



## Changing Minds: Cogency Theory and Secular Bodies

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This reflection on Donovan O. Schaefer's *Wild Experiment* focuses on one angle of the multidisciplinary network of ideas explored in his book: the way cogency theory pertains to the theoretical discussion in psychology and secular studies. The beauty of cogency theory is identified to lie in its capacity to bring together conversations in philosophy, psychology, religious studies, and secularism studies, among other fields.

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## Introduction

I am grateful for the opportunity to join this forum and offer a reflection on Donovan Schaefer's latest book, *Wild Experiment: Feeling Science and Secularism After Darwin* (2022). I first met Schaefer in 2017 as a graduate student at Oxford, where I enjoyed the privilege of being taught by him in the Science and Religion program. The discussions we had about different ways of thinking about religion, science, and secularism in the light-filled rooms of Trinity College in many respects shaped my academic sensibility and the trajectory of my research. Reading *Wild Experiment* brought back the joyful feeling of diving into those expansive and illuminating exchanges.

*Wild Experiment* is a captivating book. Much like Schaefer's other works, it offers the reader an impressive kaleidoscope of ideas, weaving the diverse fields of science and technology studies, psychology, affect theory, and secular studies, to name a few, into a single capacious conversation saturated with crisp theoretical and practical insight. Schaefer's (2022, 3) concept of "click"—the intellectual affect that consists in "the subtle joy of pieces of information snapping together" best describes my experience of following the central argument of this book unfold and blossom.

*Wild Experiment* reads as a natural companion to Schaefer's first book, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (2015), in which he offers a layered critique of the interiority and immateriality of the Western cultural notion of religion defined as "always and only a way of thinking," arguing that religion is affective at its very core:

What if religion is not only about language, books, or belief? In what ways is religion—for humans and other animals about the way things feel, the things we want, the way our bodies are guided through thickly textured, magnetised worlds? Or the way our bodies flow into relationships—loving or hostile—with other bodies? (Schaefer 2015, 29)

Although some of these themes are echoed in *Wild Experiment* (I particularly enjoyed Schaefer's discussion of William James's (2022, 47) understanding of religion, which "emerges not from arithmetic but from our deep-running affective currents" where "we start with the feeling, then surround it with elaborate architectures of belief"), the new monograph expands this argument beyond the subject of religion. Here, Schaefer (2022, 20) builds his case to demonstrate that "everything we do as bodies is affective": religion, secularism, science, and politics are all saturated with feeling. Schaefer (2022, 16–17) writes that "from babies playing with blocks to giddy proofreaders picking out mistakes in a text," the desire to know the world is the mechanism that propels thinking (an argument I eagerly attest to from "empirical" observation as I alternate writing this reflection with looking after my infant daughter who is currently in her "explorer" stage):

Babies and their games with shapes, words, dolls, blocks, faces, gestures, and toys are already learning to revel in click . . . All animals and all humans are rational in the sense of desiring, considering, and more or less effectively arranging information about our environments. This is because all animals have intellectual feelings, in different combinations and in varying degrees. What gets called rationality is really a combination of intellectual passions nudging us to know the world.

This approach shapes the main arch of the book's argument, which is centered around Schaefer's (2022, 10) *cogency theory*, defined as "a collection of perspectives on how thinking is made by feeling." Schaefer (2022, 5) takes this thesis further than the thinkers associated with feminist science and technology studies scholarship have done in the past, arguing that "knowledge-making is not just entangled with feeling . . . but encompassed by it."

This argument, supported by several case studies, is developed in two key moves: first, Schaefer deconstructs "the ambient belief" that saturates the Western way of approaching thinking and feeling as separate categories. Subsequently, he builds an intricate bridge between secularism and affect, presenting his case for the reimagining of the secular not as "contraptions of pure reason" but as "alloys of emotion." Max Weber's regularly misconstrued concept of disenchantment (or "demagnification"), according to Schaefer (2022, 95), is not based on annihilation of feeling, but on its reconfiguration or rearrangement:

The cogency theory approach to secularism suggests that disenchantment is not so much the eradication of feeling in our understanding of the world. It remixes ways of feeling and thinking into new affective forms.

As a scholar of nonreligion with a background in cognitive science, I find this framework of approaching the secular through the lens of reconfiguring emotion/affect most intriguing. The angle that interests me most is the mechanism behind this reconfiguration. In my work, I explore the cognitive aspects of nonreligion, focusing on the way different theories of mind contribute to the production of nonreligious experience. The two central issues behind the majority of cognitive approaches to the study of nonreligion are the disembodiment behind their conceptions of the mind and the subtractionist approach to defining nonreligion. I argue that cogency theory is perfectly placed to address both issues. Therefore, this response will focus on the themes in *Wild Experiment* that are closest to my heart by engaging with the way this book sets up the conversations about cognition and secularism (particularly in chapters three and four) and exploring what cogency theory contributes to the psychological study of nonreligion.

My reflections are rooted in the 4E (more appropriately described as 5E) cognition paradigm, which is an understanding of the mind as embodied, embedded, enactive, extended, and emotional/affective. I use this framework as I reflect on the cluster of approaches to nonreligion Schaefer calls “material secularism,” the term that gives the nod to “material religion,” thereby presenting secularism as substantive, embodied, and felt.

### **Embodied Minds: Thinking as Feeling**

“Before any statement about the mind, is an assumption about the nature of the reality of which it is part, and which is in some degree accessible to it as experience or as knowledge. Whoever controls the definition of mind controls the definition of humanity itself, and culture, and history,” writes American novelist Marilynne Robinson (2010, 31–32) in her remarkable collection of essays *Absence of Mind*. Science (and cognitive science is no exception) is never neutral: Schaefer (2022, 231) writes that “no part of science happens in a vacuum. It’s engineered by living bodies, saturated by culture, power, and history, and enfolded within feeling.” Science always works within a specific cultural paradigm, which leads to a particular understanding of the mind; this, in turn, leads to a particular understanding of the human experience.

Schaefer (2022, 14) builds on this foundational theme throughout the book, first by putting Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi in an elaborate conversation to show that science always relies on “tacit knowledge, the repertoire of unspoken background coordinates—absorbed through experience rather than language—that powerfully shape scientific knowledge production.” All theories, without exception, are created by embodied, culturally embedded, historically and physically situated human minds. But what, according to cognitive science, is the mind?

According to the traditional cognitivist (i.e., computationalism) approach, dominant in cognitive approaches to the study of nonreligion, the mind is a complex information processing system, and cognition is usually understood as a form of computation. Philosopher Andy Clark (2012, 276) describes the traditional cognitive science model, as “brainbound.” According to this model, the body is “just the sensor system of the brain, while the rest of the world is just an arena in which adaptive problems get posed, and the brain-body system must sense and act” (Clark 2012, 276). This broad commitment to the computational theory of mind in the cognitive study of nonreligion leads to an almost exclusive focus on the study of mental phenomena like the presence or absence of belief.

An alternative to this “brainbound” model is an embodied or 4E approach that views cognition as inherently linked to the body and its environment. Clark aptly describes this model as “porous.” According to this porous model, the processes that facilitate cognition involve inextricable entanglements of

“feedback, feedforward, and feed-around loops that promiscuously criss-cross the boundaries of brain, body, and world” (Clark 2012, 278). From this perspective, the faculties linked to sensing, thinking, and feeling are inextricably formed and informed by our body-based interactions with the surrounding world. According to these 4E theories, the body (from its chemical composition down to the gut bacteria) and environment (expressed through both physical and cultural niches) are an inextricable part of cognition and emotion.

By his own admission, Schaefer (2022, 6) employs a “light-touch approach” to the term “cognition,” using it “as a catchall to include many kinds of thought like reasoning, knowing, recalling, discovering, and learning.” Despite the conceptual breadth of this treatment, Schaefer’s understanding of the mind seems to broadly align with the embodied cognition approach. Even though the term “cogency” looks as if it is etymologically rooted in the “cogito” of computationalism, Schaefer (2022, 9) explains that this is not the case:

It comes from the Latin roots *co-*, meaning “together,” and *agō*, meaning “drive” or “act.” Its descendants are English words like agent or action. The related Greek root *agō* gives the further sense of a “guide” or “duct” and enters English in words like the agonism of dramatic action, or the pedagogy of guiding the young, or axiom—a thing found to be weighty. Cogency as *cō* + *agō* corrals all these meanings. This confluence and contest of forces is agonism, a struggle of different priorities. To say something is cogent is not the self-evident testimony of truth to an abstract intellect. It spotlights forces streaming together, creating a tangible *feeling of truth* measured by the body. These forces interact on the microregister of feeling. *Believing* means one of these struggling currents of feeling has prevailed. It has, for now, been found *cogent*.

One minor concern I have about Schaefer’s discussion of the psychological grounding of cogency theory is the use of metaphors that on occasion seem to obscure the conceptual precision of the argument. For instance, Schaefer (2022, 234) writes that thinking “buds” from feeling, thus echoing the idea that goes back to the founder of experimental psychology Wilhelm Wundt, who held that feelings come before thinking, arguing that “the clear apperception of ideas in acts of cognition and recognition is always preceded by special feelings” (Wundt 1907, 244). However, the argument behind cogency theory as well as Schaefer’s (2022, 8) engagement with the key discussions within psychology and neuroscience support the perspective that affect and cognition are one and should be conceptualized as “a seamless garment.”

In the “Feeling is Believing” chapter, Schaefer sets up a dialogue between psychology and cognitive theory that achieves two important goals: first, it demonstrates that contemporary cognitive neuroscience supports cogency theory, and second, it challenges the outdated theoretical frameworks within



the field of psychology that stem from the tacit knowledge that understands reason and emotion as autonomous categories. Schaefer's methodology is rooted in Samantha Frost's biocultural approach, which allows him to build a much-needed bridge between the humanistic and scientific perspectives on the mind. A biocultural approach, according to Frost, pays attention to an ongoing polyphonous conversation between an organism, its habitat, other organisms, and their history of experience: it melts and remolds the flat familiar binaries (including the binary of thinking/feeling) into relationships, networks, and flows. This theoretical framework is consonant with the logic of the 4E approach as it provides a way to conceive of the body as essentially and irreducibly relational, extended, and historied. "An organism," writes Frost (2016, 123), "can be seen as a literal corporealization of a conjunction between its transgenerational carried history and the environment within which it currently lives."

The layer I would like to explore further is the role that culture and environment play in the shaping of this "seamless garment" of thinking/feeling. In his discussion of the making and remaking of belief, Schaefer (2022, 232) describes cogency as "the raw material of conviction":

It's the agonism of compulsions in our bodies, the traces of the rambunctious passion for reason messing together with the sticky affects that surround it to make weird conglomerates of belief. It affirms that thinking and feeling are not just intertwined . . . It's about how we make up our minds by feeling our way forward, and how new injections of feeling—including the feelings carried by information, fact or fiction—remake belief.

If feeling (re)shapes belief, then what (re)shapes feeling? How does one explore this process and the mechanism behind it without reiterating the binary that cogency theory deconstructs? One potential avenue for exploring it within the biocultural framework is the concept of imaginaries. It has a rich (yet not unproblematic) history of engagement in the work of Charles Taylor. However, the approach I find more productive is found in works of Leila Dawney (2011) and Kathleen Lennon (2015), who reimagine this concept through the lens of affect, using imaginaries as a tool of subject formation to argue that bodies make sense of their engagement with the world through the production of affective imaginary associations tied to their histories and shaped by participation in their environment. It seems to me that this approach may avoid Schaefer's critique of Taylor's understanding of imaginaries as an on/off switch of emotion.

This contemporary application invites a new conception of imaginaries as material entities: "They are not just a backdrop to the world," argues Dawney (2011, 535), "imaginaries are produced by bodies through practices and technologies and constitute the way in which we experience the world." From this perspective, imaginaries are more like intuition or gut feeling than

a rigid mental representational framework. Dawney (2011, 542) argues that conceptualizing imaginaries as “a way of collective production of sense” offers an insight into “how differently historied bodies come to experience and engage with the world in different ways” and leads to the possibility of thinking about the role of imaginaries in constituting different bodies with different capacities: differently historied bodies produce different imaginaries, which in their turn may increase or decrease their capacities to act in accordance with the histories that have affected their imaginaries in the first place.

Kathleen Lennon’s *Imagination and the Imaginary* (2015, 73) defines imaginaries as “the shape or form in terms of which we experience the world and ourselves; a gestalt which carries significance, affect, and normative force.” Lennon (2015, 138) argues that they are simultaneously *disclosed* by the world and yet *created* by us. We do not project or force imaginaries on the world; rather, they emerge from our embedding in the environment.

Lennon’s (2015, 2) conception of the imaginary should be approached “not as a domain of illusion posited in opposition to a ‘real’, but rather as *that by which* the real is made available to us.” The histories through which bodies are produced take place within histories of both ideas and material relations and should be considered in terms of how they position and affect bodies always already embedded in the environment. It is through the body’s material relationship with the world that these categories emerge and “back-form reality,” using Brian Massumi’s (2002, 8) vocabulary. One of the exciting contributions of cogency theory is the way it reframes the imaginary of the mind by reconfiguring the thinking/feeling binary and thereby offering a toolkit for a less sterile and more embodied and affective psychological study of nonreligion not limited to the study of belief and its absence.

## The Making of Secular Bodies

Before I proceed to discuss the implications of cogency theory for the understanding of the secular, I pause here for a quick terminological detour. In the current theoretical landscape of the fields engaging with secularism and nonreligion, there are three main clusters of terms: first, the ones that stem from the term “religion” (e.g., nonreligion or irreligion); second, the ones with “theism” as their root (e.g., atheism or anti-theism); and third, the ones stemming from the term “secular” (e.g., secularity and secularism). In my work, I follow Lois Lee (2012, 131), who argues that the term “nonreligion” is the broadest as it covers the largest number of nones under this multidisciplinary umbrella. There are overlapping issues within the fields of nonreligion and secularism, and I approach them as sibling disciplines here as I focus on those similarities.

One of the biggest issues common to both of these fields is the negative attitude reflected in what Chris Cotter calls a *subtractionist approach*, rooted in a

problematic historical attitude that treats nonreligion-related phenomena either as a problem or as an “uninteresting residuum.” According to this perspective, different manifestations of nonreligion are viewed as an anomaly, a statistical outlier, a left-over category, a comparison group, or just an afterthought (Cotter 2020, 55). The way this attitude is reflected in the traditional secularization theory, as well as most psychological studies of nonreligion, is linked to the reification of religion: from this perspective, religion-related phenomena are treated as something “charged” and substantial, while any nonreligion-related phenomena are relegated to the “neutral” space empty of religion. In *Recognising the Non-Religious*, Lee (2015, 50) shows how this treatment of nonreligion is also the dominant approach in social science, which manifests in “religion-centric methodologies, in which the secular is viewed as a context in which religion exists and is enacted.”

Schaefer’s (2022, 4) cogency theory challenges the subtractionist approach found in the traditional narrative of secularization summed up “as the slow but steady fade-out of religion” and that “depicts rationality floating above the world and guiding history, immune to the local, the particular, the bodily, and—especially—the emotional”:

Cogency theory shines a light on the secular not as the gleaming fortress of reason, but as a humming network of tastes, dispositions, and moods laying down the rhythm that enables our memories, ideas, concepts, and beliefs.

In his engagement with secularism, disenchantment, and critique, Schaefer (2022, 84) first challenges the historical narrative of disenchantment found in the classic accounts of Max Weber and Peter Berger followed by introducing the work of scholars in the field of secularism studies to show that secularity is not a “flat landscape” left over after religion has been removed but “a something,” or rather, “somethings”—habits, cultures, dispositions, affects.

The tradition Schaefer (2023, 704) calls “a material secularism” in one of his recent papers observes that secularism comes along “not just with a set of discourses, paradigms, beliefs and disbeliefs, but with its own ways of being embodied.” To further disassemble this logic of subtraction, Schaefer engages with anthropological work exploring the mechanisms of formation of the secular subject and secular habitus in the works of Talal Asad and his students, the late Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind. This intellectual tradition draws on Michel Foucault’s conception of historically constituted subjects, which implies the process of embodied cultivation and subjectivation of perceptual and affective capacities.

Where the classic secularization theory separates religious and secular—relegating religion to emotion and secularity to “neutral” rationality, cogency theory suggests that nonreligion and secularism are also shaped by embodied



affects. Schaefer argues that a closer look at the relationships between secularism, enchantment, and critique reveals the affective currents of reasoning. Together with Ann Pellegrini, Jane Bennett, Janet Jakobsen, Monique Scheer, and Nadia Fadil, among others, Schaefer explores the textures of secular feeling. If Taylor's story of secularization offers a flat approach to feeling where it is either there or not, Schaefer's cogency theory offers an exploration of its fullest spectrum. Therefore, cogency theory acts as a bridge between secularism studies and affect theory: Schaefer (2022, 84) argues that from this perspective, what gets called disenchantment is not the destruction of feeling but its reconfiguration.

It seems to me that Schaefer's discussion of secularism through the lens of cogency theory essentially provides a layered response to Charles Hirschkind's provocative question originally raised in his essay titled *Is There a Secular Body?* (2011). Hirschkind similarly positions his material inquiry along the lines of secular embodiment, with the question reflected in the title of his essay. This question gets further unpacked in his elaborate call for attention to the embodied nature of the secular as he asks whether there is "a particular configuration of the human sensorium—of sensibilities, affects, embodied dispositions—specific to secular subjects, and thus, constitutive of what we mean by secular society?" (Hirschkind 2011, 633). Hirschkind's essay generated a lot of interest in the notion of the secular body, however, he left his question open. My reading of Schaefer's (2022, 105–6) engagement with the secular through the lens of cogency theory suggests (and I welcome his correction if I am wrong) that his answer to this question is "yes":

In all its forms, secularism washes over us, rewriting the parameters of how our bodies feel their way through the world. Thought—the play of ideas, concepts, reasons, and evidence—is emotionally alive, neither immune to the public domain nor detached from it. If formations of the secular have something to do with the reconfiguration of frames of knowledge, they have everything to do with changing how the world feels. That's disenchantment. Certain affective forms are nourished, cultivated, detailed, disciplined refined to a level of sculptural precision. Others are left to wither and fall. Josephson-Storm writes that "we have never been disenchanted." But really, the conclusion to draw is that disenchantment, for Weber, never meant emotional emptiness. It was a new channel of feeling-by-thinking.

## Conclusion

The shimmering beauty of cogency theory lies in its capacity to bring together conversations in philosophy, psychology, religious studies, and secularism studies, among other fields. In this reflection, I have focused only on one angle of the multidisciplinary network of ideas explored in *Wild Experiment*: the way cogency

theory pertains to the theoretical discussion in psychology and secular studies. Its reach is much wider than that, as other contributors to this special issue will attest.

*Wild Experiment* provides a fresh contribution to the understanding of secularism and nonreligion by offering a more subtle yet stimulating intellectual history of the secular that considers the affective and embodied formations of both belief and unbelief. Schaefer's cogency theory and the material secularism approach are perfect candidates for mapping out new strategies for the cognitive approaches to nonreligion as they engage much more closely with the role of feeling, materiality, and culture in shaping secular bodies and their experiences, habits, orientations, and sensibilities.

In this reflection, I have argued that cogency theory contributes to a new biocultural paradigm that could enrich and broaden the cognitive understanding of nonreligion as a substantive object of research and would work well in conjunction with the 4E cognition paradigm. Schaefer's approach shows that what constitutes nonreligion and the secular extends beyond the bland absence of beliefs or emotions by providing a new map for rethinking cognition and nonreligion: "Whatever secularization and disenchantment are, they're not so much the eradication of feeling as the replacement of one template of feeling by others" (Schaefer 2022, 24).

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