

Another knowledgeable atheist acknowledges the inadequacy of materialistic evolutionary reductionism

Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False

Thomas Nagel

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John Woodmorappe

This short book is not an easy read. To comprehend fully, the reader must have a good background in the language and concepts of philosophy, and well as that of philosophers such as Descartes and Wittgenstein. The author is Professor of Philosophy at New York University. He shows a deep knowledge of evolutionary concepts, and those who disagree with him cannot reject his contentions based on his lack of sufficient understanding of the subject.

Nagel is no ‘religious apologist’. He openly identifies himself as an atheist (p. 95), and states that his skepticism of certain aspects of evolutionistic thinking is not driven either by religious considerations or by preference of any definite alternative (p. 7). He appreciates theism insofar as it raises questions about the legitimacy of certain evolutionary premises, while rejecting theism as having no more credibility than materialism as a comprehensive worldview (p. 22). He also praises Intelligent Design (ID) thinkers, by name, such as Michael Behe, Steven Meyer, and David Berlinski, because, regardless of any other beliefs they may or may not have, they have raised valid and important

questions about such things as the origin of life (p. 10).

Evolution is a legitimate object of intelligent questioning

Let us expand on the foregoing. Nowadays, any doubt about evolution is variously delegitimized as extreme ignorance, irrationality on par with that of questioning the sphericity of the Earth, fear of the loss of a sense of human specialness, or a unilateral concession to religious beliefs. None of this is true, at least not necessarily. The author decisively rejects the prevailing aggressive triumphalism of ‘evolution is fact’ thinking, and, furthermore, stresses the fact that this rejection is quite independent of whether or not one is willing to entertain the notion of an intelligent designer. He comments:

“Whatever one may think about the possibility of a designer, the prevailing doctrine—that the appearance of life from dead matter and its evolution through accidental mutation and natural selection to its present forms has involved nothing but the operation of physical law—cannot be regarded as unassailable” (p. 11).

Although the author is in no sense an ‘anti-evolutionist’, and freely accepts organic evolution as ‘well supported’ (p. 46), he implicitly acknowledges the hollowness of evolutionary explanations in general, as well as the undisguised dogmatism of many evolutionists. While focusing on evolutionistic ideas about the origin of life, he states that

“It is not enough to say, ‘Something had to happen, so why not



this?’ I find the confidence among the scientific establishment that the whole scenario will yield to a purely chemical explanation hard to understand, except as a manifestation of an axiomatic commitment to reductive materialism” (p. 49).

Nagel also rejects explanations for the ‘specialness’ of the universe based on the idea of infinite universes, in which ours happens to be the only one that can support life. Merely being a condition for existence is not an explanation for it. For instance, if one were to ask why the air pressure inside a transcontinental jet is close to that of sea level, it would not suffice as an explanation merely to be told that were it not so, everyone on the plane would be dead (p. 95).

When noting the unconvincing nature of evolutionary explanations in various contexts, Nagel adds that he is open-minded to alternative ones, as he comments:

“In the present climate of a dominant scientific naturalism, heavily dependent on speculative Darwinian explanations of practically everything, and armed to the teeth against attacks from religion, I have thought it useful to speculate about possible alternatives” (p. 127).

Not a 'god of gaps' copout

Evolutionists tell us that naturalistic explanations have always replaced supernaturalist ones. They assure us that current mysteries surrounding life will eventually find clear explanations through evolution. 'God' is merely a device to fill in the gaps in our knowledge and, as knowledge advances, the gaps become closed, and God is again displaced—to fill some other gap until it, too, is closed. Even if not, one must still accept evolution without question because all science is naturalistic as a matter of course. In fact, Nagel quotes evolutionist Richard Lewontin, who said, "We cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door" (p. 49).

The affirmation of the all-sufficiency of materialistic reductionism boils down to the sentiment that 'Just because we do not understand something, it is no reason to question evolution'. Although Nagel rejects supernaturalism in all its forms, he categorically rejects evolutionary explanations as necessarily the default ones. He quips:

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The human mind

To the evolutionist, the emergence of the 'human mind' is a no-brainer (pardon the pun). During the course of primate evolution, a feedback loop arose for some unknown reason, and it led to the runaway evolution of such things as huge brain size in humans. Every aspect of the 'human mind', including everything that endows humans with greater mental capacities than that of any other known form of

life, reduces to this presumed set of events.

Nagel treats reasoning of this kind not as an explanation, but a gloss. In particular, he questions the sufficiency of bio-neurological factors as an explanation for the 'human mind'. Nor does he accept that evolutionistic premise that human consciousness was a 'side effect' of bio-neurological evolution. He comments:

"Suppose we have reason because our brains have reached a level of complexity at which reason emerges. If this is to be an explanation that renders the appearance of reason not a complete accident, it must in some way account not just for the physical complexity itself but for the appearance of just the kind of complexity that is a condition of the emergence of reason" (p. 88).

He adds that

"It is not an explanation to say just that the physical process of evolution has resulted in creatures with eyes, ears, central nervous systems, and so forth, and that it is simply a brute fact of nature that such creatures are conscious in the familiar ways. Merely to identify a cause is not to provide a significant explanation, without some understanding of why the cause provides the effect" (p. 45).

In addition:

"The appearance of animal consciousness is evidently the result of biological evolution, but this well-supported empirical fact is not yet an explanation—it does not provide understanding, or enable us to see why the result was to be expected or how it came about" (p. 46).

Nagel accepts the newfound presumed explanatory power of evolutionary developmental biology (evo-devo), but considers it still insufficient, by itself, to explain the origin of consciousness (p. 48).

In dealing with questions about the origin of human capabilities in pursuits such as science, logic, and

ethics, he asks, "Is it credible that selection for fitness in the prehistoric past should have fixed capacities that are effective in theoretical pursuits that were unimaginable in the past?" (p. 74). Moreover, he treats the emergence of consciousness as solely the outcome of survival-causing behaviours; in his words, "a just-so story" (p. 76). He uses the same term as that with which he contemplates sociobiology as an explanation for moral realism (p. 77).

Finally, Nagel rejects the 'It must have had survival value' assertion as an explanation, by itself, for human consciousness. For instance, it is easy to see how a fear of precipices or snakes has survival value. What survival value, however, is the ability of realizing the inconsistency of seeing the morning sunrise at one's right and the belief that one is driving south (p. 83)?

Conclusion

Thomas Nagel joins the ranks of non-theists who question or reject important elements of the standard evolutionary worldview. Their very existence refutes those who say that the questioning of evolution is necessarily motivated by religious teachings. It also shows that the rejection of evolutionary explanations in no sense depends upon tacit religious presuppositions.

This atheist's open appreciation of the arguments of leading ID proponents (p. 10) is also telling. It points to the solid intellectual standing and broad-based applicability of such arguments, and refutes those who try to paint the ID movement as nothing more than 'disguised religion' or 'repackaged creationism'.

Nagel's work raises a more fundamental question. When will more non-theists respect the intellectual validity of ID challenges to evolutionary theory?