

Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False,
Thomas Nagel. New York and Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2012. 130pp.

Thomas Nagel is widely recognized as one of the most important analytical philosophers of his generation. In both the philosophy of mind and moral philosophy he has produced pioneering and influential work. This book inherits many of the virtues of that work. It is beautifully lucid, civilized, modest in tone, and courageous in its scope.

Its problem is that only a tiny proportion of its informed readers will find it anything other than profoundly wrong-headed. For as the title foretells, Nagel's leading idea is that there are things that science, as it is currently conceived, could not possibly explain. The current conception is that, given a purely physical beginning, everything else—chemistry, biology, life, mind, consciousness, intelligence, values, understandings, science itself—follows on by natural processes. Particles beget atoms beget molecules beget enzymes beget proteins beget life, beget *Homo sapiens* who begets the Royal Society and the rules of tennis. We do not understand every step in this process of course, but we can be reasonably confident of its overall shape, and confident too that any remaining gaps that can be closed will be closed only by more understanding of the same broad kind that we already have.

Nagel wholly rejects this picture. He denies that our consciousness can be explained in terms of our animal makeup; he thinks it very implausible to suppose that life can be explained as emerging from physical and chemical processes; he doubts that a process of random genetic mutation coupled with natural selection can explain the abundance and complexity of life, and he proposes instead that there should be an alternative which makes 'mind, meaning, and value as fundamental as matter and space-time in an account of what there is'. The idea is of a 'natural teleology': the world has taken the course it has partly

because it is tugged forwards to a Higher State: ‘the natural world would have a propensity to give rise to beings of the kind that have a good—beings for which things can be good or bad.’ While he acknowledges that such beings have appeared through the natural process of evolution, Nagel nevertheless holds that ‘part of the explanation of that process and the possibilities on which natural selection operates would be that they bring value into the world, in a great variety of forms’. The golden future beckons, and the world has responded, and goes on doing so.

Nagel differs from Creationists because this is not an intentional explanation. It is not that the Divine Architect is messing around with things in order to promote the emergence of value. Rather, the world targets itself on this emergence all by itself: there is a kind of immanent Providence magnetizing natural processes, beavering away behind the scenes to make sure that value comes about. Nagel advances no view about why this Providence is as slow as it seems to be—four billion years seems a long time to get as far as an implementation of value that includes Auschwitz or even Mitt Romney—but then he is disarmingly modest about the details of his vision. What he is sure about is that we need it for the world to be fully intelligible.

Explanations of events in terms of Nature seeking a goal or end went out in the seventeenth century, superseded by the scientific world view. It would give me pleasure to say that even if the endpoint is so quaint, the arguments Nagel offers for espousing it are impeccable, as befits a philosopher of his standing. Unfortunately there is considerable room for doubt. In the case of consciousness and mind, he has bought heavily into the so-called ‘Hard Problem’: first envisaging consciousness as a kind of purple haze or glassy add-on to our animal lives he then finds its arrival, and its way of interacting with physical things, inexplicable. This was Descartes’s problem, and since Wittgenstein and Ryle we have tried to

put it behind us. If consciousness is a purple haze over and above and irreducible to my animal nature, then perhaps you don't have it, and perhaps I didn't have it yesterday, for who is to say whether my apparent memory of 'it' is reliable? Part of the problem here is the abstract noun. If we follow Ryle's advice and replace it with an adverb (people doing things more or less consciously), Descartes's problem begins to deflate.

The same is true when we get to value. According to Nagel, Darwinians can explain, say, why we dislike pain and seek to minimize bringing it about for ourselves and for others we love. But, Nagel thinks, for the Darwinian, its 'real badness' can be no part of the explanation of why we are averse to it. So it is another mystery how real badness and other real normative properties enter our minds. Nagel here manifests his founding membership of a peculiar and fortunately local philosophical sub-culture that thrives by resolutely dismissing the resources of the alternative, Humean picture, which sees our judgment that pain is a bad thing as a useful expression of our natural aversion to it. All he says about this is that it 'denies that value judgments can be true in their own right', which he finds implausible. He is silent about why he thinks this, perhaps wisely, if only because nobody thinks that value judgments are true in their own right. The judgment that income distribution in the USA is unjust, for instance, is not true in its own right. It is true in virtue of that fact that after decades of lobbying, chief executives of major companies earn several hundred times the income of their rank and file workers. It is true because of natural facts.

Nagel holds that there is a negligible probability that 'self-reproducing life forms should have come into existence spontaneously', and here too it is hard to believe that the Darwinian chemist has been given a fair hearing. The question is whether large organic molecules might have come to catalyze their own reproduction, or the conditions for their own stability in a prebiotic soup, thereby providing a platform or launch-pad for an RNA

world. This is not the question of whether 'life' sprang into being spontaneously, and neither is Nagel's estimate of the vanishingly low probability of a gradualist story particularly authoritative. Given enough ocean and enough time, perhaps the proposition that there was an improbable sequence of events itself becomes probable. After all, as far as we know it only had to happen once, since the tree of life has but one trunk.

There is charm to reading a philosopher who confesses to finding things bewildering. But I regret the appearance of this book. It will only bring comfort to Creationists and Intelligent Design fans, who will not be too bothered about the difference between their Divine Architect and Nagel's Natural Providence. It will give ammunition to those triumphalist scientists who pronounce that philosophy is best pensioned off. If there were a philosophical Vatican, the book would be a good candidate for going onto the Index.