

adequate reasons for the existence of a transcendent being (a creative intelligence) radically different in kind from any mundane (physical) reality, and accessible *via* the scientific methods used to investigate other aspects of our world. Kitcher's atheistic (or more properly agnostic) stance, however, does not consist in an active disbelief. He proposes to see both science and religion as equally progressive, developing factually superior descriptions and explanations as well as enhanced ways of responding to the human condition. A secularist – remembering the history of inquiries into the natural world – should remain open to the theistic thesis because our inquiry, “even at its most rigorous, is fallible. Future generations may revise claims we take to be firmly established.” A secularist should not categorically deny the possibility of the transcendent because he cannot exclude the possibility that some future extension of methods, recognized today as reliable, will disclose a type of entity different from other aspects of reality that will entail a conceptual revision of our thinking about the world.

Kitcher's arguments for atheism (against the theistic thesis) call to mind the conflicting diversity of opinions about the transcendent being and the cultural origin of religious beliefs. Bringing to mind the epistemic rule of W. K. Clifford that “it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on the basis of insufficient evidence,” Kitcher concludes: processes that generate specific beliefs about the transcendent are so unreliable that all of the conflicting specific religious doctrines are, almost certainly, false. Although the canons of good explanations are various, none of them sanctions the idea of a transcendent creative mind as an explanatory hypothesis. Against the justificatory force of the theistic thesis, Kitcher develops what he somewhat unclear calls an “argument from symmetry.” As the main doubt regarding the existence of God he names an astounding variety and widespread inconsistency and contradiction of religious doctrines, disagreement in doctrine of different (Christian) denominations, disagreement about cogent modes of religious argument, a radical contrast with beliefs on the basis of evidence, lack of progress in settling divergent opinions, the dependance of religious doctrines from prevalent culture and society, i.e., their culture-boundness. Likewise, from a secular perspective, there seems to be no way to guarantee the objectiveness of moral values and the existence of an independent ethical order. For secularists, missing an “external” objective standard (a transcendent realm, Platonic or religious), prior to and independent of human choices and decisions, there remains a cluster of philosophical accounts that divorce the ethical standards from the natural world. Kitcher is not, however, a radical scientist: even if scientific knowledge (natural sciences) and scientific methods remain for him a “natural” point of reference, he recognizes that science is not infallible and not always a body of demonstrated truths.

It is not easy to name and to discuss in detail the many and complex subjects and problems of Kitcher's monograph, origins of which are in the author's (he started as a religious person) personal experience how to live in the secularized world after the rejection of the religious faith.

Many of Kitcher's ideas about religion, theism, and atheism are not new. His doubts and arguments against religion and the theistic thesis have been discussed many times before but even if some of the relevant topics are well-known, their vivid discussion engages the reader. He is not very original when he stresses the social value of religion in the public sphere. One of the strengths of Kitcher's partially essayist analyses, placed in the tradition of the American pragmatism (Clifford, Dewey, James), is their precision even there where he calls to mind poetry and literature. Because the author is an expert on contemporary (Anglican) Christian theology and disputed there questions, the monograph deserves more than a hasty lecture. It presupposes some sophisticated knowledge of the contemporary literature and the discussions on atheism and theism. Kitcher's argumentation in favor of the atheistic stance and against the theistic thesis is not, however, in every case successful, not only because he expresses his point of view cautiously (“almost certainly false, almost certainly inadequate”). The argument from the diversity of beliefs as such does not prove much because a variety of religious beliefs does not necessarily exclude the possibility that some particular beliefs could be true, as in case of the thesis about the existence of God on which all theistic religions agree. Also arguments in favor of atheism from the origin and dependence of religious beliefs to cultural circumstances seem weak because the way of propagation of some beliefs does not simply involve their falsity founded after all on certain states of affairs. One of the weaknesses of Kitcher's intellectually appealing defense of atheism is also that he, unfortunately, ignores to discuss the multiple serious works and objections by theologians, philosophers, and scientists over the last few years in defense of traditional forms of religious faith. Let me add that also a native speaker may have some problems with the nuanced terminology and idiomatic expressions (“human predicament, pragmatic constraint, religious aptness, enduring human purposes”) not always found in the index.

I conclude with a personal remark: religious faith is always accompanied by disbelief and disbelief is always associated with proportional belief. A person who would try to accept the theistic thesis removing earlier all theoretical and practical obstacles would also not be able to make a single step in everyday life. Our life depends simply on many – better or worse and many times on not at all justified – beliefs. Any model of secular (refined) religion presents itself faintly in comparison to traditional (monotheistic) religion, where the believer in prayer addresses a personal God directly, “affirming a fatherly creator, whose perfect goodness combines with omnipotence and omniscience.”

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Kohn, Eduardo: *How Forests Think. Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. 267 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-27611-6. Price: £ 19.95

In “How Forests Think,” Eduardo Kohn examines many occasions where Amazonian Kichwa people (Runa)

ascribe human-like qualities to the forest. Coming as they do out of Kohn's years of fieldwork and fluent knowledge of the Kichwa language, these stories are rich. Often they are poignant moments that cause wonder. By portraying credible people who know the forest well and who believe it to be human-like, these narratives make the reader wistful. What if it were true? What makes Kohn's book different from ethnographic writing is that instead of treating these stories functionally as myth he takes them seriously as statements about how nature actually works. Kohn does not engage in credulity or pretend to think like a Runa. Rather he uses the semiotics of Charles Pierce to show how a modern Western person might be able to understand Runa claims that the forest is a conscious thinking being.

To do this Kohn defines thinking in a spare manner as meaningful interpretation and response to signs. To show how the forest could meet this definition requires answering at least two questions: How does a non-human individual respond to a sign? Secondly, even if one could think of an individual plant or animal as responding to a sign, how would the collective network of species that comprise the forest as a whole respond to signs so as to "think?" The core of the book explores this non-human use of signs. To portray non-human behavior as a response to signs, Kohn draws on Charles Pierce's distinction between a symbol in which the relation between sign and signified is an arbitrary convention (as in human language) and what Pierce called indexical signs where the connection is not arbitrary.

To help the reader understand what an indexical sign is, Kohn uses the example of a monkey that jumps to a higher perch when it hears a tree crashing to the ground in the forest. For Kohn, the monkey's response is a meaningful response to a sign which the monkey interprets. The crashing tree may in fact pose no danger, yet it is a non-arbitrary sign because it would be dangerous if the monkey were in the tree or in the path of its fall. For Kohn the monkey's response to the crashing tree is a case of "thinking" as meaningful response to an indexical sign. The monkey's thinking would contrast to human thought as response to conventional signs like a stop sign or the word "danger."

How then does the forest as a whole think? To answer this, Kohn expands on his example of the monkey. The jumping to a higher perch combines with the crashing of the tree to create a further chain of signs to which other plants and animals respond. The chain creates a pattern. Kohn argues that the forest environment as a whole "thinks" by responding to these smaller interacting patterns of responses to indexical signs. Kohn notes that the form or pattern of responses to indexical signs outlives its individual components. Particular plants and animals die and reproduce, but the patterns of migration to spawn or to seek seasonal sources of food endure over time. Thus, one could say that the forest has a memory. Since the pattern can adapt to change (such as climate change), Kohn argues that the forest can also think new thoughts and create novelty.

"How Forests Think" is an important book that provides a viable way for people educated in Western phi-

losophy to approach indigenous animism without being credulous or inauthentic. It is refreshing to read a book of this intellectual caliber that takes Runa stories seriously and enters into dialogue with their claims using the tools of Western philosophy. It is important to note, however, that Kohn's questions are not Runa questions. The problem of how a plant thinks would not arise for Runa because their tradition posits that the plant and animal species were once human. After the transformation into their present forms the plants and animals continue to have fully human qualities of thought that are simply hidden from human sight by our incomprehension of their animal language. Runa also do not understand the forest as thinking collective. Rather, behind the forest there is a forest owner or *dueño* who thinks and reacts like a human individual does. These assumptions are not available to Kohn, presumably because he accepts the standard Darwinian idea that humans evolved from previous stages of animal life rather than the other way around.

Kohn's claims that the forest thinks through indexical signs may be insufficient to explain the social relation to the forest so central to Runa thought. Runa seek to evoke an empathic response from the forest that will elicit game, fish, healing, or crops. The forest gives these things because it recognizes certain people, is attracted to them, or feels compassion. To court the forest, Runa use songs whose lyrics are filled with analogies that would require the forest to think in a fully symbolic manner and not merely through indexical signs.

These are not shortcomings of Kohn's book, however, but rather areas outside its scope. Kohn is clear that he is not writing an ethnography. The book does not seek to explicate an implicit indigenous philosophy of how language is embedded in the land in the manner of Keith Basso's "Wisdom Sits in Places" (1996). Nor does it seek to explain how Runa understand their social relation to nature as in Phillippe Descola's "In the Society of Nature" (1994) or to explain how Runa understand emotional affinity with nature as in Michael Brown (1986). Kohn's purpose is different. It is to give a Western philosophical rationale for a thinking forest, that would bring Westerners into dialogue with indigenous animism. In this respect, what he achieves is reminiscent of the process theology of Alfred North Whitehead which posited a conscious decision-making quality within the processes of nature. Unlike Whitehead, Kohn develops his work in dialogue with indigenous animism. Kohn's proposal of a forest that thinks through responses to indexical signs may be more accessible to modern readers than Whitehead's philosophy because its claims are more modest. Although the title asks how forests think, Kohn's proposal has implications that go beyond the forest. Forests are smaller patterns caught up in larger patterns of climate change, ocean currents, migrating birds, and dying stars. At the largest level the thinking agent Kohn posits is the whole changing process of the material universe. Hence the subtitle "Anthropology beyond the Human."

Tod D. Swanson