

## The Heretic | The Weekly Standard

Last fall, a few days before Halloween and about a month after the publication of *Mind and Cosmos*, the controversial new book by the philosopher Thomas Nagel, several of the world's leading philosophers gathered with a group of cutting-edge scientists in the conference room of a charming inn in the Berkshires. They faced one another around a big table set with pitchers of iced water and trays of hard candies wrapped in cellophane and talked and talked, as public intellectuals do. PowerPoint was often brought into play.



C.F. Payne

The title of the “interdisciplinary workshop” was “Moving Naturalism Forward.” For those of us who like to kill time sitting around pondering the nature of reality—personhood, God, moral judgment, free will, what have you—this was the Concert for Bangladesh. The biologist Richard Dawkins was there, author of *The Blind Watchmaker*, *The Selfish Gene*, and other bestselling books of popular science, and so was Daniel Dennett, a philosopher at Tufts and author of *Consciousness Explained* and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*. So were the authors of *Why Evolution is True*, *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World*, *Everything Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized*, and *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions*—all of them books that to one degree or another bring to a larger audience the world as scientists have discovered it to be.

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Contemporary philosophers have a name for the way you and I see the world, a world filled with other people, with colors and sounds, sights and sensations, things that are good and things that are bad and things that are very good indeed: ourselves, who are able, more or less, to make our own way through life, by our own lights. Philosophers call this common view the “manifest image.” Daniel Dennett pointed out at the conference that modern science, at least since the revelations of Darwin, has been piling up proof that the manifest image is not really accurate in any scientific sense. Rather science—this vast interlocking combine of genetics, neuroscience, evolutionary biology, particle physics—tells us that the components of the manifest image are illusory.

Color, for instance: That azalea outside the window may look red to you, but in reality it has no color at all. The red comes from certain properties of the azalea that absorb some kinds of light and reflect other kinds of light, which are then received by the eye and transformed in our brains into a

subjective experience of red. And sounds, too: Complex vibrations in the air are soundless in reality, but our ears are able to turn the vibrations into a car alarm or a cat's meow or, worse, the voice of Mariah Carey. These capacities of the human organism are evolutionary adaptations. Everything about human beings, by definition, is an evolutionary adaptation. Our sense that the colors and sounds exist "out there" and not merely in our brain is a convenient illusion that long ago increased the survival chances of our species. Powered by Darwin, modern science proceeds, in Dennett's phrase, as a "universal corrosive," destroying illusions all the way up and all the way down, dismantling our feelings of freedom and separate selfhood, our morals and beliefs, a mother's love and a patient's prayer: All in reality are just "molecules in motion."

The most famous, most succinct, and most pitiless summary of the manifest image's fraudulence was written nearly 20 years ago by the geneticist Francis Crick: "'You,' your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. Who you are is nothing but a pack of neurons."

This view is the "naturalism" that the workshopers in the Berkshires were trying to move forward. Naturalism is also called "materialism," the view that only matter exists; or "reductionism," the view that all life, from tables to daydreams, is ultimately reducible to pure physics; or "determinism," the view that every phenomenon, including our own actions, is determined by a preexisting cause, which was itself determined by another cause, and so on back to the Big Bang. The naturalistic project has been greatly aided by neo-Darwinism, the application of Darwin's theory of natural selection to human behavior, including areas of life once assumed to be nonmaterial: emotions and thoughts and habits and perceptions. At the workshop the philosophers and scientists each added his own gloss to neo-Darwinian reductive naturalism or materialistic neo-Darwinian reductionism or naturalistic materialism or reductive determinism. They were unanimous in their solid certainty that materialism—as we'll call it here, to limit the number of isms—is the all-purpose explanation for life as we know it.

One notable division did arise among the participants, however. Some of the biologists thought the materialist view of the world should be taught and explained to the wider public in its true, high-octane, Crickian form. Then common, nonintellectual people might see that a purely random universe without purpose or free will or spiritual life of any kind isn't as bad as some superstitious people—*religious* people—have led them to believe.

Daniel Dennett took a different view. While it is true that materialism tells us a human being is nothing more than a "moist robot"—a phrase Dennett took from a Dilbert comic—we run a risk when we let this cat, or robot, out of the bag. If we repeatedly tell folks that their sense of free will or belief in objective morality is essentially an illusion, such knowledge has the potential to undermine civilization itself, Dennett believes. Civil order requires the general acceptance of personal responsibility, which is closely linked to the notion of free will. Better, said Dennett, if the public were told that "for general purposes" the self and free will and objective morality do indeed exist—that colors and sounds exist, too—"just not in the way they think." They "exist in a special way," which is to say, ultimately, not at all.

On this point the discussion grew testy at times. I was reminded of the debate among British censors over the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* half a century ago. "Fine for you or me," one prosecutor is said to have remarked, "but is this the sort of thing you would leave lying about for your wife or servant to read?"

There was little else to disturb the materialists in their Berkshire contentment. Surveys have shown that vast majorities of philosophers and scientists call themselves naturalists or materialists. Nearly all popular science books, not only those written by the workshopers, conclude that materialism offers the true picture of reality. The workshopers seemed vexed, however, knowing that not everyone in their intellectual class had yet tumbled to the truth of neo-Darwinism. A video of the workshop shows Dennett complaining that a few—but only a few!—contemporary philosophers have stubbornly refused to incorporate the naturalistic conclusions of science into their philosophizing, continuing to play around with outmoded ideas like morality and sometimes even the soul.

"I am just appalled to see how, in spite of what I think is the progress we've made in the last 25 years, there's this sort of retrograde gang," he said, dropping his hands on the table. "They're going back to old-fashioned armchair philosophy with relish and eagerness. It's sickening. And they lure in other people. And their work isn't worth anything—it's cute and it's clever and it's not worth a damn."

There was an air of amused exasperation. "Will you name names?" one of the participants prodded, joking.

"No names!" Dennett said.

The philosopher Alex Rosenberg, author of *The Atheist's Guide*, leaned forward, unamused.

"And then there's some work that is neither cute nor clever," he said. "And it's by Tom Nagel."

There it was! Tom Nagel, whose *Mind and Cosmos* was already causing a derangement among philosophers in England and America.

Dennett sighed at the mention of the name, more in sorrow than in anger. His disgust seemed to drain from him, replaced by resignation. He looked at the table.

"Yes," said Dennett, "there is that."

Around the table, with the PowerPoint humming, they all seemed to heave a sad sigh—a deep, workshop sigh.

*Tom, oh Tom . . . How did we lose Tom . . .*

Thomas Nagel may be the most famous philosopher in the United States—a bit like being the best power forward in the Lullaby League, but still. His paper "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" was recognized as a classic when it was published in 1974. Today it is a staple of undergraduate philosophy classes. His books range with a light touch over ethics and politics and the philosophy of mind. His papers are admired not only for their philosophical provocations but also for their rare (among modern philosophers) simplicity and stylistic clarity, bordering sometimes on literary grace.

Nagel occupies an endowed chair at NYU as a University Professor, a rare and exalted position that frees him to teach whatever course he wants. Before coming to NYU he taught at Princeton for 15 years. He dabbles in the higher journalism, contributing articles frequently to the *New York Review of Books* and now and then to the *New Republic*. A confirmed atheist, he lacks what he calls the *sensus divinitatis* that leads some people to embrace the numinous. But he does possess a finely tuned *sensus socialistis*; his most notable excursion into politics was a book-length plea for the confiscation of wealth and its radical redistribution—a view that places him safely in the narrow strip

of respectable political opinion among successful American academics.

For all this and more, Thomas Nagel is a prominent and heretofore respected member of the country's intellectual elite. And such men are not supposed to write books with subtitles like the one he tacked onto *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*.

Imagine if your local archbishop climbed into the pulpit and started reading from the *Collected Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*. "What has gotten into Thomas Nagel?" demanded the evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker, on Twitter. (Yes, even Steven Pinker tweets.) Pinker inserted a link to a negative review of Nagel's book, which he said "exposed the shoddy reasoning of a once-great thinker." At the point where science, philosophy, and public discussion intersect—a dangerous intersection these days—it is simply taken for granted that by attacking naturalism Thomas Nagel has rendered himself an embarrassment to his colleagues and a traitor to his class.

The *Guardian* awarded *Mind and Cosmos* its prize for the Most Despised Science Book of 2012. The reviews were numerous and overwhelmingly negative; one of the kindest, in the British magazine *Prospect*, carried the defensive headline "Thomas Nagel is not crazy." (Really, he's not!) Most other reviewers weren't so sure about that. Almost before the ink was dry on Nagel's book the UC Berkeley economist and prominent blogger Brad DeLong could be found gathering the straw and wood for the ritual burning. DeLong is a great believer in neo-Darwinism. He has coined the popular term "jumped-up monkeys" to describe our species. (*Monkeys* because we're descended from primates; *jumped-up* because evolution has customized us with the ability to reason and the big brains that go with it.)

DeLong was particularly offended by Nagel's conviction that reason allows us to "grasp objective reality." A good materialist doesn't believe in objective reality, certainly not in the traditional sense. "Thomas Nagel is not smarter than we are," he wrote, responding to a reviewer who praised Nagel's intelligence. "In fact, he seems to me to be distinctly dumber than anybody who is running even an eight-bit virtual David Hume on his wetware." (What he means is, anybody who's read the work of David Hume, the father of modern materialism.) DeLong's readers gathered to jeer as the faggots were placed around the stake.

"Thomas Nagel is of absolutely no importance on this subject," wrote one. "He's a self-contradictory idiot," opined another. Some made simple appeals to authority and left it at that: "Haven't these guys ever heard of Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett?" The hearts of still others were broken at seeing a man of Nagel's eminence sink so low. "It is sad that Nagel, whom my friends and I thought back in the 1960's could leap over tall buildings with a single bound, has tripped over the Bible and fallen on his face. Very sad."

Nagel doesn't mention the Bible in his new book—or in any of his books, from what I can tell—but among materialists the mere association of a thinking person with the Bible is an insult meant to wound, as Bertie Wooster would say. Directed at Nagel, a self-declared atheist, it is more revealing of the accuser than the accused. The hysterical insults were accompanied by an insistence that the book was so bad it shouldn't upset anyone.

"Evolutionists," one reviewer huffily wrote, "will feel they've been ravaged by a sheep." Many reviewers attacked the book on cultural as well as philosophical or scientific grounds, wondering aloud how a distinguished house like Oxford University Press could allow such a book to be published. The *Philosophers' Magazine* described it with the curious word "irresponsible." How so? In

*Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, the British philosopher John Dupré explained. *Mind and Cosmos*, he wrote, “will certainly lend comfort (and sell a lot of copies) to the religious enemies of Darwinism.” Simon Blackburn of Cambridge University made the same point: “I regret the appearance of this book. It will only bring comfort to creationists and fans of ‘intelligent design.’”

But what about fans of apostasy? You don’t have to be a biblical fundamentalist or a young-earth creationist or an intelligent design enthusiast—I’m none of the above, for what it’s worth—to find *Mind and Cosmos* exhilarating. “For a long time I have found the materialist account of how we and our fellow organisms came to exist hard to believe,” Nagel writes. “It is prima facie highly implausible that life as we know it is the result of a sequence of physical accidents together with the mechanism of natural selection.” The prima facie impression, reinforced by common sense, should carry more weight than the clerisy gives it. “I would like to defend the untutored reaction of incredulity to the reductionist neo-Darwinian account of the origin and evolution of life.”

The incredulity is not simply a matter of scientific ignorance, as the materialists would have it. It arises from something more fundamental and intimate. The neo-Darwinian materialist account offers a picture of the world that is unrecognizable to us—a world without color or sound, and also a world without free will or consciousness or good and evil or selves or, when it comes to that, selflessness. “It flies in the face of common sense,” he says. Materialism is an explanation for a world we don’t live in.

Nagel’s tone is measured and tentative, but there’s no disguising the book’s renegade quality. There are flashes of exasperation and dismissive impatience. What’s exhilarating is that the source of Nagel’s exasperation is, so to speak, his own tribe: the “secular theoretical establishment and the contemporary enlightened culture which it dominates.” The establishment today, he says, is devoted beyond all reason to a “dominant scientific naturalism, heavily dependent on Darwinian explanations of practically everything, and armed to the teeth against attacks from religion.” I’m sure Nagel would recoil at the phrase, but *Mind and Cosmos* is a work of philosophical populism, defending our everyday understanding from the highly implausible worldview of a secular clerisy. His working assumption is, in today’s intellectual climate, radical: If the materialist, neo-Darwinian orthodoxy contradicts common sense, then this is a mark against the orthodoxy, not against common sense. When a chain of reasoning leads us to deny the obvious, we should double-check the chain of reasoning before we give up on the obvious.

Nagel follows the materialist chain of reasoning all the way into the cul de sac where it inevitably winds up. Nagel’s touchier critics have accused him of launching an assault on science, when really it is an assault on the nonscientific uses to which materialism has been put. Though he does praise intelligent design advocates for having the nerve to annoy the secular establishment, he’s no creationist himself. He has no doubt that “we are products of the long history of the universe since the big bang, descended from bacteria through millions of years of natural selection.” And he assumes that the self and the body go together. “So far as we can tell,” he writes, “our mental lives, including our subjective experiences, and those of other creatures are strongly connected with and probably strictly dependent on physical events in our brains and on the physical interaction of our bodies with the rest of the physical world.” To believe otherwise is to believe, as the materialists derisively say, in “spooky stuff.” (Along with *jumped-up monkeys* and *moist robots* and countless other much-too-cute phrases, the use of *spooky stuff* proves that our popular science writers have spent a lot of time watching *Scooby-Doo*.) Nagel doesn’t believe in spooky stuff.

Materialism, then, is fine as far as it goes. It just doesn’t go as far as materialists want it to. It is a

premise of science, not a finding. Scientists do their work by assuming that every phenomenon can be reduced to a material, mechanistic cause and by excluding any possibility of nonmaterial explanations. And the materialist assumption works really, really well—in detecting and quantifying things that have a material or mechanistic explanation. Materialism has allowed us to predict and control what happens in nature with astonishing success. The jaw-dropping edifice of modern science, from space probes to nanosurgery, is the result.

But the success has gone to the materialists' heads. From a fruitful method, materialism becomes an axiom: If science can't quantify something, it doesn't exist, and so the subjective, unquantifiable, immaterial "manifest image" of our mental life is proved to be an illusion.

Here materialism bumps up against itself. Nagel insists that we know some things to exist even if materialism omits or ignores or is oblivious to them. Reductive materialism doesn't account for the "brute facts" of existence—it doesn't explain, for example, why the world exists at all, or how life arose from nonlife. Closer to home, it doesn't plausibly explain the fundamental beliefs we rely on as we go about our everyday business: the truth of our subjective experience, our ability to reason, our capacity to recognize that some acts are virtuous and others aren't. These failures, Nagel says, aren't just temporary gaps in our knowledge, waiting to be filled in by new discoveries in science. On its own terms, materialism *cannot* account for brute facts. Brute facts are irreducible, and materialism, which operates by breaking things down to their physical components, stands useless before them. "There is little or no possibility," he writes, "that these facts depend on nothing but the laws of physics."

In a dazzling six-part tour de force rebutting Nagel's critics, the philosopher Edward Feser provided a good analogy to describe the basic materialist error—the attempt to stretch materialism from a working assumption into a comprehensive explanation of the world. Feser suggests a parody of materialist reasoning: "1. Metal detectors have had far greater success in finding coins and other metallic objects in more places than any other method has. 2. Therefore we have good reason to think that metal detectors can reveal to us everything that can be revealed" about metallic objects.

But of course a metal detector only detects the metallic content of an object; it tells us nothing about its color, size, weight, or shape. In the same way, Feser writes, the methods of "mechanistic science are as successful as they are in predicting and controlling natural phenomena *precisely because* they focus on only those aspects of nature *susceptible* to prediction and control."

Meanwhile, they ignore everything else. But this is a fatal weakness for a theory that aspires to be a comprehensive picture of the world. With magnetic resonance imaging, science can tell us which parts of my brain light up when, for example, I glimpse my daughter's face in a crowd; the bouncing neurons can be observed and measured. Science cannot quantify or describe the feelings I experience when I see my daughter. Yet the feelings are no less real than the neurons.

The point sounds more sentimental than it is. My bouncing neurons and my feelings of love and obligation are unquestionably bound together. But the difference between the neurons and the feelings, the material and the mental, is a qualitative difference, a difference in kind. And of the two, reductive materialism can capture only one.

"The world is an astonishing place," Nagel writes. "That it has produced you, and me, and the rest of us is the most astonishing thing about it." Materialists are in the business of banishing astonishment; they want to demystify the world and human beings along with it, to show that everything we see as a mystery is reducible to components that aren't mysterious at all. And they cling to this ambition

even in cases where doing so is obviously fruitless. Neo-Darwinism insists that every phenomenon, every species, every trait of every species, is the consequence of random chance, as natural selection requires. And yet, Nagel says, “certain things are so remarkable that they have to be explained as non-accidental *if we are to pretend to a real understanding of the world.*” (The italics are mine.)

Among these remarkable, nonaccidental things are many of the features of the manifest image. Consciousness itself, for example: You can’t explain consciousness in evolutionary terms, Nagel says, without undermining the explanation itself. Evolution easily accounts for rudimentary kinds of awareness. Hundreds of thousands of years ago on the African savannah, where the earliest humans evolved the unique characteristics of our species, the ability to sense danger or to read signals from a potential mate would clearly help an organism survive.

So far, so good. But the human brain can do much more than this. It can perform calculus, hypothesize metaphysics, compose music—even develop a theory of evolution. None of these higher capacities has any evident survival value, certainly not hundreds of thousands of years ago when the chief aim of mental life was to avoid getting eaten. Could our brain have developed and sustained such nonadaptive abilities by the trial and error of natural selection, as neo-Darwinism insists? It’s possible, but the odds, Nagel says, are “vanishingly small.” If Nagel is right, the materialist is in a pickle. The conscious brain that is able to come up with neo-Darwinism as a universal explanation simultaneously makes neo-Darwinism, as a universal explanation, exceedingly unlikely.

A similar argument holds for our other cognitive capacities. “The evolution story leaves the authority of reason in a much weaker position,” he writes. Neo-Darwinism tells us that we have the power of reason because reason was adaptive; it must have helped us survive, back in the day. Yet reason often conflicts with our intuition or our emotion—capacities that must also have been adaptive and essential for survival. Why should we “privilege” one capacity over another when reason and intuition conflict? On its own terms, the scheme of neo-Darwinism gives us no standard by which we should choose one adaptive capacity over the other. And yet neo-Darwinists insist we embrace neo-Darwinism because it conforms to our reason, even though it runs against our intuition. Their defense of reason is unreasonable.

So too our moral sense. We all of us have confidence, to one degree or another, that “our moral judgments are objectively valid”—that is, while our individual judgments might be right or wrong, *what makes them right or wrong is real*, not simply fantasy or opinion. Two and two really do make four. Why is this confidence inherent in our species? How was it adaptive? Neo-Darwinian materialists tell us that morality evolved as a survival mechanism (like everything else): We developed an instinct for behavior that would help us survive, and we called this behavior good as a means of reinforcing it. We did the reverse for behavior that would hurt our chances for survival: We called it bad. Neither type of behavior was good or bad in reality; such moral judgments are just useful tricks human beings have learned to play on ourselves.

Yet Nagel points out that our moral sense, even at the most basic level, developed a complexity far beyond anything needed for survival, even on the savannah—even in Manhattan. We are, as Nagel writes, “beings capable of thinking successfully about good and bad, right and wrong, and discovering moral and evaluative truths that do not depend on [our] own beliefs.” And we behave accordingly, or try to. The odds that such a multilayered but nonadaptive capacity should become a characteristic of the species through natural selection are, again, implausibly long.

Nagel’s reliance on “common sense” has roused in his critics a special contempt. One scientist,

writing in the *Huffington Post*, calls it Nagel's "argument from ignorance." In the *Nation*, the philosophers Brian Leiter and Michael Weisberg could only shake their heads at the once-great philosopher's retrogression from sophisticated thinking to common sense.

"This style of argument," they write, "does not, alas, have a promising history." Once upon a time, after all, our common-sense intuitions told us the sun traveled across the sky over a flat earth. Materialistic science has since taught us otherwise.

Not all intuitions are of the same kind, though. It is one thing for me to be mistaken in my intuition about the shape of the planet; it's another thing to be mistaken about whether I exist, or whether truth and falsehood exist independently of my say-so, or whether my "self" has some degree of control over my actions. Indeed, a person couldn't correct his mistaken intuitions unless these intuitions were correct—unless he was a rational self capable of distinguishing the true from the false and choosing one over the other. And it is the materialist attack on those intuitions—"common sense"—that Nagel finds absurd.

Leiter and Weisberg, like most of his other critics, were also agog that Nagel has the nerve to pronounce on matters that they consider purely scientific, far beyond his professional range. A philosopher doubting a scientist is a rare sight nowadays. With the general decline of the humanities and the success of the physical sciences, the relationship of scientists to philosophers of science has been reversed. As recently as the middle of the last century, philosophers like Bertrand Russell and A. J. Ayer might feel free to explain to scientists the philosophical implications of what they were doing. Today the power is all on the side of the scientists: One false move and it's *back to your sandbox, philosophy boy*.

And so some philosophers have retreated into the same sort of hyperspecialization that has rendered scientists from different subdisciplines practically incapable of communicating with each other. Now these philosophers, practicing what they call "experimental philosophy," can pride themselves on being just as incomprehensible as scientists. Other philosophers, like Dennett, have turned their field into a handmaiden of science: meekly and gratefully accepting whatever findings the scientists come up with—from brain scans to the Higgs boson—which they then use to demonstrate the superiority of hardheaded science to the airy musings of old-fashioned "armchair philosophy."

In this sense too Nagel is a throwback, daring not only to interpret science but to contradict scientists. He admits it's "strange" when he relies "on a philosophical claim to refute a scientific theory supported by empirical evidence." But he knows that when it comes to cosmology, scientists are just as likely to make an error of philosophy as philosophers are to make an error of science. And Nagel is accused of making large errors indeed. According to Leiter and Weisberg and the others, he is ignorant of how science is actually done these days.

Nagel, say Leiter and Weisberg, overestimates the importance of materialism, even as a scientific method. He's attacking a straw man. He writes as though "reductive materialism really were driving the scientific community." In truth, they say, most scientists reject theoretical reductionism. Fifty years ago, many philosophers and scientists might have believed that all the sciences were ultimately reducible to physics, but modern science doesn't work that way. Psychologists, for example, aren't trying to reduce psychology to biology; and biologists don't want to boil biology down to chemistry; and chemists don't want to reduce chemistry to physics. Indeed, an evolutionary biologist—even one who's a good materialist—won't refer to physics at all in the course of his work!



And this point is true, as Nagel himself writes in his book: Theoretical materialism, he says, “is not a necessary condition of the practice of any of those sciences.” Researchers can believe in materialism or not, as they wish, and still make scientific progress. (This is another reason why it’s unconvincing to cite scientific progress as evidence for the truth of materialism.) But the critics’ point is also disingenuous. If materialism is true as an explanation of everything—and they insist it is—then psychological facts, for example, *must* be reducible to biology, and then down to chemistry, and finally down to physics. If they weren’t reducible in this way, they would (ta-da!) be irreducible. And any fact that’s irreducible would, by definition, be uncaused and undetermined; meaning it wouldn’t be material. It might even be spooky stuff.

On this point Leiter and Weisberg were gently chided by the prominent biologist Jerry Coyne, who was also a workshopper in the Berkshires. He was delighted by their roasting of Nagel in the *Nation*, but he accused them of going wobbly on materialism—of shying away from the hard conclusions that reductive materialism demands. It’s not surprising that scientists in various disciplines aren’t actively trying to reduce all science to physics; that would be a theoretical problem that is only solvable in the distant future. However: “The view that all sciences are *in principle* reducible to the laws of physics,” he wrote, “must be true unless you’re religious.” Either we’re molecules in motion or we’re not.

You can sympathize with Leiter and Weisberg for fudging on materialism. As a philosophy of everything it is an undeniable drag. As a way of life it would be even worse. Fortunately, materialism is never translated into life as it’s lived. As colleagues and friends, husbands and mothers, wives and fathers, sons and daughters, materialists never put their money where their mouth is. Nobody thinks his daughter is just molecules in motion and nothing but; nobody thinks the Holocaust was evil, but only in a relative, provisional sense. A materialist who lived his life according to his professed convictions—understanding himself to have no moral agency at all, seeing his friends and enemies and family as genetically determined robots—wouldn’t just be a materialist: He’d be a psychopath. Say what you will about Leiter and Weisberg and the workshoppers in the Berkshires. From what I can tell, none of them is a psychopath. Not even close.

Applied beyond its own usefulness as a scientific methodology, materialism is, as Nagel suggests, self-evidently absurd. *Mind and Cosmos* can be read as an extended paraphrase of Orwell’s famous insult: “One has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that: no ordinary man could be such a fool.” Materialism can only be taken seriously as a philosophy through a heroic feat of cognitive dissonance; pretending, in our abstract, intellectual life, that values like truth and goodness have no objective content even as, in our private life, we try to learn what’s really true and behave in a way we know to be good. Nagel has sealed his ostracism from the intelligentsia by idly speculating why his fellow intellectuals would undertake such a feat.

“The priority given to evolutionary naturalism in the face of its implausible conclusions,” he writes, “is due, I think, to the secular consensus that this is the only form of external understanding of ourselves that provides an alternative to theism.”

In a recent review in the *New York Review of Books* of *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, by the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga, Nagel told how instinctively he recoils from theism, and how hungry he is for a reasonable alternative. “If I ever found myself flooded with the conviction that what the Nicene Creed says is true,” he wrote, “the most likely explanation would be that I was losing my mind, not that I was being granted the gift of faith.” He admits that he finds the evident failure of materialism as a worldview alarming—precisely because the alternative is, for a secular intellectual,

unthinkable. He calls this intellectual tic “fear of religion.”

“I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear,” he wrote not long ago in an essay called “Evolutionary Naturalism and the Fear of Religion.” “I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.”

Nagel believes this “cosmic authority problem” is widely shared among intellectuals, and I believe him. It accounts for the stubbornness with which they cling to materialism—and for the hostility that greets an intellectual who starts to wander off from the herd. Materialism must be true because it “liberates us from religion.” The positive mission Nagel undertakes in *Mind and Cosmos* is to outline, cautiously, a possible Third Way between theism and materialism, given that the first is unacceptable—emotionally, if not intellectually—and the second is untenable. Perhaps matter itself has a bias toward producing conscious creatures. Nature in that case would be “teleological”—not random, not fully subject to chance, but tending toward a particular end. Our mental life would be accounted for—phew!—without reference to God.

I don’t think Nagel succeeds in finding his Third Way, and I doubt he or his successors ever will, but then I have biases of my own. There’s no doubting the honesty and intellectual courage—the free thinking and ennobling good faith—that shine through his attempt.

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