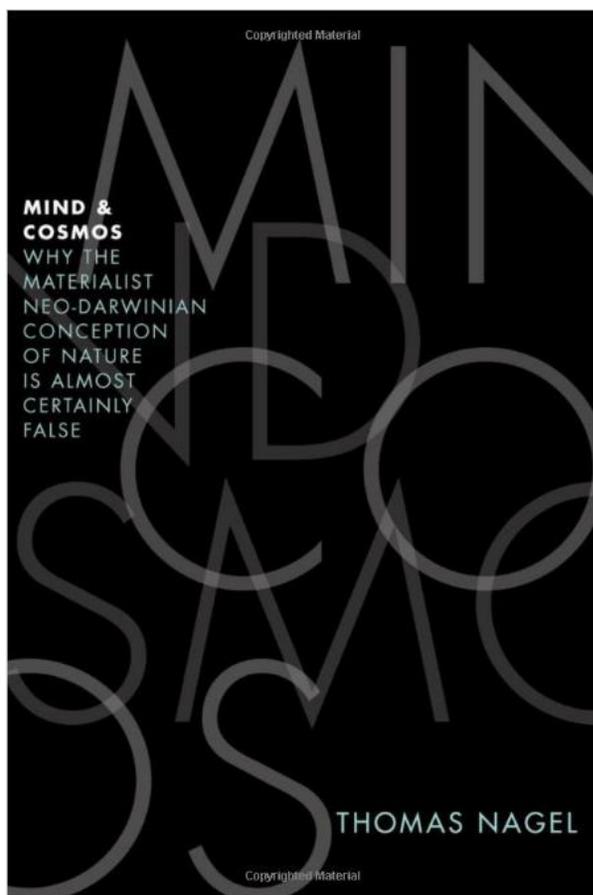


Book Review of Mind & Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False by T. Nagel, Oxford Press, 2012

Fermilab Philosophy Society, Alexey Burov, organizer



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Presenter: Al Brunsting



Abstract

A failure to account for something so integral to nature as mind, argues a philosopher T. Nagel, is a major problem, threatening to unravel the entire naturalistic world picture, extending to biology, evolutionary theory, and cosmology. The book was highly praised by J.Holt, L.Wieseltier, and E.L.Doctorow.

About the Author

Self-identified as an atheist. AB comments are in blue.

Thomas Nagel is University Professor in the Department of Philosophy and the School of Law at New York University. His books include *The Possibility of Altruism*, *The View from Nowhere*, and *What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy. In 2008, he was awarded the Rolf Schock Prize in Logic and Philosophy and the Balzan Prize in Moral Philosophy.

[Ref: Book review by Alvin Plantinga, Prof.Phil.emeritus at U.Notre Dame, Dec. 6, '12. Thanks to Alexey who pointed out this reference.]

Q: What is “Materialist Neo-Darwinism,” MND? Author: MND = reductionism. Also called “scientific naturalism.” “Orthodoxy” or at least “majority opinion.”

From Plantinga’s review [red text]:

There is no such person as God or any other supernatural being.

Life on our planet arose by way of ill-understood but completely naturalistic processes involving only the working of natural law.

Given life’s start, natural selection has taken over, and produced all the enormous variety that we find in the living world.

Human beings, like the rest of the world, are totally material objects. They have no soul or ego or self or anything else beyond the material.

Our world consists only of elementary particles described in physics, together with things composed of these particles.

Summary

The author claims that MND is almost certainly false. See the title.

Q: What is the basis for this claim?

Nagel's criticism is not with how science is conducted, he simply questions its claim for completeness.

It is extremely improbable that life arose from non-life due to only the laws of chemistry and physics. -- p.6.

“The great advances in the physical and biological sciences were made possible by excluding the mind from the physical world. This has permitted a quantitative understanding of that world, express in timeless, mathematically formulated physical laws. But at some point it will be necessary to make a new start on a more comprehensive understanding that includes the mind.” -- p.7.

MND: Enormous variety of life today is due to *unguided* processes.

[My comments are in blue & labeled AB.]

AB: According to Nagel's view, simulate the universe's evolution, 13.8 billion years ago to now. Use only currently accepted natural laws; unguided processes (randomness); effective, bug-free code that works; large enough machine & memory; & let it run. 2 years later: You won't have the origin of life & you won't have a conscious & self-aware mind.

MND has “problems of probability.” Arbitrary mapping of nucleotide sequences in amino acids, mechanisms to read the code, & processes to carry out the code seem improbable, given physical law alone. [AB: This is the origin of life problem.]

The more we learn about the chemical bases of life & the intricacy of the genetic code, the more unbelievable that MND is the whole story. –p.19

The material universe must have properties that lead to the formation of consciousness.

Conflict: Side 1: “The hope that everything can be accounted for at the most basic level by the physical sciences, extended to include biology.” Author calls this “materialism.” Elsewhere it's called “reductionism.”

Side 2: “There are doubts about whether the reality of such features of our world as consciousness, intentionality, meaning, purpose, thought & value can be accommodated in a universe consisting of at the most basic level only of physical facts—facts, however sophisticated, of the kind revealed by the physical sciences.” Author calls this “antireductionism.” – p.13

Requirements for alternative to reductionism: An account of how mind & everything that goes with it is inherent in the universe. – p.15

Author’s conviction: “...mind is not just an afterthought or an accident or an add-on, but a basic aspect of nature.” – p.15

Mind, being a basic aspect of nature, results in the intelligibility of the world. Implication: Conscious beings with minds arose.

Q: If not MND, what about theism, THM?

THM: Physical law is a consequence of mind. Physical & mental character of the universe is caused by “some kind of mind or intention.” – p. 21.

“God’s essential nature may lead him to create probabilistic laws and beings with free will.” – p. 21.

Q: Why does Nagel reject theism?

Plantinga:

A: Nagel has a fear of religion itself. He hopes there is no God. He doesn’t want there to be a God. He doesn’t want the universe to be like that.

This is emotional & not philosophical or rational.

Q: What is the strictly philosophical reason for Nagel to reject THM?

THM does not provide a comprehensive account of the natural order, especially the mind, an intelligibility from within. God is without. – p.25.

The problem of evil. – p. 25.

Nagel rejects dualism. The universe must have a unity, no fundamental breaks. THM & dualism are incompatible with unity or “neutral monism” -- p.56.

Nagel’s preference is for an immanent (existing or operating within; inherent), natural explanation, consistent with his atheism.
– p.95

Ch.3. Consciousness

Consciousness is an obstacle to a comprehensive naturalism that relies only on the resources of physical science [MND]. – p.35

“...our mental lives, including our subjective experiences, ... are strongly connected with & probably strictly dependent on physical events in our brains & on the physical interaction of our bodies with the rest of the physical world.” – p.36

“Conscious subjects & their mental lives are inescapable components of reality not describable by the physical sciences.” – p.41 [Example, taste.]

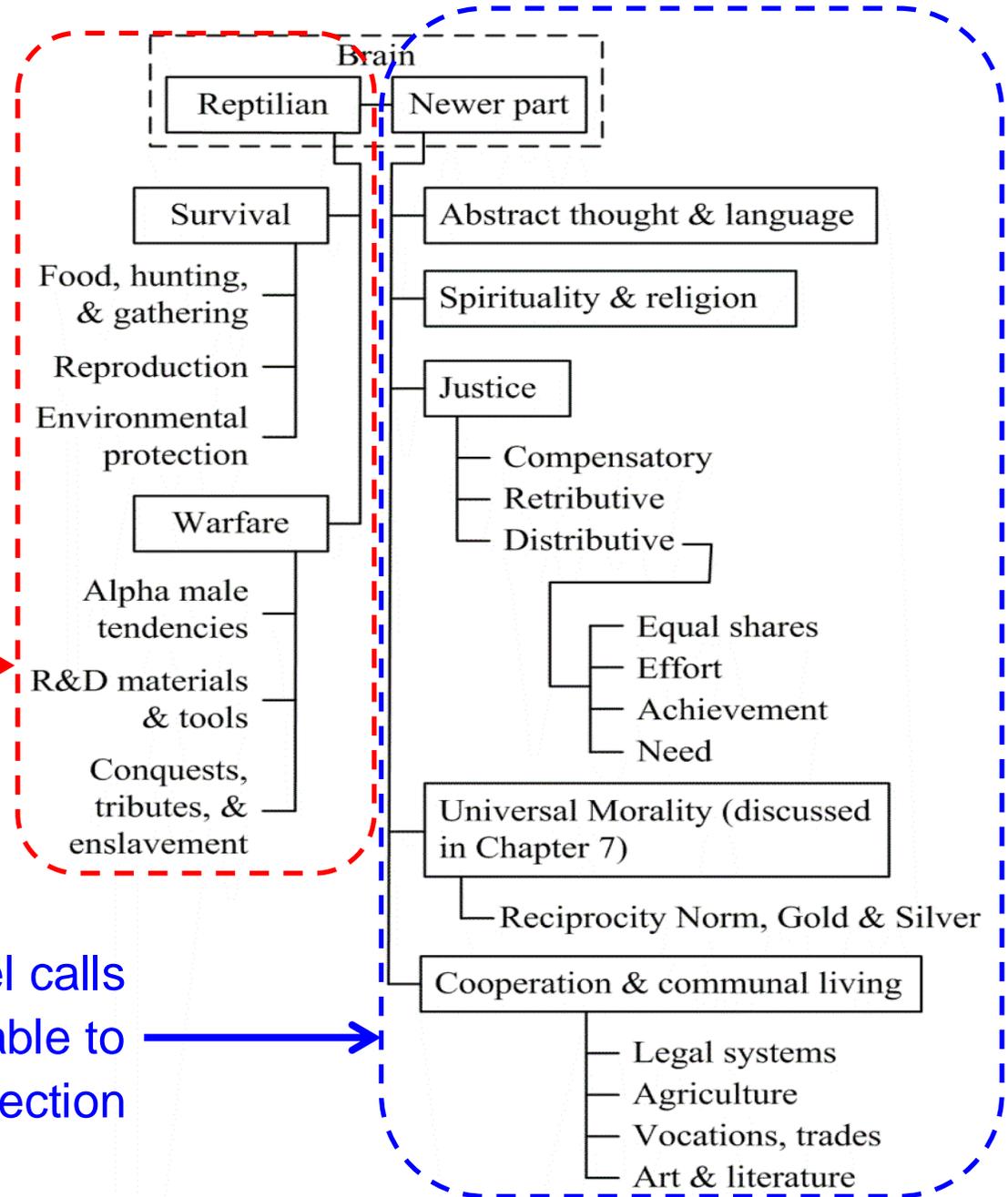
“...biological evolution must explain the appearance of conscious organisms. ... Materialism is incomplete.” – p.45.

Ch.4. Cognition

Mental human functions of thought, reasoning, & evaluation vs. more basic mental functions: immediate life-world functions.

Attributable to natural selection

AB's summary of what Nagel calls "cognition." & not attributable to natural selection



Nagel: It is unlikely that unguided natural selection should have “generated creatures with the capacity to discover by reason the truth about a reality that extends vastly beyond the initial appearances.”

Why would natural selection produce “cognition?”

Q: If Nagel rejects MND and THM, what is he proposing?

He is modest. It may take centuries to work this all out. He suggests only a sketch. The task is so overwhelming.

A1: He proposes pan-psychism. Something like a mind all the way down to sub-atomic particles. They enjoy some sort of mentality. Thus, Nagel avoids dualism. [AB: This is a core concept within Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism and has been central to eastern religions for at least 2,500 years.]

[Gain: 1, not 2, fundamentally different kinds of objects. Loss: 2 fundamentally different kinds of properties. Q: Is this a net gain?]

Q: How are these elementary minds to be combined into a less than elementary mind? [The details are missing.]

A2: Natural teleology. [On-line definition: Teleology is the philosophical attempt to describe things in terms of their apparent purpose, directive principle, or goal.]

Starting with the Big Bang [13.8 billion years ago] the universe has an intrinsic bias toward outcomes that eventually produced a mind.

My conclusions & questions

Q1: What guides Nagle's intrinsic bias toward a mind? Wouldn't there need to be some sort of divine controller?

Q2: What role might multi-dimensionality beyond the 4 that we are limited to, play in better understanding THM or Nagel's natural teleology?

Q3: Isn't Nagel's claims that his "teleological monism" will ultimately be figured out just hopefulness, devoid of facts and a worked out system?

Q4: Does Nagel's teleology imply signals traveling back in time in some sort of feedback mechanism?

Q5: Isn't THM more satisfactory than Pan-psychism and/or Natural teleology?

Mind is fundamental to the universe. God is the premier mind.

God could have desired fellowship & thus created humans in his own image with free will.

As designer and creator God could have designed and formed neutrinos, electrons, quarks, gluons, Higgs bosons, & photons.

“Nagel is to be applauded for his withering critical examination of some of the most common and oppressive dogmas of our age.” – Plantinga