

BREAKING THE SPELL

RELIGION AS A NATURAL PHENOMENON



DANIEL C. DENNETT

AUTHOR OF *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*

BREAKING THE SPELL



ALSO BY DANIEL C. DENNETT

Content and Consciousness

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The Mind's I

(with Douglas Hofstadter)

Elbow Room

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Kinds of Minds

Brainchildren

Freedom Evolves

Sweet Dreams

DANIEL C. DENNETT



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THE SPELL



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VIKING



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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario,
Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd,
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green,
Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd) • Penguin Group (Australia), 250
Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson
Australia Group Pty Ltd) • Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre,
Panchsheel Park, New Delhi-110 017, India • Penguin Books (NZ), Cnr Airborne and
Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New
Zealand Ltd) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in 2006 by Viking Penguin, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Dennett, Daniel Clement.

Breaking the spell: religion as a natural phenomenon / Daniel C. Dennett.
p.cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN: 978-1-1012-1886-0

Religion—Controversial literature. I. Title.

BL2775.3.D46 2006

200—dc22 2005042415

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FOR SUSAN

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Preface

Let me begin with an obvious fact: I am an American author, and this book is addressed in the first place to American readers. I shared drafts of this book with many readers, and most of my non-American readers found this fact not just obvious but distracting—even objectionable in some cases. Couldn't I make the book less provincial in outlook? Shouldn't I strive, as a philosopher, for the most universal target audience I could muster? No. Not in this case, and my non-American readers should consider what they can learn about the situation in America from what they find in this book. More compelling to me than the reaction of my non-American readers was the fact that so few of my American readers had any inkling of this bias—or, if they did, they didn't object. That is a pattern to ponder. It is commonly observed—both in America and abroad—that America is strikingly different from other First World nations in its attitudes to religion, and this book is, among other things, a sounding device intended to measure the depths of those differences. I decided I had to express the emphases found here if I was to have any hope of reaching my intended audience: the curious and conscientious citizens of my native land—as many as possible, not just the academics. (I saw no point in preaching to the choir.) This is an experiment, a departure from my aims in earlier books, and those who are disoriented or disappointed by the departure now know that I had my reasons, good or bad. Of course I may have missed my target. We shall see.

My focus on America is deliberate; when it comes to contemporary religion, on the other hand, my focus on Christianity first, and Islam and Judaism next, is unintended but unavoidable: I simply do not know enough about other religions to write with any confidence *xiii* about them. Perhaps I should have devoted several more years to study before writing this book, but since the urgency of the message was borne in on me again and again by current events, I had to settle for the perspectives I had managed to achieve so far.

One of the departures from my previous stylistic practices is that for once I am using endnotes, not footnotes. Usually I deplore this practice, since it obliges the scholarly reader to keep an extra bookmark running while flipping back and forth, but in this instance I decided that a reader-friendly flow for a wider audience was more important than the convenience of scholars. This then let me pack rather more material than usual into rather lengthy endnotes, so the inconvenience has some recompense for those who are up for the extra arguments. In the same spirit, I have pulled four chunks of material meant mainly for academic readers out of the main text and deposited them at the end as appendixes. They are referred to at the point in the text where otherwise they would be chapters or chapter sections.

Once again, thanks to Tufts University, I have been able to play Tom Sawyer and the whitewashed fence with a remarkably brave and conscientious group of students, mostly undergraduates, who put their own often deeply held religious convictions on the line, reading an early draft in a seminar in the fall of 2004, correcting many errors, and guiding me into their religious worlds with good humor and tolerance for my gaffes and other offenses. If I do manage to find my target audience, their feedback deserves much of the credit. Thank you, Priscilla Alvarez, Jacquelyn Ardam, Mauricio Artinano, Gajanthan Balakaneshan, Alexandra Barker, Lawrence Bluestone, Sara Brauner, Benjamin Brooks, Sean Chisholm, Erika Clampitt, Sarah Dalglish, Kathleen Daniel, Noah Dock, Hannah Ehrlich, Jed Forman, Aaron Goldberg, Gena Gorlin, Joseph Gulezian, Christopher Healey, Eitan Hersh, Joe Keating, Matthew Kibbee, Tucker Lentz, Chris Lintz, Stephen Martin, Juliana McCanney, Akiko Noro, David Polk, Sameer Puri, Marc Raifman, Lucas Recchione, Edward Rossel, Zack Rubin, Ariel Rudolph, Mami Sakamaki, Bryan Salvatore, Kyle Thompson-Westra, and Graedon Zorzi.

Thanks also to my happy team in the Center for Cognitive Studies, the teaching assistants, research assistants, research associate, and program assistant. They commented on student essays, advised students who were upset by the project, advised me; helped me devise, refine, copy, and translate questionnaires; entered and analyzed data; retrieved hundreds of books and articles from libraries and Web sites; helped one another, and helped keep me on track: Avery Archer, Felipe de Brigard, Adam Degen Brown, Richard Griffin, and Teresa Salvato. Thanks as well to Chris Westbury, Diana Raffman, John Roberts, John Symons, and Bill Ramsey for their participation at their universities in our questionnaire project, which is still under way, and to John Kihlstrom, Karel de Pauw, and Marcel Kinsbourne for steering me to valuable reading.

Special thanks to Meera Nanda, whose own brave campaign to bring scientific understanding of religion to her native India was one of the inspirations for this book, and also for its title. See her book *Breaking the Spell of Dharma* (2002) as well as the more recent *Prophets Facing Backwards* (2003).

The readers mentioned in the first paragraph include a few who have chosen to remain anonymous. I thank them, and also Ron Barnette, Akeel Bilgrami, Pascal Boyer, Joanna Bryson, Tom Clark, Bo Dahlbom, Richard Denton, Robert Goldstein, Nick Humphrey, Justin Junge, Matt Konig, Will Lowe, Ian Lustick, Suzanne Massey, Rob McCall, Paul Oppenheim, Seymour Papert, Amber Ross, Don Ross, Paul Seabright, Paul Slovak, Dan Sperber, and Sue Stafford. Once again, Terry Zaroff did an outstanding copyediting stint for me, picking up not just stylistic slips but substantive weaknesses as well. Richard Dawkins and Peter Suber are two who provided particularly valuable suggestions in the course of conversations, as did my agent, John Brockman, and his wife, Katinka Matson, but let me also thank, without naming them, the many other people who have taken an interest in this project over the last two years and provided much-appreciated suggestions, advice, and moral support.

Finally, I must once again thank my wife, Susan, who makes every book of mine a duet, not a solo, in ways I could never calculate.

PART I

OPENING PANDORA'S BOX

CHAPTER ONE

Breaking Which Spell?

1 What's going on?

And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow; And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up.

—Matthew 13:3–4

If “survival of the fittest” has any validity as a slogan, then the Bible seems a fair candidate for the accolade of the fittest of texts.

—Hugh Pyper, “The Selfish Text: The Bible and Memetics”

You watch an ant in a meadow, laboriously climbing up a blade of grass, higher and higher until it falls, then climbs again, and again, like Sisyphus rolling his rock, always striving to reach the top. Why is the ant doing this? What benefit is it seeking for itself in this strenuous and unlikely activity? Wrong question, as it turns out. No biological benefit accrues to the ant. It is not trying to get a better view of the territory or seeking food or showing off to a potential mate, for instance. Its brain has been commandeered by a tiny parasite, a lancet fluke (*Dicrocoelium dendriticum*), that needs to get itself into the stomach of a sheep or a cow in order to complete its reproductive cycle. This little brain worm is driving the ant into position to benefit *its* progeny, not the ant's. This is not an isolated phenomenon. Similarly manipulative parasites infect fish, and mice, among other species. These hitchhikers cause their hosts to behave in unlikely—even suicidal—ways, all for the benefit of the guest, not the host.¹

Does anything like this ever happen with human beings? Yes indeed. We often find human beings setting aside their personal interests, their health, their chances to have children, and devoting their entire lives to furthering the interests of an *idea* that has lodged in their brains. The Arabic word *islam* means “submission,” and every good Muslim bears witness, prays five times a day, gives alms, fasts during Ramadan, and tries to make the pilgrimage, or *hajj*, to Mecca, all on behalf of the idea of Allah, and Muhammad, the messenger of Allah. Christians and Jews do likewise, of course, devoting their lives to spreading the Word, making huge sacrifices, suffering bravely, risking their lives for an idea. So do Sikhs and Hindus and Buddhists. And don't forget

the many thousands of secular humanists who have given their lives for Democracy, or Justice, or just plain Truth. There are many ideas to die for.

Our ability to devote our lives to something we deem more important than our own personal welfare—or our own biological imperative to have offspring—is one of the things that set us aside from the rest of the animal world. A mother bear will bravely defend a food patch, and ferociously protect her cub, or even her empty den, but probably more people have died in the valiant attempt to protect sacred places and texts than in the attempt to protect food stores or their own children and homes. Like other animals, we have built-in desires to reproduce and to do pretty much whatever it takes to achieve this goal, but we also have creeds, and the ability to transcend our genetic imperatives. This fact does make us different, but it is itself a biological fact, visible to natural science, and something that requires an explanation from natural science. How did just one species, *Homo sapiens*, come to have these extraordinary perspectives on their own lives?

Hardly anybody would say that the most important thing in life is having more grandchildren than one's rivals do, but this is the default *summum bonum* of every wild animal. They don't know any better. They can't. They're just animals. There is one interesting exception, it seems: the dog. Can't "man's best friend" exhibit devotion that rivals that of a human friend? Won't a dog even die if need be to protect its master? Yes, and it is no coincidence that this admirable trait is found in a domesticated species. The dogs of today are the offspring of the dogs our ancestors most loved and admired in the past; without even trying to breed for loyalty, they managed to do so, bringing out the best (by their lights, by our lights) in our companion animals.² Did we unconsciously model this devotion to a master on our own devotion to God? Were we shaping dogs in our own image? Perhaps, but then where did we get our devotion to God?

The comparison with which I began, between a parasitic worm invading an ant's brain and an idea invading a human brain, probably seems both far-fetched and outrageous. Unlike worms, ideas aren't alive, and don't *invade brains*; they are *created by minds*. True on both counts, but these are not as telling objections as they first appear. Ideas aren't alive; they can't see where they're going and have no limbs with which to steer a host brain even if they could see. True, but a lancet fluke isn't exactly a rocket scientist either; it's no more intelligent than a carrot, really; it doesn't even have a brain. What it has is just the good fortune of being endowed with features that affect ant brains in this useful way whenever it comes in contact with them. (These features are like the eye spots on butterfly wings that sometimes fool predatory birds into thinking some big animal is looking at them. The birds are scared away and the butterflies are the beneficiaries, but are none the wiser for it.) An inert idea, if it were designed just right, *might* have a beneficial effect on a brain without having to know it was doing so! And if it did, it might prosper because it had that design.

The comparison of the Word of God to a lancet fluke is unsettling, but the idea of comparing an idea to a living thing is not new. I have a page of music, written on parchment in the mid-sixteenth century, which I found half a century ago in a Paris bookstall. The text (in Latin) recounts the moral of the parable of the Sower (Matthew 13): *Semen est verbum Dei; sator autem Christus*. The Word of God is a seed, and the sower of the seed is Christ. These seeds take root in individual human beings, it seems,

and get those human beings to spread them, far and wide (and in return, the human hosts get eternal life—*eum qui audit manebit in eternum*).

How are ideas created by minds? It might be by miraculous inspiration, or it might be by more natural means, as ideas are spread from mind to mind, surviving translation between different languages, hitchhiking on songs and icons and statues and rituals, coming together in unlikely combinations in particular people's heads, where they give rise to yet further new "creations," bearing family resemblances to the ideas that inspired them but adding new features, new powers as they go. And perhaps some of the "wild" ideas that first invaded our minds have yielded offspring that have been domesticated and tamed, as we have attempted to become their masters or at least their stewards, their shepherds. What are the ancestors of the domesticated ideas that spread today? Where did they originate and why? And once our ancestors took on the goal of spreading these ideas, not just harboring them but cherishing them, how did this *belief in belief* transform the ideas being spread?

The great ideas of religion have been holding us human beings enthralled for thousands of years, longer than recorded history but still just a brief moment in biological time. If we want to understand the nature of religion today, as a natural phenomenon, we have to look not just at what it is today, but at what it used to be. An account of the origins of religion, in the next seven chapters, will provide us with a new perspective from which to look, in the last three chapters, at what religion is today, why it means so much to so many people, and what they might be right and wrong about in their self-understanding as religious people. Then we can see better where religion might be heading in the near future, our future on this planet. I can think of no more important topic to investigate.

2 A working definition of religion

Philosophers stretch the meaning of words until they retain scarcely anything of their original sense; by calling "God" some vague abstraction which they have created for themselves, they pose as deists, as believers, before the world; they may even pride themselves on having attained a higher and purer idea of God, although their God is nothing but an insubstantial shadow and no longer the mighty personality of religious doctrine.

—Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*

How do I define religion? It doesn't matter *just* how I define it, since I plan to examine and discuss the neighboring phenomena that (probably) aren't religions—spirituality, commitment to secular organizations, fanatical devotion to ethnic groups (or sports teams), superstition.... So, wherever I "draw the line," I'll be going over the line in any case. As you will see, what we usually call religions are composed of a variety of quite different phenomena, arising from different circumstances and having different implications, forming a loose family of phenomena, not a "natural kind" like a chemical element or a species.

What is the essence of religion? This question should be considered askance. Even

if there is a deep and important affinity between many or even most of the world's religions, there are sure to be variants that share some typical features while lacking one or another "essential" feature. As evolutionary biology advanced during the last century, we gradually came to appreciate the deep reasons for grouping living things the way we do—sponges are animals, and birds are more closely related to dinosaurs than frogs are—and new surprises are still being discovered every year. So we should expect—and tolerate—some difficulty in arriving at a counterexample-proof definition of something as diverse and complex as religion. Sharks and dolphins look very much alike and behave in many similar ways, but they are not the same sort of thing at all. *Perhaps*, once we understand the whole field better, we will see that Buddhism and Islam, for all their similarities, deserve to be considered two entirely different species of cultural phenomenon. We can start with common sense and tradition and consider them both to be religions, but we shouldn't blind ourselves to the prospect that our initial sorting may have to be adjusted as we learn more. Why is *suckling one's young* more fundamental than *living in the ocean*? Why is *having a backbone* more fundamental than *having wings*? It may be obvious now, but it wasn't obvious at the dawn of biology.

In the United Kingdom, the law regarding cruelty to animals draws an important moral line at whether the animal is a vertebrate: as far as the law is concerned, you may do what you like to a live worm or fly or shrimp, but not to a live bird or frog or mouse. It's a pretty good place to draw the line, but laws can be amended, and this one was. Cephalopods—octopus, squid, cuttlefish—were recently made *honorary vertebrates*, in effect, because they, unlike their close mollusc cousins the clams and oysters, have such strikingly sophisticated nervous systems. This seems to me a wise political adjustment, since the similarities that mattered to the law and morality didn't line up perfectly with the deep principles of biology.

We may find that drawing a boundary between *religion* and its nearest neighbors among cultural phenomena is beset with similar, but more vexing, problems. For instance, since the law (in the United States, at least) singles out religions for special status, declaring something that has been regarded as a religion to be really something else is bound to be of more than academic interest to those involved. Wicca (witchcraft) and other New Age phenomena have been championed as religions by their adherents precisely in order to elevate them to the legal and social status that religions have traditionally enjoyed. And, coming from the other direction, there are those who have claimed that evolutionary biology is really "just another religion," and hence its doctrines have no place in the public-school curriculum. Legal protection, honor, prestige, and a *traditional exemption from certain sorts of analysis and criticism*—a great deal hinges on how we define religion. How should I handle this delicate issue?

Tentatively, I propose to define religions as *social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought*. This is, of course, a circuitous way of articulating the idea that a religion without *God* or *gods* is like a vertebrate without a backbone.³ Some of the reasons for this roundabout language are fairly obvious; others will emerge over time—and the definition is subject to revision, a place to start, not something carved in stone to be defended to the death. According to this definition, a devout Elvis Presley fan club is not a religion,

because, although the members may, in a fairly obvious sense, *worship* Elvis, he is not deemed by them to be literally supernatural, but just to have been a particularly superb human being. (And if some fan clubs decide that Elvis is truly immortal and divine, then they are indeed on the way to starting a new religion.) A supernatural agent need not be very *anthropomorphic*. The Old Testament Jehovah is definitely a sort of divine man (not a woman), who sees with eyes and hears with ears—and talks and acts in real time. (God *waited* to see what Job would do, and *then* he *spoke* to him.) Many contemporary Christians, Jews, and Muslims insist that God, or Allah, being omniscient, has no need for anything like sense organs, and, being eternal, does not act in real time. This is puzzling, since many of them continue to pray to God, to hope that God *will* answer their prayers tomorrow, to express gratitude to God for *creating* the universe, and to use such locutions as “what God intends us to do” and “God have mercy,” acts that *seem* to be in flat contradiction to their insistence that their God is not at all anthropomorphic. According to a long-standing tradition, this tension between God as agent and God as eternal and immutable Being is one of those things that are simply beyond human comprehension, and it would be foolish and arrogant to try to understand it. That is as it may be, and this topic will be carefully treated later in the book, but we cannot proceed with my definition of religion (or any other definition, really) until we (tentatively, pending further illumination) get a *little* clearer about the spectrum of views that are discernible through this pious fog of modest incomprehension. We need to seek further interpretation before we can decide how to classify the doctrines these people espouse.

For some people, prayer is not literally *talking to God* but, rather, a “symbolic” activity, a way of talking *to oneself* about one’s deepest concerns, expressed metaphorically. It is rather like beginning a diary entry with “Dear Diary.” If what they call God is really *not* an agent in their eyes, a being that can *answer* prayers, *approve* and *disapprove*, *receive* sacrifices, and *mete out* punishment or forgiveness, then, although they may call this Being God, and stand in awe of *it* (not *Him*), their creed, whatever it is, is not really a religion according to my definition. It is, perhaps, a wonderful (or terrible) surrogate for religion, or a *former* religion, an offspring of a genuine religion that bears many family resemblances to religion, but it is another species altogether.⁴ In order to get clear about what religions *are*, we will have to allow that some religions may have turned into things that aren’t religions any more. This has certainly happened to particular practices and traditions that used to be parts of genuine religions. The rituals of Halloween are no longer religious rituals, at least in America. The people who go to great effort and expense to participate in them are not, thereby, practicing religion, even though their activities can be placed in a clear line of descent from religious practices. Belief in Santa Claus has also lost its status as a religious belief.

For others, prayer really is talking to God, who (not *which*) really does listen, and forgive. Their creed *is* a religion, according to my definition, provided that they are part of a larger social system or community, not a congregation of one. In this regard, my definition is profoundly at odds with that of William James, who defined religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (1902, p. 31). He would have no difficulty identifying a lone believer as a person with

a religion; he himself was apparently such a one. This concentration on individual, private religious *experience* was a tactical choice for James; he thought that the creeds, rituals, trappings, and political hierarchies of “organized” religion were a distraction from the root phenomenon, and his tactical path bore wonderful fruit, but he could hardly deny that those social and cultural factors hugely affect the content and structure of the individual’s experience. Today, there are reasons for trading in James’s psychological microscope for a wide-angle biological and social telescope, looking at the factors, over large expanses of both space and time, that shape the experiences and actions of individual religious people.

But just as James could hardly deny the social and cultural factors, I could hardly deny the existence of individuals who very sincerely and devoutly take themselves to be the lone communicants of what we might call private religions. Typically these people have had considerable experience with one or more world religions and have chosen not to be joiners. Not wanting to ignore them, but needing to distinguish them from the much, much more typical religious people who identify themselves with a particular creed or church that has many other members, I shall call them *spiritual* people, but not *religious*. They are, if you like, honorary vertebrates.

There are many other variants to be considered in due course—for instance, people who pray, and believe in the efficacy of prayer, but don’t believe that this efficacy is channeled through an agent God who literally hears the prayer. I want to postpone consideration of all these issues until we have a clearer sense of where these doctrines sprang from. The core phenomenon of religion, I am proposing, invokes gods who are effective agents in real time, and who play a central role in the way the participants think about what they ought to do. I use the evasive word “invokes” here because, as we shall see in a later chapter, the standard word “belief” tends to distort and camouflage some of the most interesting features of religion. To put it provocatively, religious belief isn’t always *belief*. And why is the approval of the supernatural agent or agents to be sought? That clause is included to distinguish religion from “black magic” of various sorts. There are people—very few, actually, although juicy urban legends about “satanic cults” would have us think otherwise—who take themselves to be able to command demons with whom they form some sort of unholy alliance. These (barely existent) social systems are on the boundary with religion, but I think it is appropriate to leave them out, since our intuitions recoil at the idea that people who engage in this kind of tripe deserve the special status of the devout. What apparently grounds the widespread respect in which religions of all kinds are held is the sense that those who are religious are well intentioned, trying to lead morally good lives, earnest in their desire not to do evil, and to make amends for their transgressions. Somebody who is both so selfish and so gullible as to try to make a pact with evil supernatural agents in order to get his way in the world lives in a comic-book world of superstition and deserves no such respect.⁵

3 To break or not to break

Science is like a blabbermouth who ruins a movie by telling you how it ends.

—Ned Flanders (fictional character on *The Simpsons*)

You're at a concert, awestruck and breathless, listening to your favorite musicians on their farewell tour, and the sweet music is lifting you, carrying you away to another place...and then somebody's cell phone starts ringing! Breaking the spell. Hateful, vile, inexcusable. This inconsiderate jerk has ruined the concert for you, stolen a precious moment that can never be recovered. How evil it is to break somebody's spell! I don't want to be that person with the cell phone, and I am well aware that I will seem to many people to be courting just that fate by embarking on this book.

The problem is that there are good spells and then there are bad spells. If only some timely phone call could have interrupted the proceedings at Jonestown in Guyana in 1978, when the lunatic Jim Jones was ordering his hundreds of spellbound followers to commit suicide! If only we could have broken the spell that enticed the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo to release sarin gas in a Tokyo subway, killing a dozen people and injuring thousands more! If only we could figure out some way today to break the spell that lures thousands of poor young Muslim boys into fanatical madrassahs where they are prepared for a life of murderous martyrdom instead of being taught about the modern world, about democracy and history and science! If only we could break the spell that convinces some of our fellow citizens that they are commanded by God to bomb abortion clinics!

Religious cults and political fanatics are not the only casters of evil spells today. Think of the people who are addicted to drugs, or gambling, or alcohol, or child pornography. They need all the help they can get, and I doubt if anybody is inclined to throw a protective mantle around these entranced ones and admonish, "Shhh! Don't break the spell!" And it may be that the best way to break these bad spells is to introduce the spellbound to a good spell, a god spell, a gospel. It may be, and it may not. We should try to find out. Perhaps, while we're at it, we should inquire whether the world would be a better place if we could snap our fingers and cure the workaholics, too—but now I'm entering controversial waters. Many workaholics would claim that theirs is a benign addiction, useful to society and to their loved ones, and, besides, they would insist, it is their right, in a free society, to follow their hearts wherever they lead, so long as no harm comes to anyone else. The principle is unassailable: we others have no right to intrude on their private practices *so long as we can be quite sure that they are not injuring others*. But it is getting harder and harder to be sure about when this is the case.

People make themselves dependent on many things. Some think they cannot live without daily newspapers and a free press, whereas others think they cannot live without cigarettes. Some think a life without music would not be worth living, and others think a life without religion would not be worth living. Are these addictions? Or are these genuine needs that we should strive to preserve, at almost any cost?

Eventually, we must arrive at questions about ultimate values, and no factual investigation could answer them. Instead, we can do no better than to sit down and reason together, a political process of mutual persuasion and education that we can try to conduct in good faith. But in order to do that we have to know what we are choosing between, and we need to have a clear account of the reasons that can be offered for and against the different visions of the participants. Those who refuse to