

Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False by Thomas Nagel - Reviewed by Tom Lombardo - A thoughtful and thought-provoking short philosophy book on the challenge of explaining consciousness, rationality, and values within scientific theories of the evolution of the physical world.



Thomas Nagel is an internationally recognized professor of philosophy at New York University. *Mind and Cosmos*, a short one hundred and thirty page book, was published this last year (2012) by Oxford University Press.

I found *Mind and Cosmos* fascinating and thought-provoking. It raises more scientific and philosophical questions and challenges than it answers or constructively addresses, but this is a plus. Nagel wants to highlight what he takes to be the big puzzles still facing science and philosophy. In particular, he attempts to demonstrate that the currently dominant physicalist, reductionist, and Neo-Darwinian explanation of the nature and evolution of the cosmos does not intelligibly explain: The origin of life, the origin and nature of consciousness; the origin and foundation of rationality; and the origin and foundation of realistically grounded ethical values. In essence, there are a number of really BIG explanatory holes in our present scientific view of the cosmos, and hence, there is SOMETHING of great and pervasive significance we are missing in our contemporary theories of nature.

Though Nagel provides some suggestions or proposals for what needs to be added to our present cosmic theories, his ideas are sketchy and tentative at best, and it seems that he is more inclined to believe that answering the puzzles he presents will involve some deep and transformative insights that will radically alter the way we think (and he thinks) about the world. We need a scientific revolution of the first order - a profound Gestalt switch.

Consider consciousness. How did experience and feeling arise out of physical matter in our evolutionary history? Or was it perhaps always there, even in the simplest forms of physical matter? Our physical theories do not tell us anything regarding how consciousness could have arisen out of matter, or why it would be always coupled with matter. What is it about matter that leads to or generates consciousness? Either way, it seems inexplicable and magical. In essence, Nagel argues that the hard problem of consciousness has not been solved within contemporary physical science.

Or consider ethical values. Nagel is a moral realist, believing that values are real qualities of the natural world. Opposing the subjectivist and relativist theories of morals and values, for Nagel, things are good and things are bad, and we can recognize or figure out the values of things. Yet, how are we to integrate values into a world of facts? And how are we to explain the human capacity to recognize values within the world? Evolutionary explanations of value and moral behavior highlight the survival value behind moral behaviors, but Nagel believes that ethical values and behaviors go beyond simple survival value. Whether or not it helps perpetuate my genes, love and concern for my children is “ethically good.”

It is not so much that Nagel objects to the theory of evolution (he definitely opposes deistic or supernatural explanations of the universe) but rather that he sees our present scientific ontology (the theory of what exists) and fundamental explanatory laws and principles (such as natural selection) as too limiting. There is more to the universe than we recognize, and there are fundamental laws and principles at work that we so far have not discovered. Given the repeated occurrences through history of realizing that our presumably “complete” theories were wrong or limited, one could say that Nagel’s general stance is very wise and probably correct.