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### January 18, 2012: But Why Can't People Just Practice a Scientific Way of Life?

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Title: But Why Can't People Just Practice a Scientific Way of Life?

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1/18/2011—I was talking to members of the Center for Inquiry in Pittsburgh about the power of religion, and its capacity to promote healthy ways of life, when someone asked the above question, why can't we all practice science? I answered that the practice of science is inevitably only for an elite, not for everybody. I couldn't practice it, for example. I have been reflecting on this question, which now seems to me to be central to the implications of the growth of secularism. What would it mean to "practice" science as a way of life? In the final scene of the comic book about Richard Feynman by Jim Ottaviani, (as told by Freeman Dyson in the New York Review of Books, July 14, 2011) "Feynman is walking on a mountain trail with his friend Danny Hillis. Hillis says, 'I'm sad because you're going to die.' Feynman replies, 'Yeah, that bugs me sometimes too. But not as much as you think. See, when you get as old as I am, you start to realize that you've told most of the good stuff you know to other people anyway. Hey! I bet I can show you a better way home.' And Hillis is left alone on the mountain." Telling good stuff you know to others is the life of a teacher. And it is a way of life, maybe even a scientific way of life. And it is perhaps open to more people than I would have thought. But now consider the work of the writer Ann Beattie, reviewed in that same issue by Meghan O'Rourke. Listen to the wistfulness in the following: "[T]he recent stories may be less radical than Beattie's earlier work, but they also feel more substantial—full as ever of the old wit, they wrestle more openly with stark, affecting situations of loss, as the characters deal with a parent's dementia (in 'The Rabbit Hole as Likely Explanation') or the death of a spouse (in 'Coping Stones'). The men in 'The Confidence Decoy' and 'Coping Stones,' alone and heading into their late years, are trying to figure out something about themselves. In 'Coping Stones,' Cahill, an aging widower in Maine, discovers that his tenant (who has become a friend) is a child molester. It's a crushing blow, and after his tenant is put in jail, Cahill reflects honestly on his own life, and his wife's complaints that he never really 'got involved': 'The sadness of family life. The erosion of love until only a little rim was left, and that, too, eventually crumbled. Rationalization: he had been no worse a father than many. No worse than a mediocre husband. That old saying about not being able to pick your family until you married and had your own...' " Alone and aging. That is when the stories that religion tells and the community that it builds can bring some measure of peace with our human lives. This is what secularists dismissingly call "comfort." But I doubt we are going to get very far as a civilization without something like it.