

Nagel, Naturalism and Theism

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In his recent controversial book, *Mind and Cosmos*, Thomas Nagel writes:

Many *materialist naturalists* would not describe their view as reductionist. But to those who doubt the adequacy of such a world view, the different attempts to accommodate within it mind and related phenomena all appear as attempts to *reduce the true extent of reality to a common basis that is not rich enough for the purpose*. Hence the resistance can be brought together as antireductionism.¹

I want to discuss the italicized phrases and their implications. First, the term “materialist naturalist” calls for comment. Materialism is understood to be the ontological thesis that material things, or perhaps physical things and physical properties, are the only things there are. What does “naturalist” add to this? Nagel explains:

I will use the terms “materialism” or “materialist naturalism” to refer to one side of this conflict and “antireductionism” to refer to the other side, even though the terms are rather rough.²

Elsewhere he adds,

[T]here is ultimately one way that the natural order is intelligible, namely, through physical law—law—everything that exists and everything that happens can in principle be explained by the laws that govern the physical universe.³

What “naturalism” adds to materialism is the thesis that all that happens in the physical realm is “explained”, i.e., described by “mathematically stateable” laws.⁴

So much for “materialist naturalist.” Turning to the second italicized passage, we see that Nagel believes that this project has failed and must fail. That is what it means to say that the resources of naturalism--as I shall henceforth refer to it--are not rich enough the phenomena of mind. I'm not going to rehearse Nagel's reasons for arriving at this essentially Mysterian view. They are familiar and summarized here:

¹ Nagel, Thomas (2012-08-04). *Mind and Cosmos* (pp. 13-14). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition, italics mine.

² Nagel, Thomas (2012-08-04). *Mind and Cosmos* (p. 13).

³ Nagel, Thomas (2012-08-04). *Mind and Cosmos* (p. 18).

⁴ Nagel, Thomas (2012-08-04). *Mind and Cosmos* (p. 18).

On the other side there are doubts about whether the reality of such features of our world as consciousness, intentionality, meaning, purpose, thought, and value can be accommodated in a universe consisting at the most basic level only of physical facts—facts, however sophisticated, of the kind revealed by the physical sciences.⁵

What is more striking is Nagel's inclusion of phenomena well beyond the usual domain of the mind-body problem in his assessment of the failure of naturalism. His pessimism extends to the origin of life and even its subsequent evolutionary diversification, for reasons articulated by well-known (and controversial) Intelligent Design proponents Michael Behe and Stephen Meyer. There are more than a few mind-body Mysterians around, but not so many who take this further step. Moreover, Nagel also takes seriously the skeptical doubts raised by Plantinga and others about reason itself that plague evolutionary accounts of our cognitive faculties.

Once one arrives at the Mysterian's position that the resources of naturalism have been tried and found wanting, the interesting question becomes: What are the alternatives? Philosophical disputes very often follow the logic of the disjunctive syllogism, with disputants attempting to push each other off their respective disjuncts. Some Mysterians remain committed to naturalism simply because the alternatives seem so much worse. I'll mention three such philosophers. The first is Jaegwon Kim. Although he would undoubtedly reject the title of "Mysterian" he does concede that the best we can do is "a slightly defective physicalism."⁶ He anticipates Nagel's position concerning the "present approach" at the very end of an entire book devoted to trying to make naturalism work:

Why are there just these qualia and not other possible ones? That remains a mystery; I do not believe the present approach is capable of answering that question.⁷

Defective it may be, but any port in a storm, apparently. Colin McGinn is another philosopher who has embraced Mysterianism, in the form of the "cognitive closure" thesis, according to which we are so constituted that an explanation of the relation between the mental and the physical is beyond us. The explanation of consciousness, he thinks, "combines deep epistemic transcendence with the denial that what thus transcends is thereby non-natural."⁸ That is, he doesn't give up naturalism in response to Mysterianism. Finally (in the context of this tiny survey) there is Galen Strawson, who also wouldn't call himself a Mysterian, but who nevertheless claims:

⁵ Nagel, Thomas (2012-08-04). *Mind and Cosmos* (p. 13).

⁶ Jaegwon Kim, *Physicalism, or Something Near Enough* (p. 174) Princeton University Press.

⁷ Kim, p. 173.

⁸ McGinn, Colin (1994). "[The Problem of Philosophy](#)". *Philosophical Studies* (76): 133-156.

The intuition that drives people to dualism (and eliminativism, and all other crazy attempts at wholesale mental-to-non-mental reduction) is correct in holding that you can't get experiential phenomena from P phenomena...⁹

...where "P phenomena" are construed as physical and entirely non-experiential phenomena. Strawson's response, however, is to assert that we were mistaken to suppose that the physical phenomena ever excluded the experiential in the first place. Instead he opts for a version of panpsychism, according to which any ultimate physical entities must have, in addition to microphysical properties, *micro-experiential* properties. Calling this position "real physicalism," he says,

Real physicalists must accept that at least some ultimates are intrinsically experience-involving. They must at least embrace micropsychism. Given that everything concrete is physical, and that everything physical is constituted out of physical ultimates, and that experience is part of concrete reality, it seems the only reasonable position, more than just an "inference to the best explanation." Which is not to say that it is easy to accept in the current intellectual climate.¹⁰

Like Kim and McGinn, Strawson sticks with naturalism. Unlike them, he takes the bold step of re-construing the physical. There are two salient difficulties with this approach. One is that it's simply not clear that our notion of the physical really can accommodate the essential first-person-ness of experiential properties. The other is the "addition problem" of explaining the mereological relation between micropsychism and macropsychism, or making big subjects out of little ones. Notwithstanding these difficulties, there is an element of similarity between Strawson's and Nagel's approaches, and that is what I propose to discuss in the remainder of this essay.

In response to what he regards as the intractable difficulties of naturalism Nagel comments,

The possibility opens up of a pervasive conception of the natural order very different from materialism— one that makes mind central, rather than a side effect of physical law.¹¹

Nagel recognizes that the known options for a "mind-central" conception of the natural order are limited. He recognizes that pantheism is one of them, and is unhappy with its implications.

The protopsychic properties of all matter, on such a view, are postulated solely because they are needed to explain the appearance of consciousness at high levels of organic complexity. Apart from that nothing is known about them: they are completely indescribable and have no predictable local effects, in contrast to the physical properties

⁹ G. Strawson, "Realistic Monism", in *Consciousness and its place in nature* (p. 24) Imprint Academic.

¹⁰ G. Strawson, p. 25.

¹¹ Nagel, Thomas (2012-08-04). *Mind and Cosmos* (p. 15).

of electrons and protons, which allow them to be detected individually. So we have no idea how such a compositional explanation would work.¹²

Other than panpsychism, the other main option is theism, which Nagel gives due consideration.. There are many flavors of theism, but at least part of Nagel's demand is expressed by another atheist philosopher, David Chalmers:

[O]nce God fixed all the A-facts, in order to fix the B-facts he had more work to do.¹³

The A-facts are all the facts about the physical constitution of the universe. According to naturalism, these are the only facts there are. For Chalmers, Nagel and company, they are not. Chalmers uses God-talk as a whimsical device to make this point, but to the theist, it's not just a figure of speech but the way things really are. God is understood to be a personal, and thus "minded" or mind-like being who exists in some manner outside the natural order and somehow infuses it with properties that it otherwise could not have. These properties include the qualia, Intentionality, and from Nagel's standpoint, they also include the appearance of life and powers of reasoning. These are the B-facts--and that's a longer list than Chalmers certainly had in mind--and the best explanation of them is that God so arranged them. To the theist, what makes this the best explanation is the bankruptcy of the conceptual resources of naturalism to do the job.

To the atheist, of course, theism is no explanation at all, since it explains the facts about mind by positing mind as a source. A true explanation must explain mind in terms of something other than mind, and for that there simply isn't anything but the physical. Both the naturalist and theistic accounts "bottom out" in brute B-facts. The difference is in how those facts are situated. For the naturalist, they are emergent brute facts; for the theist they are not. Nagel, like some other philosophers, finds the notion of brute unattractive.¹⁴

It would imply that conscious organisms have developed through natural selection precisely in virtue of the kinds of physical characteristics that systematically give rise to consciousness, according to the psychophysical theory of emergence. This, then, is one serious option. It has the disadvantage of postulating the brute fact of emergence, not explainable in terms of anything more basic, and therefore essentially mysterious.¹⁵

He doesn't find much appeal in the theistic alternative, however. He notes that the price exacted by theism is that the natural order remains internally inexplicable; i.e., incapable of being explained by reference to only the resources that lie within it, since the God of theism exists outside the natural order. He's right, of course. Since the fact that the universe cannot be "internally explained" is the central problem of his book, it's not surprising that a purported

¹² Nagel, Thomas (2012-08-04). *Mind and Cosmos* (pp. 61-62).

¹³ David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 41.

¹⁴ Some, such as Strawson, find it incoherent.

¹⁵ Nagel, Thomas (2012-08-04). *Mind and Cosmos* (pp. 60-61).

solution should invoke something external to the natural order. Nagel points out that theism is an “interventionist” hypothesis, a theory that God somehow or other intervenes in the natural order to get things done. This is correct, of course, so it is also correct to note, as Nagel does, that,

Such interventionist hypotheses amount to a denial that there is a comprehensive natural order. They are in part motivated by a belief that seems to me correct, namely, that there is little or no possibility that these facts [the B-facts] depend on nothing but the laws of physics.¹⁶

It’s not entirely clear what Nagel means by a “comprehensive natural order,” but I assume it has something to do with the causal closure of the physical, which is indeed contradicted by theism. That is, according to theism the natural order is not “causally comprehensive.” But what is Nagel’s objection to this?

A standard atheist objection is that anything that has causal influence in the natural order is, by definition, a part of the natural order, and it’s vacuous to talk about “causes from outside.” Nagel doesn’t avail himself of this objection, probably because he recognizes that the causal principles recognized within the natural order are described by mathematically stateable laws, and it’s a coherent possibility that other kinds of causal influences exist. The fact that our own willed actions and thoughts have yet to be subsumed under such laws makes this more than an idle conjecture. So what is the source of Nagel’s rejection of theism? It is, by his own admission, an “ungrounded intellectual preference.”¹⁷ That is, he simply finds it unappealing. His candor is admirable, and he made the point even more bluntly a few years back:

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.¹⁸

In the end, Nagel appears to take the view that none of the positions discussed in the literature are likely to succeed, so some radically different approach is needed. And yet, he admits that his objection to theism is not based on any deep conceptual difficulty, such as panpsychism seems to entail. In fact, with very little modification his entire book could be seen as making an extended case for theism, and this is what is most striking about it. He takes us to the very edge of theism, so to speak, and then backs off from sheer displeasure with where the argument has led. Nagel’s willingness to acknowledge the power of his own personal metaphysical preferences, rather than presenting them as self-evident principles, is exemplary.

¹⁶ Nagel, Thomas (2012-08-04). *Mind and Cosmos* (p. 26).

¹⁷ Nagel, Thomas (2012-08-04). *Mind and Cosmos* (p. 26).

¹⁸ Nagel, Thomas, *The Last Word*, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 130-131.