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August 17, 2011: Check Out James Wood on The Joy of Secularism

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Title: Check Out James Wood on The Joy of Secularism

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8/17/2011—Critic at Large James Wood reviews the new book, *The Joy of Secularism*, in *The New Yorker*. Take a look [here](#). Wood shows the difference between secularism and hallowed secularism. Wood begins with the questions of a friend: “How can it be that this world is the result of an accidental big bang? How could there be no design, no metaphysical purpose? Can it be that every life—beginning with my own, my husband’s, my child’s, and spreading outward—is cosmically irrelevant?” He then adds, “atheists are not supposed to have such thoughts.” Wood points out that religious believers entertain the same doubts. The question, why, is not very different from Job’s “Why Lord?” The problem is, and it is the problem this book is supposed to address, that modern humans find it hard to experience spiritual fullness. But the book fails, for reasons Wood identifies and does not identify. One failing of the book is that apparently it is still very much about religion, which should no longer be the point. Another is that Wood identifies Weber’s “enchantment” with spiritual fullness and then writes that it would be dangerous for secularism to try to fulfill this loss. That would make secularism merely upbeat and vacuously “positive,” he writes. The emphasis of the book is on human autonomy, but for various reasons, that heroic humanist story—man asserting his own values—does not work either. Evolutionary biology has robbed humanity of even that myth. Unfortunately, Wood ends his essay with the proposal of Thomas Nagel that “we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.” And this is where thoughtful secularists often end up. But I remind the reader of a different promise: “Wouldn’t you like to live your life abundantly? You and your family? Why don’t you?” The promise of hallowed secularism is that the joy and sorrow—and meaning—of religious life is not out of reach simply because we do not believe in the supernatural God.