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A Reluctant Traveler's Guide for Slouching Towards Theism

A Philosophical Note on Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos*

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Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False. By Thomas Nagel. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 128 pages. \$24.95.

Mind and Cosmos is the sort of bold, innovative, controversial offering that we have come to expect from Nagel. It is sure to draw hostile fire from most naturalists, and it will attract friendly fire from many theists. Elliot Sober opines that “*Mind and Cosmos* is an audacious book, bucking the tide.”¹ And it represents the most recent installment of Nagel’s journey away from a fairly standard version of naturalism towards a theistic-friendly view of the universe. Nagel let the camel’s nose under the tent for this journey in 1974 with his publication of “What It Is Like to Be a Bat” in which he admitted the existence of irreducible consciousness and the first person point of view.² In 2001, Nagel’s *The Last Word* admitted that the existence of several facets of objective reason provided problems for naturalism and evidence for theism, though he sought to undercut the latter in that book.³ The fact that Nagel has been on such a journey is evidence of his honesty and integrity. He has

ABSTRACT: In this article, I state and respond to Nagel’s *Mind and Cosmos* argument, according to which, there are four things that physicalist Darwinism fails to explain, and while theism and his own panpsychist immanent teleological view do explain them, his view is superior to theism: (1) The emergence from a lifeless universe of the staggeringly complex life on earth in such a short time; (2) the development of such an incredible diversity of highly complex life forms from first life in such a short time; (3) the appearance of conscious beings from brute matter; (4) the existence of objective reason and value and the existence of creatures with the sort of faculties apt for grasping objective reality and value and being motivated by value.

1. Elliott Sober, “Remarkable Facts: Ending Science as We Know It,” *BostonReview.net*, November/December, 2012, http://www.bostonreview.net/BR37.6/elliott_sober_thomas_nagel_mind_cosmos.php.

2. Thomas Nagel, “What It Is Like to Be a Bat,” *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 435–50.

3. Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

doggedly refused to accept dismissive philosophical slogans as solutions for problems that are serious and won't go away.

In a nutshell, Nagel's argument is this: There are four things that must be explained that standard physicalist Darwinism will most likely never be able to explain or cannot explain even in principle (85):

- (1) The emergence from a lifeless universe of the staggeringly complex life on earth in such a short time.
- (2) The development of such an incredible diversity of highly complex life forms from first life in such a short time.
- (3) The appearance of conscious beings from brute matter.
- (4) The existence of objective reason and value and the existence of creatures with the sort of faculties apt for grasping objective reality and value and being motivated by value.

Any explanation of these four facts of our cosmos will have two elements to it (54): An ahistorical constitutive component that focuses on how the world could be such a place as to have x (for example, complex life, consciousness, objective reason, and value) in it (86, 112–16), and a historical component that focuses on describing the process by which x actually came to be.

Given the failure of Darwinian materialism, Nagel offers theism and his own solution as the primary explanatory options, and he rejects theism on two "grounds": We should not go outside of the universe and seek an explanation for something; instead, we should prefer a comprehensive view of the universe that offers a single natural order that unifies everything on the basis of a set of common elements and principles (cf. 8, 26). And Nagel doesn't want theism to be true, he can't bring himself to believe it, and he has a preference for a naturalist view (12, 22, 95). Nagel's solution to the constitutive component is to postulate a version of panpsychism to account for the origin of consciousness and reason. And his solution to the historical component is to proffer a version of immanent teleology that, given the indeterminacy of physical laws, selects a certain pathway among alternatives according to its tendency towards certain outcomes, namely, "a bias towards the marvelous" (92), an inherent tendency in matter towards the realization of conscious, (epistemically and morally) rational subjects with intrinsic value and the motivational structure to act for moral reasons and truth.

In his introductory chapter, Nagel states his central thesis, including a précis of the areas in which Darwinian materialism has been a failure, and he explains his preference for a naturalist over a theist solution to these problem areas. As a part of Nagel's project, he claims that some things are so remarkable (for example, complex life forms, consciousness) that they must be explained as nonaccidental if we are to pretend to have a real understanding of the world (7). This claim allows Nagel to reject a standard materialistic Darwinist explanation (given that no historical outcome is special, some improbable result or other was bound to obtain and we just have to settle

for the historical sequence that lead to us as an accidental, brute fact), but I think it gets him into trouble with the design filter. Recall that the filter states that when we have the conjunction of a highly improbable state of affairs and the fact that the state of affairs is “remarkable,” that is, special in some way besides the fact that it obtained, then we have strong evidence for the state of affairs resulting from the act of an intelligent agent. Nagel is familiar with intelligent design literature, and his claim above cries out for interaction with the design filter. In this context, it is worth mentioning that, as Etienne Gilson taught us long ago, immanent teleology is best explained by the existence of a purposeful Designer who gave it being. Nagel leaves immanent teleology as a brute fact, but it seems to need further explanation, which a Designer provides. And the design filter would indicate that the existence of immanent teleology (surely an improbable state of affairs across relevant possible worlds) and its specialness (it mimics the purposive goal oriented acts of an agent; it is aimed at creatures like us who are deemed special according to Western theism) is best explained by a Designer.

Finally, in this introductory chapter, Nagel makes the important observation that the mind-body problem isn’t a local one; it invades our understanding of the entire cosmos and its history. If irreducible consciousness and reason exist, we simply must ask what sort of reality could and did give rise to them.

Nagel is to be thanked for adopting a synoptic view of the mind-body problem, and drawing our attention to central questions regarding the cosmos as a whole. However, given this focus, it is inexcusable for him not to mention, much less interact with three central aspects of our cosmos: it had a beginning, it is contingent, and it is fine-tuned for life to appear. These are powerful pieces of evidence for theism, and they provide facts about the cosmos within which Nagel’s panpsychist, immanent teleological approach must be worked out. These pieces of evidence seem to be ontologically and explanatorily prior to the more detailed topics Nagel treats in his book, and if theism is the best explanation for this evidence, that would render otiose Nagel’s attempt to provide an alternative to theism. Given that an interacting God is in place epistemically prior to investigating the details of the natural order and its history, some of the intellectual motivation for Nagel’s solution is simply gone. There is a proper ordering in a cumulative case for God, and the three items mentioned above are prior to Nagel’s issues; as a result, his case is severely weakened by not treating these items at the beginning of his project.

My two responses to this chapter—Nagel’s failure to interact with the theistic friendly design filter and three broad features of the cosmos—are symptoms of a bigger problem with the book. Nagel’s main, almost exclusive target is materialist Darwinianism, and he spends very little time inter-

acting with and responding to a theistic alternative. In my view, the book is limited as a result.

In chapter 2, Nagel defines “antireductionism” as the view of all those who doubt the adequacy of the purely physical-scientific attempt to provide an account of all there is, and he numbers himself among the antireductionists in this sense. Nagel reiterates his doubts that the reductionists can explain consciousness, intentionality, purpose, reason, and value. But he raises a second problem for reductionism: the problem of giving an account of how it turned out that the world has an intelligible, hidden order that lies beyond observable phenomena and how our noetic faculties turned out to be apt for grasping this order. This order cannot be taken as an arbitrary brute fact. There must be some reason for it, says Nagel. It is a fundamental feature of the universe that the mind is doubly related to the natural order—that order gave rise to mindful beings and they can, in turn, grasp this deep structure.

According to Nagel, a purely physicalist, Darwinian account of this second feature of mind is problematic on two counts: (1) By naturalizing our noetic equipment, this account leaves out what is essential to knowledge and reasoning—their mentalistic, teleological, normative aspects. (2) In Plantingian fashion, the account provides a defeater for the trustworthiness of our faculties, especially as they are exercised in contexts that are far from the struggle for survival. And Nagel rejects a theistic account of these two features of mind because (1) it amounts to an attempt to validate reason in the face of skepticism and such an attempt is circular (it assumes reason to validate reason); (2) it appeals to the intentions/purposes of God that things be so, but it cannot fill in those intentions with content that goes beyond what is being explained; (3) theism inappropriately goes beyond the natural order and fails to provide a comprehensive account of the world from within.

Regarding (1), Nagel shows a lack of familiarity with the theistic literature validating our noetic equipment in the face of materialistic Darwinianism. For example, Plantinga’s skeptical-threat argument avoids circularity by appealing to a stagnating dialectical loop. And the theistic argument can be understood as an inference to the best explanation in which case circularity is just not an issue.

Regarding (2), the alleged limits of appealing to theistic intentions are, in fact, what characterize an appeal to any unobservable, theoretical entity (for example, a quark)—we attribute to that entity what and only what is needed to explain the data. This alleged limitation is also characteristic of personal explanation. We attribute to a person those and only those intentions needed to explain his behavior. Moreover, in the case of God, we have other factors—for example, religious experience, revelation, other arguments in natural theology—that allow us to fill out God’s intentions for bringing our cosmos and us into existence.

Finally, regarding (3), throughout the book, Nagel repeatedly expresses a preference for an immanent naturalistic explanation over an external deity who intervenes in the natural order. It is here that the historical evidence for miracles becomes methodologically relevant. Books arguing for New Testament reliability and the rationality of belief in Jesus's resurrection abound. And Craig Keener has recently produced a massive (hernia-inducing) two-volume set in which he meticulously documents the outbreak of New Testament-style miracles done in the name of Jesus all around the world.⁴ There is strong evidence that, in fact, there is an external God who regularly intervenes in the natural world, and given this evidence, it becomes less plausible to set aside such a deity in explaining the things of interest to Nagel precisely on the grounds that it involves intervention.

Returning to Nagel's chapter, he makes clear that he is not after an account of reason that validates it in the face of skepticism. Rather, starting from our trust in reason, we need an account that explains how we doubly-related-to-reality subjects got here that is not self-refuting and that further undergirds our confidence in reason itself. What is needed, he says, is a broadly naturalistic account that is not reductionistic and that, most likely, will include teleological elements to it.

Before moving on to the next chapter, it is worth mentioning a resource relevant to the central issue of chapter 2—the problem of giving an account of how it turned out that the world has an intelligible, hidden order that lies beyond observable phenomena and that our noetic faculties are apt for grasping this order. Rob Koons has interacted with this very issue, especially the topic of why the universe's deep structure is epistemically responsive to theoretical simplicity, and he offers a theistic alternative to Nagel.⁵

In chapter 3, Nagel says that consciousness cannot be explained by physical science and threatens to unravel the naturalistic worldview. He points out that it is not enough to stop the search for explanations by claiming that evolution produced the physical complexity that is necessary and sufficient for consciousness. This generates a list of correlations that are bare, brute facts in need of further explanation. Nagel claims that a conjunctive explanation in which *A* (for example, evolution) explains *B* (for example, physical complexity) and *B* has *C* (for example, conscious states) as a consequence can explain *C* only if there is some further internal connection between the way *A* explains *B* and *B* explains *C*.

To illustrate, we can explain why four people who, in fact, are members of the same family, all died, without explaining why four members of the same family died. For an adequate conjunctive explanation, we need something like this: *A* (a genetic disease) explains *B* (all four died) and *B* explains

4. Craig Keener, *Miracles*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011).

5. Robert Koons, "Epistemological Objections to Materialism," in *The Waning of Materialism*, ed. Robert Koons and George Bealer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 281–306.

C (they were members of the same family) in which there is the sort of connection just cited. A purely materialist Darwinian account fails to satisfy this “internal connection” requirement.

What we need in an explanation of (1) why consciousness takes this particular type of form in this particular organism and (2) how there could be consciousness to begin with. An adequate explanation will be constitutive and historical and it will show that consciousness and its precise form in organisms was to be expected. The constitutive explanation (how could there be consciousness in the first place) will be reductive (here Nagel changes his definition of “reduction” to “an analysis of the properties of wholes in terms of those of their parts”) or emergent (a higher-order account that links macro-mental states to complex physical functioning and is consistent with a purely physical description of micro-parts). Sensitive to the problem of getting something from nothing, Nagel opts for the reductive solution and adopts a form of panpsychism or dual aspect theory according to which the constituents of the universe have mental and physical properties that are necessarily connected together. On this view, the macro-conscious states of an organism are composed of the conscious properties/states of its micro-parts. Regarding the historical explanation, Nagel rejects the standard physicalist causal account (it can’t overcome the improbabilities of complex life and can’t account for the appearance of consciousness) and the theistic one, and adopts a teleological answer: the panpsychist universe had a propensity from the beginning to develop organisms with a subjective point of view.

I agree with Nagel that the existence of consciousness provides a problem for materialistic Darwinian naturalism, and have argued elsewhere that consciousness provides evidence for God’s existence.⁶ But there are two central problems with Nagel’s position. First, Nagel’s solution requires that the connection between mental and physical states be a necessary one (cf. 63). If the connection is contingent, then they seem to be gratuitously slapped together, and we need an explanation for this fact, an explanation that theism provides. The problem for Nagel is that the connection seems to be contingent and not necessary. Inverted qualia, zombie, disembodied, and related thought experiments are ubiquitous in the literature in philosophy of mind, and Jaegwon Kim has pointed out while the metaphysical possibility of these possible worlds seems commonsensical, the only real resistance to this may well be a question-begging commitment to physicalism prior to considering these thought experiments.⁷ Suffice it to say that for those of us who take the mental-physical connection to be contingent, Nagel’s position is in trouble and a theistic alternative is superior to his.

6. See my *Consciousness and the Existence of God: A Theistic Argument* (London: Routledge, 2008); and *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism* (London: SCM, 2009).

7. See Jaegwon Kim, *Philosophy of Mind*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2006), 233.

Second, Nagel's reductive panpsychism entails that one's conscious visual field is actually a combination of the consciousness of myriads of particles each with its own consciousness. Now panpsychism has always faced what is called the combinatorial problem—how do you get a unified subject, or at least a unified visual field, from merely combining particles that have their own “drop” of unified consciousness. Nagel is sensitive to this problem, and that is why he opts for an emergentist solution to the existence of the rational subject (87–8) and the moral agent (115–16). But consciousness itself is as unified as the rational and moral agent, and as William Hasker has never tired of reminding us, the unity of consciousness cannot be accounted for adequately by breaking it down into a collection of parts such that each contributes to that unity. In this latter case, the unity of consciousness vanishes and we have, instead, something like a group or collection of individual conscious beings.

In chapter 4, Nagel tackles the problem of cognition, namely, the mind's ability to transcend subjectivity and lay hold of what is objectively the case. One aspect of this problem is the following issue: Since our natures/capacities are contingent (they didn't have to be this way), how is it that they are able to gain contact with the realm of necessary truths of, for example, logic and mathematics, when we can easily imagine worlds in which they fail to have this ability? How can we explain creatures with these abilities, especially when they go far beyond what is needed in the struggle for survival? For most creatures, says Nagel, they live in a world of appearances with an objectivity that extends no further than what their senses and desires tell them about the world. But we grasp an underlying intelligible order that lies beyond appearances.

The issue Nagel is after has two aspects: (1) The problem of the likelihood that natural selection would generate creatures with the capacity to discover *by reason* the truth about reality that extends beyond the appearances. (2) The problem of overcoming the difficulty for naturalism of understanding the faculty of reason itself. Now while he is skeptical of an evolutionary just-so story regarding one, Nagel admits that one can be offered according to which a pragmatic justification for reasoning is offered by appealing to the survival value of such reasoning. But there are several problems Nagel mentions with the naturalist attempt to account for the faculty of reason itself:

- (1) Reason isn't just pragmatically useful; indeed, it is self-refuting and circular to assert that it is.
- (2) Reason isn't a contingent, local, perspectivalist feature of our evolved nature. It has universal applicability. Evolution produces local, contingent dispositions, not universal, necessary ones.
- (3) Reason is intrinsically normative.
- (4) Reason takes us beyond appearances to the hidden, intelligible structure of the world.

- (5) In contrast to the senses, which put us in contact with objects via causal chains, reason is not mediated by mechanisms that could be selected by evolutionary processes; rather, reason puts us in immediate, direct contact with the rational order.
- (6) Reason is active and involves agency (for example, it isn't Sphekish); sensation is passive.

Regarding the constitutive issue, the unity of the rational subject rules out a reductive answer for Nagel, and he opts for an emergentist view of the origin of reason. Regarding the historical issue, he proffers an immanent, naturalistic teleological approach according to which the universe has a bias towards the marvelous, a teleological principle of value for higher life forms.

In my view, Nagel's chapter is effective against materialist Darwinian accounts of reason.⁸ But it is not as effective compared to a theistic alternative. To see this, recall that Nagel is concerned that the appearance of beings like us with the faculties we have not turn out to be accidental. And, in a sense, given his teleological principle and its immanent end, he succeeds in avoiding a cosmic accident here. But in a deeper sense, it seems to me that Nagel is stuck with the accident he wishes to avoid, an accident that can be avoided by postulating theism.

Consider the range of materialist Darwinian possible worlds, and then consider a subset of those worlds that have panpsychist and teleological elements in them. Such a subset contains myriads of worlds. Each has its own principle of immanent teleology with its own end. Now Nagel postulates, correctly in my view, an objective realm of reason that is quite independent of any contingent possible world, and he believe that our faculties, fortunately, are able to tap into this objective realm. But now we seem to be faced with a highly improbable coincidence. Surely, it is highly likely that we would turn out to be present in a world with a teleological principle that does not produce faculties apt for "tapping into" the objective realm of reason. Thus, Nagel's principle of teleology avoids one accident (given its presence, it is not accidental that we have the properly functioning faculties we do) only at the expense of postulating another accident (it a sheer accident that we ended up in a possible world with the right sort of immanent teleology.⁹

The theist is in no such pickle: Given that the objective realm of reason is grounded in the Divine mind, and given that God created us in his image to be able to find truth and grasp the world as it is, it is no accident that we are able to "tap into" the realm of objective reason. Our faculties were designed precisely to be suited for such a task. Again, Nagel's book would

8. See Victor Reppert, "The Argument from Reason," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 344–90).

9. It is important to note that Nagel rejects multiple-worlds theories that attempt to avoid fine-tuning and related types of arguments; see *Mind and Cosmos*, 95n9.

have been better had he spent more time interacting with theistic alternatives to his position.

Setting aside subjectivism (for example, “ x is wrong” means “I disapprove of x ”), Nagel takes up the topic of value in chapter 5 and advances a specific form of moral realism. According to Nagel, moral truths exist (for example, “Do x if x avoids harming a sentient creature”) but there are no moral truth-makers. The dispute between subjectivism and realism is not about the contents of the universe; it’s about the order of normative explanation. Thus, specific moral judgments (“Don’t hurt dogs”) are explained by more general norms (“Don’t hurt sentient creatures”), but the evaluative elements in these principles are not to be explained by anything else. Moral truths are just true in their own right without truth-makers. For example, says Nagel, idealists can’t take physical truths as truths in themselves, but rather, they must be explained with respect to actual/possible experiences. But for physicalists, mental truths can’t just be true in themselves; they must be explained with respect to physical truths that are just basic principles true in themselves.

Now, Nagel continues, some may think that just because moral realism does not add extra entities to the furniture of the universe, then moral realism has no implications for the natural order. But this thinking is wrong. Moral realism is incompatible with a Darwinian materialist account of our moral faculties (we would have the moral beliefs/dispositions we do have whether or not they were true/appropriate because they have survival value). The real badness of pain is superfluous to survival as is the faculty of discerning this badness.

As with earlier chapters, Nagel identifies a constitutive and historical aspect to the problem of value. Regarding the former, the question to be answered is: How could there be creatures who recognize moral truths and reasons, are motivated to act on this recognition, and have the freedom relevant to such action? Nagel sets aside the reductive answer (we explain such wholes by appealing to the properties of their parts) in favor of an emergentist one because the former violates the unity of the agent, a unity which is essential for moral action. How? The reductive answer treats the moral subject and his actions as a mere combination of the responses of the subject’s parts. The unity of the agent is hard to harmonize with a reductive, panpsychist account of consciousness.

Regarding the historical issue, Nagel claims, correctly in my view, that subjectivism fits most nicely with evolution. For the realist, one has to ask what must be added to Darwinism to account for creatures who freely control their actions in response to the apprehension of moral truth and moral reasons, and are motivated by those reasons. A historical process adequate to deal with this issue must move through four stages:

- (1) creatures who have a good (things can go well or bad for them);

- (2) conscious creatures;
- (3) creatures who can recognize the good as good and the bad as bad;
- (4) creatures who can universalize their judgments.

Besides such a process, two other things must be explained: the appearance of value itself and the appearance of creatures with the correct rational and motivational faculties to apprehend and want to act on moral reasons. Nagel sets aside a theistic answer to the various issues of value, he claims that Darwinianism turns all this into one inexplicable accident, and he opts again for his teleological approach: What explains the appearance of life is that it is a necessary condition for the instantiation of value and its recognition. The natural world just has a propensity to develop such forms of life that are valuable and can aim at the good.

There is much to say about this final chapter, but, alas, space is limited. So I will make one general observation. It seems that two features of morality—virtues and imperatives—have ontological implications favorable to theism and unfavorable to naturalism, including Nagel’s version. Statements like “Necessarily, kindness is a virtue” seem to be subject-predicate assertions in which a determinable is exemplified by a determinate. Now virtue properties are conscious properties (kindness, honesty, and so forth), and it would seem that they cannot exist in an impersonal mode of being. They seem to be Aristotelian properties that require a specific entity to exist, namely, a sentient subject. And theism provides such a subject as the exemplifier of virtue properties that cannot exist unexemplified. And moral principles come to us as imposed duties with imperatival force. A lawgiver is the sort of thing that can generate imperatives and impose duties, so objective moral imperatives seem to be best explained by a Moral Lawgiver. I know these remarks are brief and more development is needed to defend them. But this, in brief, constitutes what I believe to be a difficulty for Nagel’s last chapter.

In sum, *Mind and Cosmos* is a very good book that, in my view, succeeds in its attack on materialist Darwinian naturalism. Nagel’s argument might be viewed as a fitting supplement to other books like Jerry Fodor and Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini’s *What Darwin Got Wrong* (2011) and Bradley Monton’s *Seeking God in Science: An Atheist Defends Intelligent Design* (2009). While not wishing to break with the Darwinian pack, a small but growing number of mainstream thinkers are exhibiting the courage to criticize the inadequacies of Darwinian materialism. And to my knowledge, Nagel’s book is the only one that attempts to provide a nontheistic alternative to Darwinian materialism. But it does not consider theistic responses to the points made and, as a result, is not what it could have been had theism been given its due.