." It has been elevated into a defining ideal, dismissing all opposition as irrationalist, with the hope that accusations of irrationality, because of the *general* stigma that the term imparts in its "*thin*" usage, will disguise the very specific and "thick" sense of rationality and irrationality that are actually being deployed by the opposition. Such (thick) *irrationalism* is precisely what the dissenters yearned for; and hindsight shows just how admirable a yearning it was.

So the dismissals of Gandhi's critique of the Enlightenment ideals as a kind of irrationalism and nostalgia have blinded us to making explicit the interpretative

possibilities for some of his thinking that are opened up by noting his affinities with a longstanding, dissenting tradition in the most radical period in English history. I am not suggesting for a moment that what was radical then could be retained without remainder as being radical today or even at the time when Gandhi was articulating his critique. But I *am* saying that it opens up liberating interpretative options for how to read Gandhi as being continuous with a tradition that was clear-eyed about what was implied by the “disenchantment” of the world, to stay with the Weberian term. It is a tradition consisting not just of Gandhi and the early seventeenth century freethinkers, but any number of remarkable literary and philosophical voices in between such as Blake, Shelley, Godwin, not all of Marx, but one strand in Marx, William Morris, Whitman and Dewey in this country, and countless voices of the non-traditional Left, from the freemasons in the early eighteenth century down to the heterodox Left in our own time, voices such as those of E.P. Thompson and Noam Chomsky, and the vast army of heroic but anonymous organizers of popular grass roots movements—in a word, the West as conceived by the “radical” Enlightenment which has refused to be complacent about the orthodox Enlightenment’s legacy of scientific rationality that the early dissenters in England had warned against well over three centuries ago.

To move away now from the specific sacralized formulations of Gandhi and his antecedents in intellectual history, we should be asking in a much more general way, what their view amounts to, once we acknowledge that we have our own intellectual demands for more secular formulations. This is a tractable, historically situated, version of the question I began with: is there something interesting in the secular that is continuous with something in the religious? Even so situated, it is a very large question which requires a far more detailed inquiry than I can give in the little while I have left of what is already quite a long lecture, but I do want to say something now to give at least a very general and preliminary philosophical sense of what I think is the right direction for its answer.

I had said earlier that our own secular ways of re-enchanting a world made brute by the rampant adoption of the ideologies around the thick notion of scientific rationality, turns on seeing the world as “suffused with value,” without any compulsion to see this as having its source in the pantheistic terms of a divinity.

Here, then, is how I’ve allowed myself to think towards that idea. Spinoza, in a profound insight, pointed out that one cannot both intend to do something and predict that one will do it, *at the same time*. Predicting what one will do is done from a detached point of view, when one as it were steps outside of oneself and looks at oneself as others would, from a *third* person point of view. But intending is done from the *first* person point of view of agency itself. And we

cannot occupy both points of view on ourselves at once. *Now*, I want to claim that there ought to be an *exactly similar distinction*, not on the points of view that we have *on ourselves* that were Spinoza's concern, but on the points of view we have *on the world*. The world *too* can be seen from a detached, third person or an engaged, first person point of view. And it is the availability of the world to us through its *value* properties (which move us to our first personal engagement with it) that provides the minimal continuity with the sacralized picture ~the rest of which we cannot find palatable any longer.

Thus putting it in the most abjectly simple terms, one might for instance find, from a certain perspective of the study of populations and disease and so on, that this or that segment of a population has a certain average daily caloric intake and that they, as a result, die of old age at an average in their late forties, a metaphor for their malnutrition. But that is only one perspective that I could take on the matter, one of detached, roughly scientific, study. I could then switch perspectives and see those very people as being in *need*. And the crucial point is that need a *value* notion quite unlike the notions of caloric counts and, therefore, it makes *normative* demands on me. To view the world from this quite other perspective is, as I said earlier, to view it from the point of view of engagement rather than detachment. To be able to perceive the evaluative aspects of the world, one therefore has to possess agency, one has to have the capacity to respond to its normative force. In fact, we *experience* ourselves as agents partly *in* the perceptions of such a value-laden world.

Our agency and the evaluative enchantment of the world, then, are inseparably linked. That is why Spinoza's insight about ourselves can be extended outwards onto the world. In a long and unsatisfactory philosophical tradition of moral psychology (deriving from philosophers such as Hume and Adam Smith), values are said to be given to us in our desires and moral sentiments. This is precisely the tradition that leaves out the evaluative properties from being in the world to which our agency responds. So here, then, is the absolutely crucial point. If my extension of Spinoza's point is right, the *objects* of our desires must be *given to us* as *desirable*, that is, as *desirabilities* or value elements in the world itself. If they were not, if their givenness to us was not as "desirable" but as "desired" (as Hume and Adam Smith's moral psychology claims) then they could only be given to us when we step outside of ourselves and perceive what our desires are from the third person point of view. But that is precisely to abdicate our agency, our *first* person point of view. Agency is possible only if we take the desirabilities or evaluative properties in the world itself as *given to us in the experience* of our desires.

I have said that these evaluative properties are contained in the world and can be perceived or apprehended as such. But I have also said that this evaluative aspect of the world is nothing, it is darkness, to subjects that do not possess

agency, a capacity for normative engagement. One reductive confusion to watch out for here is to think that because subjects capable of agency and engagement alone are capable of perceiving values in the world external to them, that values must therefore not be external after all and ultimately come from us. Another-related-confusion is to think that because some people may see some values in the world and others may not (you may see someone as being in need and be moved normatively by it, I may not), it is wrong to think that values are in the world at all and that we respond to them normatively—rather the world is indeed brute and value-free as Newton and Boyle claimed, and it is we who through our moral sentiments make up values and project them differentially onto the world. This is as confused as saying that because observation of things, of objects in the world, is theory-laden, i.e., because when we hold different physical theories we will perceive different objects in the world, we must therefore in some sense be making up objects. These confusions may be natural but they are elementary and are easy to identify and resist.

A more ideological confusion that all this amounts to something unscientific is no less elementary, but being ideological it may be harder to resist. I've said that even irreligious people committed to scientific rationality in the thin sense of the term⁸ can embrace this way of thinking of the enchantment of the world because I insist that there is nothing unscientific about it. To view nature and the world not as brute but as containing value that makes normative demands on our agency is not by any means to be unscientific. It only means that natural science does not have full coverage of nature. In general, it is not unscientific to say that not all themes about nature are scientific themes. It is only unscientific to give unscientific responses to science's themes—as hypotheses about creationism or intelligent of design do (being, as they are, responses to scientific questions about the origins the universe).

The point here is not the point often made by so many that that we do not know very much scientifically. One can say that science knows only a very little bit of what might be known without in any way upsetting the scientific naturalist picture that I think a re-enchantment of nature would and should upset. The point is not just to be humble about how little we have managed to come to know and may ever come to know, but to say that nature consists of more than science (at least as we know and understand it now) can know because it is not the *business* of science to cover all that is *in nature*.

Nor is the point the same as the perfectly good point many have made before which is that science has told us how to study nature but not how to study the human subject. The point is rather that there is no studying what is special about human subjectivity *unless we see nature and the world itself* as often describable in terms that are not susceptible to the kind of inquiry that natural science or even social science provides. There is a revealing point here about someone like Weber

and his legacy. He, among others, is seen as having directed us to what is now fairly widely accepted as an undeniable truth, viz., that what makes the study of *human beings* stand apart from the natural sciences is that such study is “value-laden.” But—bizarrely—he never linked this now familiar point explicitly with his own remarks about the disenchantment of nature. The fact is that there is no understanding what makes the study of human society stand apart by its value ladenness unless we see that fact as being *of a piece* with an equally fundamental insight about a value laden natural and human environment, in virtue of which our agential engagements with it are prompted. Without that further link the insight that the study of human society stands apart from scientific study in its value-ladenness is incomplete, and the claim to the naturalistic irreducibility of the human subject is shallow.

I don’t want to give the slightly misleading impression that *all* I am concerned to deny, in order to gain an enchantment of the world that is continuous with something in the religious, is the scientific picture which has it that *natural* science has total coverage of the world and nature. In fact that will not suffice and that is not all that I am concerned to say. This is because the scientific picture accommodates much more than *natural* science.

Under the influence of a familiar orientation in the social sciences, one might aspire to a certain picture of the world that concedes that one does not have to view it as brute. In other words, one can allow that it may contain more than what *natural* science studies, it contains *opportunities* for us to satisfy our desires. Thus, one might say, if I were to take a purely impersonal and scientific perspective on the world, I would see the water in the glass in front of me as H₂O, but with the social scientific broadening of this perspective to include a certain expanded notion of scientific rationality, one could also see that very glass of water as an *opportunity* to satisfy a desire of mine, to quench my thirst. This loosens things up a bit to allow the world to contain such strange things as opportunities, something the physicist or chemist or biologist would never allow nor could study, since opportunities, whatever they are, are not the subject-matter of these sciences. Rather they are the subject matter of Economics and more broadly the social and behavioral sciences which could now be seen to be, among other things, the science of desire-satisfaction in the light of (probabilistic) apprehension of the desire-satisfying properties in the world, i.e., opportunities that the world provides to satisfy our wants and preferences.

But this is not the loosening up of the world that is needed for a secular *enchantment* of the world that is continuous with the religious. Though it grants that the world is not entirely brute and it grants that the world contains something (opportunities) that escapes the purview of the natural sciences, it doesn’t grant enough. It may be a first step but to stop there is merely to extend the reach of scientific rationality in the thick sense, it is not to show its limitations in

its conception of nature and the world. Nothing short of seeing the world as containing *values* (an older Aristotelian idea, if recent writers such as McDowell read him rightly) does that, for it is values not opportunities that put *moral* demands on us. Thus even if we respond to others with a view to gratifying our moral sentiments of sympathy towards them, we are not quite yet on board with the depth of the demand that a perception of others' needs is the perception of something that puts normative *demands* on our individual and collective agency. It is in this deep respect that Marx's talk of needs in his slogan "From each according to his abilities to each according to his needs" went beyond the moral psychology of Hume and Adam Smith. Perceiving opportunities in the world merely tells us that the world is there for satisfying our desires and preferences, however filled with sympathy for others those desires are, but it doesn't conceive of the desires themselves as responding to what I have described as "*desirabilities*" in the world. This has impoverishing implications for how we can think of more specific questions relevant to politics and political theory, implications I can do no more than hint at here by merely saying that I believe that it is why, for example, the endless bickering within the orthodox enlightenment's framework about the extent to which one may or may not emphasize equality over liberty (or autonomy) cannot *have* an end within that framework precisely because the framework doesn't have the conceptual ingredients to allow even those who favour the emphasis on equality to claim that values like equality are not separable from a fully meaningful *autonomy*, that they are an essential part of one's own *self-realization* (as a result of being moved by an evaluatively enchanted world which our agency collectively inhabits and to whose normative demands our agency responds). In short, equality when it is in concert with a range of other values that the world constrains us with and to which we respond is a value that then becomes an essential part of an *unalienated life*. Nothing short of perceiving in the world values that move our agency to respond in ethical terms, then, will re-enchanted it and help to arrest our alienation from it,⁹ providing the initial steps to a *secular* version of what Gandhi and the freethinkers of the seventeenth century were struggling to find.

That the deliverances of their struggles yielded sacralized and pantheistic conceptions of the world with which we have little sympathy today, does not at all imply that those struggles were not honorable. But to say that their struggles are honorable is to say that they must be the antecedents to our own philosophical struggles to re-characterize the world and nature, and in doing so to reorient our entire range of social scientific and historiographic interests away from the obsessively causal explanatory methods that dominate them. This disciplinary reorientation based on such a re-view of nature may have some chance of laying the ground of resistance to the ubiquitously narrowing effects of the orthodox Enlightenment's legacies not just in the universities but in our moral and political

lives generally.

In a previous essay of mine called “What is a Muslim?”¹⁰ I had tried explicitly to locate the forms of political pacification that come from a loss of agency owing to a picture of things in which a third person, rather than a first person, point of view dominates our conception of *ourselves* and our cultural and political identity. In the present lecture I have tried to integrate those ideas with the politics that grew around the new science for the first time some centuries ago as a result of an increasingly third person conception not of ourselves, but of the *world and nature*. Many more deep connections between metaphysics, moral psychology and politics and culture still need to be drawn which I could not possibly have drawn here and likely don’t have the intellectual powers ever to do, before anything of genuinely theoretical ambition is constructed on the subjects of identity, democratic politics, and disenchantment. But even without them it is possible at least to state the issues and aspirations at stake.

What Gandhi’s and the early freethinkers’ intellectual efforts made *thinkable*, and what I am trying to consolidate in secular terms in my last many remarks, is something that goes measurably beyond what recent scholars have started saying is our best and only bet: the placing of *constraints* on an *essentially utilitarian* framework so as to provide for a social democratic safety net for the worst off. Salutory though the idea of such a safety net is (how could it fail to be given the wretched conditions of the worst off?), it is a project of limited ambition, in which Adam Smith and Hume remain the heroes and Condorcet (among others) is wheeled in as the radical who proposed the sort of requisite constraints we need. In a recent book, Gareth Stedman Jones,¹¹ chastened by the failures to put into practice more ambitious intellectual frameworks, comes to just these modest conclusions about our world as we have inherited it from these more ambitious theories and their failures. By contrast, the heroes of this lecture, Gandhi and the key dissenting figures of the 17th century, through whose lens I have been reading him, wanted it to be at least thinkable that that world could be “turned upside down” –not entirely, not all at once, but in places where the reach of thick rationality has not been comprehensive and where there might be scope for some reversal and re-enchantment. Gandhi in many of his writings had nobly aspired to the argument that India as it first struggled for its freedom and then later came to be poised to gain independence from colonial rule, was just such a place.

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Notes

¹ This is a transcription of a public lecture that Akeel Bilgrami gave under the auspices of the Center for Philosophic Exchange at The College at Brockport, State University of New York, on October 11, 2007.

² For a very interesting such effort see Sudipta Kaviraj's "An Outline of a Revisionist Theory of Modernity", *European Journal of Sociology*, 2006

³ M.K.Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1997)

⁴ In a series of works, starting with *Christianity Not Mysterious* in 1696, more explicitly pantheistic in statement in the discussion of Spinoza in *Letters to Serena* (1704) and then in the late work *Pantheisticon* (1724). These writings are extensively discussed in Margaret Jacob's extremely useful treatment *The Radical Enlightenment* (George Allen and Unwin, 1981). In case it is a source of confusion, I should make clear that the metaphysical and scientific debate about the nature of matter and nature, whose centrality I am insisting on, should not be confused with another debate of that time, perhaps a more widely discussed one, regarding the "general concourse," which had to do with whether or not the deity was needed after the first formation of the universe, to keep it from falling apart. In that debate, Boyle, in fact, wrote against the Deists, arguing in favour of the "general concourse" of a continually active God. But both sides of that dispute take God to be external to a brute nature, which was mechanically conceived, unlike Toland and his "Socratic Brotherhood" and the dissenting tradition I am focusing on, who denied it was brute and denied that God stood apart from nature, making only external interventions. The dispute about "general concourse" was only about whether the interventions from the outside of an externally conceived God were or were not needed after the original creative intervention.

⁵ I have written at greater length about this conception of the world as providing normative constraints upon us and the essential links that such a conception of the world has with our capacities for free agency and self-knowledge, thereby making both freedom and self-knowledge thoroughly normative notions, in my book *Self-Knowledge and Resentment*, chapters 4 and 5, (in press, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press). For the idea that values are perceptible external qualities, see John McDowell's pioneering essay, "Values and Secondary Qualities" in *Morality and Objectivity*, edited by Ted Honderich (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

⁶ University of California Press, 1969.

⁷ Cited by Christopher Hill in his *The World Turned Upside Down* (Penguin, 1975) p. 293, from *The Works of Gerard Winstanley*, edited by G.H. Sabine (Cornell University Press, 1941).

⁸ See Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans*, (George, Allen and Unwin, 1981.)

⁹ By rationality in the “thin” sense I mean just the standard codifications of deductive rationality and inductive rationality or confirmation theory, and decision theory.

¹⁰ Actually the relation between opportunities in the world and values in the world is a close, complicated and interesting one. It is arguable that values in the world cannot be acted on unless we also see the world as containing opportunities. All that I am opposing is that it is sufficient to repudiate the picture of a brute nature and world by pointing out that the world contains opportunities. I am not denying that seeing the world as containing opportunities is necessary for that repudiation.

¹¹ See “What is a Muslim”, *Critical Inquiry*, Summer 1992.

¹² Gareth Stedman Jones, *An End to Poverty? A Historical Debate* (Columbia University Press, 2005).