

## Presentation and Analysis of Thomas Nagel's *Mind & Cosmos*

When a non-theistic philosopher claims that the "materialist neo-darwinian conception of nature is almost certainly false", Christian scientists must pay attention. Nagel takes the fine-tuned universe and the emergence of conscious beings for essential facts about our universe that demand an adequate explanation. He gives three main reasons why the materialist neo-Darwinian concept fails as an explanation. But what is Nagel's own proposed solution out of the dilemma? We will discuss the arguments and how they can help us in scientific apologetics.

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### A. Introduction

- + the Nagellian explosion

### B. An explorative walk through the book "*Mind and Cosmos – why the materialist neo-darwinian conception of nature is almost certainly false*" (OUP, 2012)

#### B.1 Introduction:

- + What is the problem of the materialist neo-Darwinian conception of nature?

  - Reductionist materialism fails:

    - \_Psychophysical reductionism (origin of consciousness)

    - \_Physicochemical reductionism (origin of life)

- + Why Intelligent Design is inspiring but not an alternative

- + Is there an alternative?

  - \_the antireductionist project: mind as inevitable outcome of a unified natural order

#### B.2 Antireductionism and the natural order

- + Materialism implies reductionism, but reductionism fails to explain mind:

  - => Biology = physics/chemistry + X (involves qualia, intention, reason, value...)

- + Basic assumption of science: world is intelligible by mind

- + Explanandum: Nature produces beings capable to comprehend nature & themselves
  - \_ Materialism can't explain why our cognitive senses are reliable: self-undermining
  - \_ Theism doesn't yield a comprehensive uniform understanding of nature
  - \_ Both are defenseless against skepticism (Descartes' demon, evolutionary fitness)
  
- + Alternative: understand the world from within: uniform + reliably comprehensive

### B.3 Consciousness

- + The centrality of the mind-body problem to a uniform explanation of the universe
  
- + Constitutive explanation: how can a physical system be mental?
  - ⇒ Reductive (constituents explain the whole: panpsychism)
  - ⇒ Emergent (new property due to complex interaction of constituents)
  
- + Historical explanation:
  - ⇒ Causal: purely physical cause-effect relations
  - ⇒ Teleological: physical plus teleological laws
  - ⇒ Intentional: divine intervention and guidance
  
- + Consciousness is irreducible, immediate 1<sup>st</sup>-person subjective appearance

### B.4 Cognition

- + cognition (reasoning, thought, evaluation) is based on consciousness (perception, sensation, emotion, appetite) but transcends subjectivity into 3<sup>rd</sup> person objective "reality"
  
- + 2 problems of a naturalistic explanation:
  - \_ the likelihood of its existence and the nature of reason
  - \_ evolutionary explanation works only if survival value through generalisation from immediate own experience (in scientific and moral knowledge)
  
- + reason allows self-awareness and judgements (science, logic, moral) in direct apprehension of truth, not because of increased fitness value
  
- + how to get from subjective appearance to objective truth?
- + explanations:
  - \_ constitutive: reductive/emergent: unified subject necessary
  - \_ historical: causal: cosmic accident (but mind implies too much intention)

intentional: divine intervention destroys uniform intelligibility of natural order  
teleological: speculative

## B.5 Value

- + Value comes from a result towards which things tend (good/bad, right/wrong)
- + What is the difference between value realism versus subjectivism?
  - value of basic experiences: are pleasure/pain good/bad in themselves?
  - value of complex experiences (of others or at other time)
- + there is no experiment to decide between realism and subjectivism, only by comparison of explanatory power
- + moral realism is incompatible with Darwinism:
  - => is Darwinism false or is moral realism false?
  - Darwinism: value is an illusion, just fitness increase
- + explanation of value:
  - \_conscious human beings can detect value and be motivated by it
  - \_values provide reasons for action (counts for/against doing s.th.)
- + reductive expl.: unlikely: response to value needs unified conscious subject  
emergent expl.: necessary unified subject of decision
- + historical: subjectivism can arise by Darwinism (value from appetite)
  - realism implies Darwinism plus X (control actions responding to reasons)
  - value in world:
    - \_1 life is a good that can be lost
    - \_2 conscious beings: lives can go well or wrong
    - \_3 capacity for reason: responding to reason as motive for action
    - \_4 collective reason: value beyond good for oneself, but other beings
  - (a) causal: hardly imaginable (reductive: combined value of protomental parts?)
  - (b) natural teleology: propensity to existence of beings for which things go good/bad  
life exists because it is necessary condition for value:  
cosmic predisposition for life, consciousness, cognition, value

## B.6 Conclusion

- + The task of philosophy is the comparison of alternatives:
  - \_current paradigm: no viable account for origin of life (cf. Francis Crick: miracle)
  - chance plus selection fail to account for the existence of reason & value
  - \_divine intervention destroys the uniform natural order
  - \_the better alternative is natural teleology, though it is pure speculation
- + The explananda:
  - \_theoretical reason: determines the real character of the world (science)

\_practical reason: values as reasons for action (moral)

+ what to expect in the future:

\_s.o. “not disposed to accept value realism” will find my book implausible

\_it is unclear, whether we don’t know yet or can’t know at all

\_heroic triumph of ideological theory over common sense, but costs too high

## C. Discussion

### C.1 arguments against Nagel’s theses

+ he misrepresents current scientific and philosophical landscape and is attacking a strawman

+ he underestimates the evidence for evolution and overestimates the unique nature of consciousness and value realism

+ he is the real reductionist by insisting on a comprehensive theory that explains everything from big bang to consciousness

+ as a rationalist Nagel searches for a principle that makes the appearance of mind probable, empiricists can live with improbable things becoming more and more probable in the course of evolution

+ Nagel gives momentum to religious opponents of evolution

+ he argues from ignorance and offers no real alternative, but speculation about an “esoteric” natural teleological force

+ he rejects theism only on grounds of his presuppositions

### C.2 arguments in support of Nagel’s theses

+ he reveals the weakness of materialism, if it is stretched from a working assumption to a comprehensive explanation of the world (parable of the “metal detector”)

+ he reveals that materialism is necessarily reductionistic (though most scientists might not explicitly reduce everything to material processes)

+ he exposes chance as an insufficient explanation for the genesis of consciousness

+ he exposes how an evolutionary explanation undermines the objectivity of our rationality and our morality by subordinating them to “fitness value” instead of truth

+ he shows intellectual courage in arguing “against the flow”

### C.3 Is Nagel’s argument useful in apologetics?

+ his argument definitely poses a strong challenge to materialism

+ it depends on the evaluation: is the weight of the success of reductive science stronger or the common sense experience of subjectivity, rationality, morality

+ while his argument challenges materialism, it does not lead to faith in God, but opens doors for other paradigms like natural teleology (pantheism etc.)

#### Suggested Readings:

Thomas Nagel, “*Mind and Cosmos – why the materialist neo-darwinian conception of nature is almost certainly false*” (OUP, 2012)