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## Feeling Rational: Affinity and Affinity Narratives in British Science/Nonreligion Relations<sup>1</sup>

Lois Lee  
Department of Religious Studies, University of Kent  
Cornwallis North-West  
Canterbury CT2 7NF, UK  
T: +44 (0)1227 826543  
E: [l.a.lee@kent.ac.uk](mailto:l.a.lee@kent.ac.uk)

The idea that religion and science are opposed to one another has proved remarkably resilient, despite widespread, wide-ranging and often quite straightforward, easily graspable criticisms of its core premises. Given that the idea of science and religion are intrinsically conflicting now seems naïve, it is not the theoretical question – *How are religion and science opposed to one another, if at all?* – but the empirical one – *What is the basis of this flawed idea of conflict and its hold over popular and scholarly imaginations?* – that is the more interesting, and the more pressing. If the idea of science/religion conflict is not based in reality, how and why does it persist as one of the central narratives about religion/science relations, and about modernity more generally?

The goal of this chapter is to consider this question from the perspective of nonreligion and secularity studies (Bullivant & Lee 2012), focusing in particular on the relationship between science and nonreligiosity.<sup>2</sup> These areas of study offer an

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to the editors of this volume for their help developing this chapter. I am grateful also for the opportunity I had to develop this work at a workshop and conference convened by the SRES programme; thank you to the organisers and participants at those events. The chapter was also made possible through the support of grants from the John Templeton Foundation (grant numbers 59544 and 60624); the opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> I use ‘nonreligion’ in the relational sense developed by Lee (2012; 2015), Quack (2014) and Cotter (2017), to identify phenomena that are understood (emically and/or etically) in contradistinction to religion. This usage of ‘nonreligion’ is similar to the idea of the ‘secular’ in some of the senses it is used; I have argued that the term ‘secular’ is often confusing, however, since it is also used to identify phenomena that are not necessarily nonreligious and may even have significant religious aspects, such as ‘secular states’ that adopt a particular form of pluralist secularism in their constitution.

important vantage point, since the other side of the coin to the idea of science/religion conflict is the idea of science/nonreligion affinity. It is therefore possible and potentially helpful to ask what role the latter idea plays in sustaining the popularity of the former.

This discussion builds on ideas arising from critical secular studies and critical religion studies, both of which challenge the idea that science mainly impacts on religion epistemically, and instead draw attention to the ideological and mythological roles that science plays in the subjectivities, identities and cultures of nonreligious people.<sup>3</sup> This work tends to be largely theoretical, or to rely on very broad historical accounts of Western modernity in its entirety (Lee forthcoming). The aim of this chapter is therefore to contribute to – and further encourage – the more localised and detailed empirical explorations of perceived nonreligion/science affinity that are just beginning to emerge (see e.g. Kaden, Catto and Jones, 2017; Elsdon-Baker, 2019: this volume).

The chapter uses the UK as a case study for understanding the role of science within nonreligious cultural formations found more widely, especially across Europe and other Western regions. It returns to data from the Being Secular research project (Lee 2015), gathered primarily through in-depth interviews with people who said that they would prefer to identify as ‘nonreligious’ than ‘religious’. These interviews (*n*: 42) were conducted in Cambridge and Greater London between 2006 and 2011 and explored participants’ understandings and experiences of religious cultures and ‘religious-like’ things (e.g. life-cycle ceremonies) in relation to their nonreligious identification.<sup>4</sup> For this chapter, I have reviewed these conversations in light of

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<sup>3</sup> Lee (forthcoming) provides a critical overview of these ‘schools’.

<sup>4</sup> In order to explore the potential variety of positions and meanings that underlie generic nonreligious identifications, the sampling approach sought to maximise variation by working with people who differed according to an array of demographic characteristics (age, gender, race, religious background), although

questions posed by the editors of this volume and the broader Science and Religion: Exploring the Spectrum (SRES) project about science/religion relations. The chapter also draws on wider ethnographic material from the Being Secular project, more recent media material relevant to the British context, and a number of recent empirical studies from across the human sciences that provide further insights into the relationship between nonreligion and science.

I argue that these explorations indicate that the perceived affinity between nonreligion and science has some empirical grounding, and that this needs to be taken seriously. However, I also argue against naïve understandings of this affinity and its implications. Rather, this work supports the view that the real force of these relations is cultural and historic, rather than intellectual and epistemic. This idea of a non-essential connection between nonreligious and scientific cultures is consistent with critical accounts; however, the argument builds on these in highlighting the ambivalence, variability and heterogeneity of these relations. Critical approaches focus on how the nonreligious caricature the religious as un-scientific, but neglect the more constructive role that science can also play in nonreligious people's meaning systems; by contrast, this work seeks to highlight that nonreligious people's engagement with science does not always much concern others or impact upon them, so much as it offers them personal and inward-facing rewards as a source of comfort and meaning as they go about their lives. Past scholarship has also tended to generalise the nature of science/nonreligion relations, but this empirical work demonstrates that science does not play the same role in the lives of nonreligious people. Again, this observation is consistent with other data showing that nonreligious populations are split in their

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recruitment methods meant that the final sample was biased towards those with tertiary level education. A full review of the methodology used to gather these data can be found in Lee 2015.

attitudes towards particular scientific claims (e.g. about evolution) or science in general (Catto 2017; Elsdon-Baker 2017; Hill 2019: this volume). I argue that differentiating broad nonreligious populations according to their different *existential outlooks* and *cultures* (Lee 2015; see also Lee & Bullivant 2016) can help to understand these differences: I propose that there are significant intellectual and cultural affinities between science and existential humanism in its rationalist form, but these affinities are not seen in other forms of humanism, nor in other nonreligious existential cultures such as atheistic agnosticism, that latter of which involves considerable ambivalent stance towards science.

I begin with a short exploration of the role and significance of the study of nonreligious actors and cultures for understanding the relationship between religion and science.

### **Science, Nonreligion and Existential Culture**

Despite wide-ranging challenges to the religion/science conflict narrative, it remains both a motif in popular discourse in Western discourse, and a cornerstone of academic theories about the nature and role of religion and secularity in contemporary societies. As Kaden et al. (2017: 1) put it, the ‘science vs. religion’ rubric has, over time, spawned its own industry, and its ability ‘to excite public and professional passions’ has hardly diminished. If these understandings are not empirically grounded in any straightforward way, what then are its foundations? This chapter calls attention to an aspect of science/religion relations that is normally implicit but which is integral to it: the idea that people who say they have no religion – referred to in this chapter as ‘the nonreligious’ – have a distinctively positive relationship with science.

In this view, the nonreligious individual's relationship is, at the very least, unimpeded by religion. But others go much further. Critical scholarship of religion and secularity suggests, for example, that the idea of science/nonreligion affinity has its own momentum – that actors are invested in this idea in its own right. Science/nonreligion affinity is also identified as a narrative that both religious *and* nonreligious actors are invested in (Fitzgerald 2000): for example, the nonreligious might enjoy to claim that they have privileged access to scientific knowledge and reason, but this idea can also sustain the idea that religious actors have privileged access to the realms of existential or 'spiritual' meaning, myth, and even the arts. So we find that religious authorities often distance themselves from 'the inquiring mind', spoken of with pity or contempt, and seen as a cause of irreligion (Lee 2015: 57; 167). At the same time, nonreligious voices often lay claim to the idea that their minds are more rational, or more specifically that their existential and metaphysical outlooks are more scientific.

Other work shows how these logics of science/nonreligion affinity are matters of identity – of self-understanding and representation of the self in public settings (Catto 2016) These ideas and patterns of identification are found in – and inculcated through – popular culture in the UK. This is most obviously perhaps in the work of prominent television and radio science programming, which is frequently associated with figures who are known for and explicit about their nonreligious philosophies. Recent examples include work by popular science broadcasters, Brian Cox and Robin Ince, who follow twentieth-century forebears in creating science programming which often interprets this material according to a humanist outlook.<sup>5</sup> But the association between science and

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Cox is a popular science broadcaster who has been described as a 'humanist scientist' (Engelke 2015), and Robin Ince is a comedian and patron of Humanists UK. On the BBC's twentieth century 'humanist blockbusters', see Hall 2017.

nonreligion is found much more widely, and not only in programming explicitly associated with science. In ‘Crazy Ex-Girlfriend’ – a US musical comedy television drama series first screened in the UK in 2015, and focused on themes very little concerned with matters of science or philosophy – the opening scenes find the heroine, Rebecca, making the following speech in a moment of panic: ‘Dear God; *I don’t pray to you, because I believe in science*, but I don’t know what to do. Give me guidance. Please. Ahh-men. ... “Ay-men”?! “Ahh-men”?!’ (Crazy Ex-Girlfriend 2015; emphasis added). These kinds of casual references found within mainstream programming illustrate the prevalence of ‘belief in science’ as a central way of understanding and identifying a nonreligious set of beliefs – and incidentally complicate notions of the US as normatively religious (Berger et al 2008; Trzebiatowska 2018).

Established as ideas about the close relationship between science and nonreligion may be, however, they have not been closely examined from a social scientific perspective until very recently. Though numerous scholars have challenged the notion of a simple opposition between science and religion (e.g. Fitzgerald 2000; Asad 2003), as well as a series of other binaries that often operate in intersection with it (the rational/irrational; the modern/pre-modern), this work has not always paid close empirical attention to exactly how science is entwined into the cultures and identities of the nonreligious *qua* nonreligious – of what science means to them in their everyday lives. This chapter aims to contribute to this work of understanding what exactly the relationship between the nonreligious and science is.

In so doing, it draws on insights from recent empirical studies working with nonreligious populations – normally operationalised as those identifying as nonreligious or with another label which is interpreted as nonreligious in the local context (e.g. ‘atheism’, or ‘humanism’ in the UK). This work is increasingly interested

in the ‘religious-like’ beliefs and cultures of these individuals and populations (e.g. Baker and Smith 2016; Lee 2015; Taves 2016), and in my own work I am interested in how nonreligious populations include not one but several alternative ‘worldviews’, or what I refer to as *existential cultures* (Lee 2015). The idea of existential culture is not seen as exclusive to nonreligious people: many religious traditions are characterised by (though by no means reducible to) the way in which they offer conceptualisations of existence and reality – but nonreligious people conceptualise their existence in similar ways. These conceptualisations are intrinsically transcendent or metaphysical since they do not merely participate in secular, ‘this-worldly’ existence and reality, but make or otherwise manifest claims *about* the nature of that existence and reality (cf. Simmel 2010). Although it may be possible to think of religious traditions as forms of ‘existential culture’, the way in which nonreligious individuals and groups are also observed to conceptualise the nature of existence and reality means that this notion offers a way of understanding nonreligious populations more specifically, too.

In this chapter, I use this notion of existential culture to explore the way in which different nonreligious existential orientations engage with science in distinctive ways. In so doing, I put to one side questions about the role of science in nonreligious people’s secular or ‘this-worldly’ lives: as Farias et al. (2013: 1211; my emphasis) say, ‘most individuals accept science as a reliable source of knowledge about *the world*’; this is true of people with religious as well as nonreligious identities and meta-existential beliefs. Rather, the chapter focuses on the several ways in which science is bound up with nonreligious existential cultures that transcend the secular world through the processes and performances of making sense of it. This chapter also draws attention to nonreligious existential outlooks and cultures that are more critical of or distant from science. Rather than the blanket and largely ideological scientism that critical



approaches diagnose the nonreligious to have, this investigation adds weight to the argument that there is a significant affinity between science and nonreligion, which is historical and powerful but neither intrinsic nor universal.

### **Science in Nonreligious Existential Life: Rationalist Humanism**

The first part of this chapter focuses on a nonreligious existential culture within which science plays a notable role, namely rationalist humanism. Rationalist humanism is a materialist outlook that places emphasis on humanity and, in particular, humans' rational capacities as a source of existential meaning. When scholars and others identify a cultural affinity between the nonreligious and science, it is most often the rationalist humanist they have in mind. Indeed, one scholar even suggests the term 'scientific atheism' in his work (Le Drew 2015) to describe that part of the US Secular movement,<sup>6</sup> whilst the central role of science in the works of those most prominent of rationalist humanists, the New Atheists, is well known.

In fact, the New Atheism provides a helpful example of rationalist humanism and its relationship with science. Though the term 'New Atheism' is contested, it tends to denote a cultural movement that emerged in the mid-00s and is particularly associated with Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens as well as later-comers such as A. C. Grayling.<sup>7</sup> For all their differences, these writers are united by two things: a radical secularist agenda which advocates the marginalisation of religion, be it on the basis of Enlightenment rationalist claims about

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<sup>6</sup> 'Scientific atheism' is 'humanistic atheism', though both orientations confirm to the broader notion of humanism established in historical accounts. For example, LeDrew's 'scientific atheism' and 'humanistic atheism' would both be forms of what Charles Taylor (2007) calls 'exclusive humanism' in his seminal history of Christendom.

<sup>7</sup> For a definition of New Atheism, see Lee and Bullivant 2016. For a wider discussion of the New Atheism, see Cotter et al. 2017

the disaffinity of religion and reason or of moral objections about religious authority and institutions; and veneration of the achievements and aesthetics of Western science. The role of science is central. In one scholar's words, 'New Atheism is *built* upon a rhetorical distinction between religion and scientific knowledge or, more specifically, a distinction between religion and science or religion and rationality'; it is 'a popular, media-driven discourse in which a strict distinction between religion and scientific knowledge is *a defining feature*, functioning as a means of drawing boundaries around the opposing parties involved in the debate' (Taira, 2012: 98, my emphasis). This iteration arguably overstates the role of the religion/science conflict thesis within New Atheism relative to its other concerns; several contributors are, for example, more concerned with their moral objections to religion. However, it captures the significant role that science plays within New Atheist culture, as well as the critical scholars' account of this role, as a matter of identity and identity politics. In Taira's words,

Despite the New Atheist claims to represent universal scientific knowledge and rationality, their popularity is related to the public realm of identity politics, in which atheists demand recognition as atheists. (Taira, 2012: 98)

The New Atheist case certainly provides further support to the view that science plays a role in the identities of rationalist humanists, and maybe other nonreligious orientations besides. But it is important to recognize that the rationalist humanist connection with science is much more diverse than New Atheism-focused critiques acknowledge. For one, science is also a genuine source of existential meaning and comfort for some – an effect also documented in social psychological research (see Farias et al 2013). This use of science as an existential resource was articulated in my

fieldwork by Matthew,<sup>8</sup> a retired academic in his seventies. Matthew told me, ‘science is what is important to me’. He explained,

I believe in science as a frame of reference, I think that in [...] the sense of finding one’s place in the universe [...] the method and the whole perspective of a scientific age is one that I find very comforting. I don’t need supernatural explanations because [...] nature in itself is impressive enough.

*Interviewer: Can you say more about that? What’s comforting about it? Is it not something to—?*

Well you mentioned earlier that there’s this notion of fear, yes, and comfort is somehow a response to fear and fear derives from uncertainty and [...] the nature of the universe and the powers at large of the universe creates uncertainty, which can require comfort through some kind of intellectual system, which is based on the superstition or the supernatural, which I personally don’t feel the need.

*Interviewer: So, science resolves—or means you’re not uncertain and therefore ... Is that—?*

I’m not uncertain about the things that a lot of people seem to be uncertain about, I’m not worried about the afterlife, I’m not worried [about] divine retribution, you know, or divine reward for that matter. I think this [...] all belongs in the past but if people don’t want to embrace science and they feel comfort by traditional remedies, that’s fine by me.

This is the rationalist orientation that critical secular and other scholars most associate with nonreligious identification: it finds scientific knowledge a source of existential comfort, and it dismisses religiosity as a source of comfort, enabled by a disinclination to ‘embrace science’. But for Matthew the most important thing is not that not about identifying or distancing himself from a religious other; rather, those remarks are used to help him articulate his own engagement with science as a ‘frame of reference’ and a source of comfort. At the same time, the example illustrates how ideas of science/religion disaffinity are a resource that is drawn on to help articulate the central role of science within a nonreligious existential philosophy.

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<sup>8</sup> All names are changed to preserve anonymity.

There is other evidence that, outside of the New Atheism, this kind of ‘belief in science’ is found quite widely, and this work supports the idea that this belief is not only a matter of identification and identity politics. Farias et al. (2013: 1210) argue, for example, that their social psychological research shows that science can act as, ‘a form of “faith” that helps [nonreligious people] to deal with stressful and anxiety provoking situations’. This research differentiates this ‘belief in science’ from the more general and more widely held view that science provides legitimate knowledge about the material world, since these ‘believers’ expand the remit of scientific knowledge to include existential and metaphysical questions and subsequently elevate its value as a source of meaning (ibid: 1211). This throws more light on how science/nonreligion affinity narratives can translate into the idea of science/religious disaffinity, since the kind of value that science plays within the *existential* lives of nonreligious people may be incompatible with religious existential ideas. Though this affinity only relates to the existential domain and has no necessary bearing on how individuals relate to science as an aspect of secular life, it may be that this sense of affinity has the capacity to burst its banks – especially since in practice our lives are not lived accordingly to neatly demarcated domains – the economic, the political, the existential, etcetera – but find them constantly and messily tangled together.

### **Science in ‘lived’ rationalist humanism**

Although Matthew casts science as an ‘intellectual system’, rationalist humanists also connect to science in non-intellectual ways. In the course of my fieldwork, I was struck by an informal conversation about my research with a young woman living in the area. I was talking with her about emerging evidence that nonreligious outlooks and identities

can arise through socialisation processes, just as religious ones do, when she interjected – with some exasperation – ‘But it *feels* rational!’ (Lee 2015: 188). What struck me then was twofold – firstly, the force of feeling with which this was said; but then also the way in which her words expressed an emotional connection to the rational: her insistence was not that her position *was* rational, but that that it *felt* rational. She was perhaps simply trying to express her sense that the argument I was making was not convincing, but was not quite able to articulate why. But her remark also speaks to the way in which the role of science and the rational can be experienced by nonreligious people (as others) in ways that are not purely intellectual, but which is multilayered and embedded in their lived lives in more complicated ways. A purely critical account of rationalist humanism misses something when it does not capture these dimensions.

For example, Katie Aston’s (forthcoming) ethnographic research has explored the materiality of culture connected with British nonreligious organisations such as Humanism UK (formerly the British Humanist Association) and the Rationalist Association – both organisations that have a strong rationalist history. Her work highlights, for example, the centrality of especially biological images in visual and material culture, including the pervasive use of images of, or relating to, Charles Darwin. These images manifest not as scientific references per se but as icons around which people form and express their identities *as* people connected to a particular existential culture. Aston’s work demonstrates the nuance we need to bring to our understanding of these individuals and groups, since in practice their boundary-making practices are, like all boundary making perhaps, ambivalent – involving identity

formation, community building and meaning making, as well as identity politics and the processes of othering involved in that.<sup>9</sup>

Rationalist humanism and the role it casts science may also be encountered in everyday life through representations of this idea in popular culture. On this, media historian Alexander Hall's idea of the 'humanist blockbuster' (Hall 2017) is instructive. 'Humanist blockbusters' are the expensive BBC science and nature programming of the twentieth century which make use of emotive language, sweeping scores and, in more recent examples, richly cinematic cinematography to inculcate an intensely *emotional* response to humanist narratives of existence. Though Richard Dawkins and his image has been used as a marker of atheism in British public life (Lee 2017), Hall's work prompts us to consider whether it is less controversial figures who front television series that continues in the tradition of the twentieth-century humanist blockbusters that Hall documents – Brian Cox, or even the beloved BBC nature documentary presenter, Sir David Attenborough – that tell us more about the prevalence and standing of existential humanism in the UK. Certainly, it demonstrates how the idea of science/rationalist humanist affinity may be a part of everyday life, and highlights again how those encountering it may engage with it not only intellectually, but emotionally and as an aesthetic experience as much as an epistemic one.

But taken together, all of these examples demonstrate that what is at stake for rationalist humanists faced with the idea that religion and science are *not* in conflict is not so much the legitimacy of religious worldviews as it is the legitimacy of their own. Ideas about science/religion conflict interwoven into rationalist humanists' existential meaning systems, and these meaning systems matter to them. These attachments are at

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<sup>9</sup> Other research with nonreligious movements outside of the UK have similar findings. See for example Smith and Cimino's (2014) US research and Schenke's (2019: this volume) research with the Swedish Humanist association.

least partly responsible for the way in which science/religion conflict narratives can excite emotional responses as well as intellectual ones: rational humanists *feel* rational; rational humanists are *comforted* by science. These attachments are the result of cultural forms – encouraged through encounter with ‘humanist blockbusters’ for example – but it also helps bring those forms into being. Those who *perceive* there to be an affinity between science and nonreligion generate cultural forms – identities, images, objects – expressing this idea, and around which they coalesce with others who share this perception. In turn, these cultural formations influence the world around them, including even popular understandings science.<sup>10</sup> In these ways, the perception and subjective experience of science/nonreligion affinity are realities which lend a particular kind of truth to the claim that that this affinity really exists. It might be cultural rather than epistemic or epistemological, but it is this affinity is found within socio-cultural contexts, and impacts upon them, just the same.

### **A problem: Disaffinities between rationalist humanism and science**

So far, so friendly. Though we might need to nuance rationalist accounts of why science and nonreligious existential cultures connect and cohere in certain ways, we cannot deny that they do so. It is important, however, not to overstate this affinity.

In reviewing interview transcripts from the Being Secular for this chapter, I noted for example how infrequently the idea of science came up in interviews. It was

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<sup>10</sup> We might consider whether the central role that Charles Darwin occupies in how modern science is imagined and represented in the UK is shaped in part by the significance of his work to prevalent forms of existential culture, so that the *existential* salience of his work becomes a driver of his status within the scientific field and our conceptions of what science *is*. (My thanks to Stephen Jones raising this point.)

far from absent – as the examples in this chapter demonstrate. But most interviewees made reference to science only once, and sometimes not at all.

When they did so, science was most consistently mentioned in response to a question concerning participants' thoughts about the origins of the universe. The following are typical answers in response to the question, 'what are your thoughts about how the universe came into being?':

Well I'm into astronomy and I believe the big bang and you know evolution the whole picture as modern day contemporary science sets out that it does ... (David, 57)

Erm, I think that science has told us a lot about that, I think that we don't know everything yet, obviously but—and I don't think we ever will know everything, I think we'll keep learning. I think, you know, that Big Bang theory makes as much sense as it can do without fully understanding quantum physics and [laughter] you know, without being clever enough to know what all that means but I would go with the Big Bang theory of change over time in terms of evolutionary processes, yeah. (Cat, 26)

Interviewees with a less materialist orientations sometimes raised scientific explanations at this point, before going on to describe their limitations, but the association between science and questions of creation was widespread. Not only does this demonstrate that science may not be associated with nonreligious (and other) existential philosophies in general, but also that it is invoked in relation to particular topics or themes – and considered less relevant to others.

It is striking, too, that most participants appeared to be particularly uninterested in this question of origins compared to other questions and topics we discussed. If science was considered particularly salient to this topic, the topic itself was not treated as particularly salient to the broader themes of our interview. One participant, Dora, a 78-year-old woman from London, put this feeling into words:

*Interviewer: What are your thoughts about how the universe came into being?*  
I think we don't know. And I don't think it matters. Because what matters is how you live your life day to day. [...] these people who think God made the universe [...], they've got a hard decision to make to think God made the



universe in seven days therefore I'll do so and such. I think it's totally irrelevant to what is important which is how we live here today and how we treat other people. [...] I don't know whether science will ever give us— [...] As an academic it's quite interesting, but it's totally irrelevant to my life and the way I live it.

Thus, issues bound up with science were often characterised as less relevant to existential beliefs and even identities.

Exploring what it means to be nonreligious as a lived reality also draws attention to the fuzzy edges of rationalist humanists' engagement with science, and its openness to change. Carl (29, London) characterised himself as a person for whom 'religion has zero or close to zero influence, whereas science – maybe 90 or something like that'. He said he was 'an advocate for science', and he understood his views on religion and science as part of a zero sum game. But elsewhere, Carl took a more qualified stance. Discussing his friendship with Lisa, a friend of his with 'this really strong Christian belief that only comes out in some situations', he said:

I don't think [her religion has] ever really been much of an issue other than broadened my mind. Before I met Lisa – I don't think it is connected, but around the same time – before, I would say, I thought science would explain everything that needs explaining. And meeting more people that had religious beliefs who weren't complete nut cases, I would say it's broadened my mind.

Carl clearly maintains a strong and rationalist idea of the religious other – as irrational; as a 'nut case' – but he shows how his own relationship with science is mutable.

Whereas critical approaches tend to talk in very general terms about how the idea of the nonreligious as rational and more scientific has been naturalised, lived approaches point to the ways in which these ideas and discourses are sometimes situational and often qualified in certain ways. This raises problems for overly neat ideas about the relationship between science and nonreligion: whilst we should take this relationship seriously as an empirical reality and one with positive as well as

negative effects, and should not dismiss the idea of science/nonreligion affinity as mere ideology, we should recognize too that this relationship is complex.

### **A bigger problem: Agnosticism and science**

Building on these concerns about the nature and significance of the role of science within rational humanism, this next section calls attention to other nonreligious existential orientations that do not share the same warm view of science in the first place. Indeed, there is even some evidence to suggest that, in some parts of the world, the UK included, a more ambivalent, even hostile engagement with science *as an existential matter* is more widespread within nonreligious populations than the ‘scientific’ modes of engagement associated with rationalist humanism. Recognising these experiences may therefore require us to refine our sense of affinity between nonreligion and science further still.

One of the most significant examples of a nonreligious mode of existentiality that displays this more negative relationship with science is an existential culture that I refer to as agnosticism (Lee 2015). Social scientists frequently make a distinction between those who reject theist claims outright and those who take the view that humans cannot know anything for certain about the existence of God/s – conventionally (though problematically) referred to as ‘atheists’ and ‘agnostics’ respectively (e.g. Clements & Gries 2017). One reason that this traditional nomenclature is problematic is that both groups largely fall within the ‘negative’ category of atheism in the sense that both atheists and agnostics ‘live their lives as though God does not exist’ (Brown

2017: 439).<sup>11</sup> One indication of this is that a majority of agnostics identify as nonreligious – though they are more slightly likely to identify with a religion than positive atheists are (British Social Attitudes survey 2008, [www.britsocat.com](http://www.britsocat.com)).<sup>12</sup> But here I use the term ‘agnosticism’ to describe a broader existential orientation, one with some resemblance to postmodern and posthumanist orientations.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on the ‘strong’ rather than the ‘weak’ sense of the term, this existential agnosticism describes an orientation that centres on the limits of human existential and metaphysical knowledge (Lee 2015). This involves not only the idea that humans cannot know anything of the existence of God, but also that this lack of knowledge is indicative of a much broader state of existential ignorance.<sup>14</sup> For agnostics, the inaccessibility of existential knowledge informs particular ethical goods, aesthetics and mythologies, each of which can act as a source of existential comfort.

As a system for generating a particular type of knowledge, science is of limited existential value within agnosticism (though it may have great value for dealing with secular, ‘this-worldly’ concerns). While they may ‘live their lives as though God does not exist’ then, existential agnostics differ from rationalist humanists and other ‘negative atheists’ in their relationship with science. This alternative relationship with science is illustrated by Jude, a 31-year-old graduate student from Cambridge, who positions her outlook not only in contradistinction to religion but to science too. Jude told me,

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<sup>11</sup> My gratitude to Abby Day for bringing this very helpful definition of ‘atheism’ to my attention. See also Bullivant and Lee (2016) for dictionary of common understandings of concepts such as ‘atheism’ and ‘agnosticism’, and the difference between ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ atheisms.

<sup>12</sup> The fact that not all non-theists nor agnostics identify as nonreligious is a moot point, since religious identity and belief consistently overlap imperfectly; the same is true for those who identify as religious, but do not believe in God.

<sup>13</sup> On posthumanism, see Ferrando 2013.

<sup>14</sup> The ‘strong’ sense of agnosticism indicates the view that nothing can be known about the existence of God; the ‘weak’ sense is used to describe a perspective of doubt and uncertainty – the proverbial fence-sitter (Lee & Bullivant 2016).

I think that at times there's a sense of knowing within myself that it's something that doesn't require scientific or rational explanation, and it works on its own regardless. [...] I think over-analysing that space kills it; I think belonging to religion kills it; because I prefer the idea that it's unexplained—because that makes life more exciting [...] What I'm trying to say is that it's why I wouldn't be religious then, because it's the same thing as what science offers me: it offers me an end explanation. I'm not sure whether it's necessary to require an end explanation. (Lee 2015: 178)

This emphasis on the ineffable is typical of what I term the agnostic mode of existentiality. Agnostics are not frightened of the unknown (as some psychologists propose that humans universally are): they revel in it. They are, in a sense, much more frightened at the prospect of knowing too much, because this detracts from some of what makes living meaningful and magical to them – the idea that it is unexplained.

This scepticism about the value of definitive knowledge about the nature and meaning of life devalues science to the extent that it is regarded as a system of knowledge – a way of providing answers. For some agnostics I interviewed, the existential is better engaged with through experience modes of 'knowing' or being in the world, or through the arts, which can articulate these experiences in new, often beautiful ways. But we should be careful to replicate C. P. Snow famously called the 'two cultures' of arts vs science in understanding the differences between nonreligious existentialities. In an interview with Tom, a young male writer from London who identified as an atheist, I encountered a rationalist account of the role of the arts as a source of existential explanation. Tom told me,

I mean obviously as a writer [...] my job is to sort of what Heaney calls raiding the inarticulate, and that's the sort of transcendental, the sublime or whatever. And that 'otherness' – like you're trying to articulate something like love or trying to articulate the feeling of loneliness and all these things are kind of traditionally the things that religion has, in the past, whether through ritual or through text, tried to sort of – these are the things that it's tried to explore and explain. And also provide answers for. And I suppose [writing] does the same thing. [...]

I mean it's amazing sometimes you see things and you are literally speechless and that's because words can't describe it. And art is a good example of this; I think [...] art happens when the material in which something is expressed is so integral to the expression that it couldn't be articulated in any other way; it couldn't be paraphrased. And that seems to me to be related to God because [...] there's moments of living which feel like art. I suppose where some idea from the natural world or the world around us hails us in a way that we don't have words for. And artists tend to go about trying to close that gap [...]

For Tom, art is a distinctive form of knowing that can 'explain' and 'provide answers' that no other source of knowledge can; in the face of the unknown or unarticulated, it offers a unique way of 'closing the gap'. Tom's words offer a caution against assuming that, just because science can be integral to rationalist humanism, it is not necessarily so, and certainly not to the exclusion of all else. But they illustrate, too, how existential outlooks can imbue different kinds of human action with different kinds of meaning: though both Tom and Jude construe religion as seeking to offer existential explanation, for Tom there is existential value in explanation in general; for Jude, there is not. These cases show that we cannot map existential values directly onto aesthetic ones, since – to put it in Farias et al's (2013) terms – 'belief in explanation' does not necessarily imply 'belief in science'.

### **The scale of the problem**

Compared to both atheist identification and rationalist humanism, agnosticism – as identity and as existential philosophy and culture – has received infinitesimal attention, both in social science research and in popular discourse. This does not mean, however, that it is absent from either. In fact, there are several indications that existential agnosticism is significant in British life.

In popular culture, the idea that meaning emerges from experiencing the unknown or unknowable world is a familiar trope, and is associated with major cultural movements such as Romanticism. In other work I have discussed how David Attenborough, the nature broadcaster and one of the most popular and beloved figures in British public life, expresses something inclining towards the agnostic when he speaks of his joy in moving amongst the ‘unrevealed complexity’ of the natural world – an idea that is situated in contrast with Richard Dawkins’ view that it is the excitement of a ‘puzzle being solved’ that gives meaning to his work (discussed in Lee 2015: 176-177). Alongside those ‘humanist blockbusters’ (Hall 2017), then, we might plausibly consider the role that agnosticism plays in the mainstream of British culture – though whether there are equivalent ‘agnostic blockbusters’ is an open and empirical question. Agnostic forms of meaning are certainly a common trope in the arts. The title poem from the prize-winning collection, *Dear Boy*, by Emily Berry, for example, laments,

You rang me three times and said ‘I can explain everything!’  
into my voicemail. You know perfectly well I believe  
nothing worthwhile is explainable. Dear boy,  
(Berry, 2013: PP).

And in the social sciences, too, affinities between existential agnosticism and postmodernist theory as well as with posthumanist philosophy indicate a significant presence within the academy.

There are also some indications that existential agnosticism is widespread. For example, substantial numbers of people respond to survey questions about their belief in God with the strong agnostic answer – ‘I don’t know whether there is a God and I don’t believe there is any way to find out’. Indeed, in the UK the number of people selecting this option makes agnostics the single largest ‘faith’ category in the UK: 18%, compared to 17% who chose the ‘positive atheist’ statement in the last round of the

British Social Attitudes survey to explore religion in depth (British Social Attitudes survey 2008, [www.britsocat.com](http://www.britsocat.com)). There is some evidence to back up the idea that these survey distinctions tell us something meaningful about the outlooks of those choosing them. These survey categories are, for example, bound up with different kinds of identity positions and politics: those who have positive atheist beliefs and those who have strong agnostic beliefs are different along a number of lines (Clements & Gries 2017). Differentiating positive atheists and agnostics also complicates many of the established demographic correlations with atheism and nonreligion. For example, both groups are famously more male than the theistic and the religious (e.g. Trzebiatowska & Bruce 2012; Keysar & Navarro-Rivera 2013) but it turns out that this is more true of positive atheists than it is agnostics in the UK (British Social Attitudes survey 2008, [www.britsocat.com](http://www.britsocat.com)). These differences lend support to the idea that survey measures of positive atheism and strong agnosticism give some indication of the scale of existential agnosticism, as well as the idea that nonreligious populations can be disaggregated into smaller populations with distinctive cultural orientations.

Given all this, the lack of empirical research into existential agnosticism is striking – and the need for new work is clear. There are significant practical reasons why agnosticism is not more widely engaged with in scholarship. There are, for example, great challenges in trying to sample and recruit from a population that does not tend to have clear representations or even self-understandings of its own existentiality – a difficulty shared by researchers of the ‘indifferent to religion’ population (Quack & Schuh 2017). As with religious indifference though, the indications we do have suggest that researchers need to take these challenges on if they are to truly understand the nature of our contemporary existential and religious landscapes.

## Conclusion

Focusing on the UK, but placing these experiences in wider context, this chapter draws attention to several different ways in which science is – and is not – bound up with nonreligious perspectives. This chapter has aimed to consolidate and deepen empirically grounded understandings of the role that science plays in the lives of nonreligious people and, more broadly, to contribute to work seeking to understand why it is that religion/science conflict narratives are so resilient. We know that science can be bound up in nonreligious people’s self-understandings and identities (e.g. Elsdon-Baker 2015), but it has not been clear (i) how science is incorporated in practice, and (ii) how and why science does not *always* play this role within nonreligious self-understandings and identities. The material discussed here show that science, like religion and the arts, is bound up with the way in which people experience and try to articulate their existentialities, regardless of whether it is embraced or ‘othered’ in these processes. But they show also that, whilst science may play a significant role within some, this role is not consistent across all nonreligious outlooks.

Specifically, this chapter proposes engaging with the existential beliefs and cultures (or ‘worldviews’) of nonreligious people through empirical research in order to understand and theorise these discrepancies within nonreligious populations. More and more, research working with nonreligious populations lays emphasis on the existentiality of so-called ‘unbelievers’ (e.g. Droogers & van Harskamp 2014; Lee 2015; forthcoming; Baker & Smith 2015; Lagerkvist 2016; Evans 2016) – their beliefs about the nature and meaning of life, the social connections and ritual practices that partly constitute these beliefs, and so on (Lee 2015). This chapter aims to show that identification of these



modes of ‘existentiality’ also provides a new and significant site for empirical investigations of the role of science – epistemic, mythic, ideological or otherwise. They allow us to make meaningful distinctions within the general nonreligious population, and through that to build a more nuanced picture of nonreligion/science relations. For example, paying close attention to – and undertaking empirical study of – the diverse beliefs and commitments of nonreligious people helps us to understand why it is that, although nonreligious people are more likely to perceive a conflict between some areas of science such as evolutionary theory and religion (Elsdon-Baker 2017), these same data show that a majority of them do not perceive this conflict. The contrasting role of science across nonreligious existential cultures helps to understand these differences. Further empirical studies are needed, especially inductive work and research concerned with nonreligious people’s everyday lives – the sort of sociological ‘lived approaches’ that have been undertaken by Zuckerman (2008), Catto and Eccles (2013), Engelke (2015), Mumford (2015), and a handful of others.

In fact, it may well be that the distinctions made here between rationalist humanism and agnosticism in their relationship with science only skim the surface. Making these distinctions is to say nothing of non-rationalist modes of existential humanism documented by Aston (forthcoming) and LeDrew (2015), for example,<sup>15</sup> nor of the possibly many other forms of nonreligious existentiality: the subjectivist cultures of the alternatively spiritual (Heelas & Woodhead 2005); or the non-human-centred forms of materialism such as existential environmentalisms (sometimes referred to as ‘deep ecology’); and perhaps many more besides. Each of these orientations also engage with science in distinctive ways, and if the relationships between the existential

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<sup>15</sup> LeDrew’s notion of ‘humanistic atheism’ is an example of this, whilst his ‘scientific atheists’ would be described as ‘rationalist humanists’ within the conceptual framework used here.

cultures examined here and science are multiple, it is likely that each of these unexamined orientations would also exhibit this same complexity.

By this light, we need also to urgently to examine why it is that both rationalist humanism and positive atheism have received such disproportionate attention in academic research compared to other nonreligious existential modes. This may be bound up with the idea that nonreligion is synonymous with rationalist humanism, and that therefore rationalist humanism's (distinctive) affinities with science tell us everything we need to know about nonreligion/science relations. Rather than accepting the oft-made claim that all nonreligious people are scientific and anti-religious, critical scholarship should maybe be asking other questions. How is it, for example, that rationalist humanists are so visible in public life, able to attract wide media coverage and shape public discourses much more than other nonreligious existential cultures are able to do? Why have nonreligion and secular studies focused so disproportionately on rational humanists (often identified by the term 'atheist') and hardly engaged at all with agnostics, as well as with other humanist outlooks? What are the structural forces channeling our scholarly imaginations in these ways as well as wider public discourses? Given that caricatures of the nonreligious – as scientific, amongst other things – are as common as caricatures of the religious as 'unscientific', these questions may be matters of social and political, as well as scholarly, concern.

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