

Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian

Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False”

by Thomas Nagel (Oxford Press, 2012)



Laws of Nature

The intelligibility of the world is no accident. Mind, in this view, is doubly related to the natural order. Nature is such as to give rise to conscious beings with minds; and it is such as to be comprehensible to such beings. Ultimately, therefore, such beings should be comprehensible to themselves. And these are fundamental features of the universe, not byproducts of contingent developments whose true explanation is given in terms that do not make reference to mind... My guiding conviction is that mind is not just an afterthought or an accident or an add-on, but a basic aspect of nature. (M&C, p. 17)

Our universe is special not only because it is populated by living and conscious beings but also because it is theoretizable by means of elegant mathematical forms, both rather simple in presentation and extremely rich in consequences. To allow life and consciousness, the mathematical structure of laws has to be complex enough so as to be able to generate rich families of material structures. From the other side, the laws have to be simple enough to be discoverable by the appearing conscious beings. To satisfy both conditions, the laws must be just right. Such special laws can only be purposefully chosen. (Genesis of a Pythagorean Universe, GPU)

History of Physics

The Science is driven by the assumption that the world is intelligible. That is, the world in which we find ourselves, and about which experience gives us some information, can be not only described but understood.. In the natural sciences as they have developed since the seventeenth century, the assumption of intelligibility has led to extraordinary discoveries, confirmed by prediction and experiment, of a hidden natural order that cannot be observed by human perception alone. Without the assumption of an intelligible underlying order, which long antedates the scientific revolution, those discoveries could not have been made.

Those to whom the last statement seems too strong are invited to watch my “Faith of the Fundamental Science” course on the history of physics. Alternatively, they may just believe Thomas Nagel supported by e.g. Albert Einstein or Max Planck.

Mind and Physics

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, expressed 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. ... Mind, as a development of life, must be included as the most recent stage of this long cosmological history, and its appearance, I believe, casts its shadow back over the entire process and the constituents and principles on which the process depends.(p.8)

...what explains the existence of organisms like us must also explain the existence of mind (p.14)... If we want to try to understand the world as a whole, we must start with an adequate range of data, and those data must include the evident facts about ourselves (p.20).

Ground of Rationality

The hope is not to discover a foundation that makes our knowledge unassailably secure but to find a way of understanding ourselves that is not radically self-undermining... Evolutionary naturalism provides an account of our capacities that undermines their reliability, and in doing so undermines itself... it does not explain why we are justified in relying on reason to correct other cognitive dispositions that lead us astray, though they may be equally natural, and equally susceptible to evolutionary explanation. The evolutionary story leaves the authority of reason in a much weaker position... Evolutionary naturalism implies that we shouldn't take any of our convictions seriously, including the scientific world picture on which evolutionary naturalism itself depends. (pp 25-28)

Examples of other self-undermining concepts of reality: Demon of Descartes, Matrix, World-as-Simulation, Boltzmann Brain...

“God is not a deceiver” (Descartes)

“Subtle is the Lord, but malicious He is not” (Einstein)

Moral Realism

What does it mean to say that my practical reasonings are efforts to get the objectively right answer about what I should do, rather than manifestations of biologically selected dispositions that have no more objective validity than a taste for sugar? (The Last Word, 1997).

MND: “altruistic moral norms are widespread just because groups that internalized and complied with these norms outcompeted groups that did not. It is meaningless to assign them any objective truth except the benefits in the group competition.”

Since moral realism is true, a Darwinian account of the motives underlying moral judgment must be false.

Why Naturalism is Popular?

The priority given to evolutionary naturalism in the face of its implausible conclusions about other subjects 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... (p. 29)

The thought that the relation between mind and the world is something fundamental makes many people in this day and age nervous. I believe this is one manifestation of a fear of religion which has large and often pernicious consequences for modern intellectual life... I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: 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... the feeling that I have called the fear of religion may extend far beyond the existence of a personal god, to include any cosmic order of which mind is an irreducible and nonaccidental part...

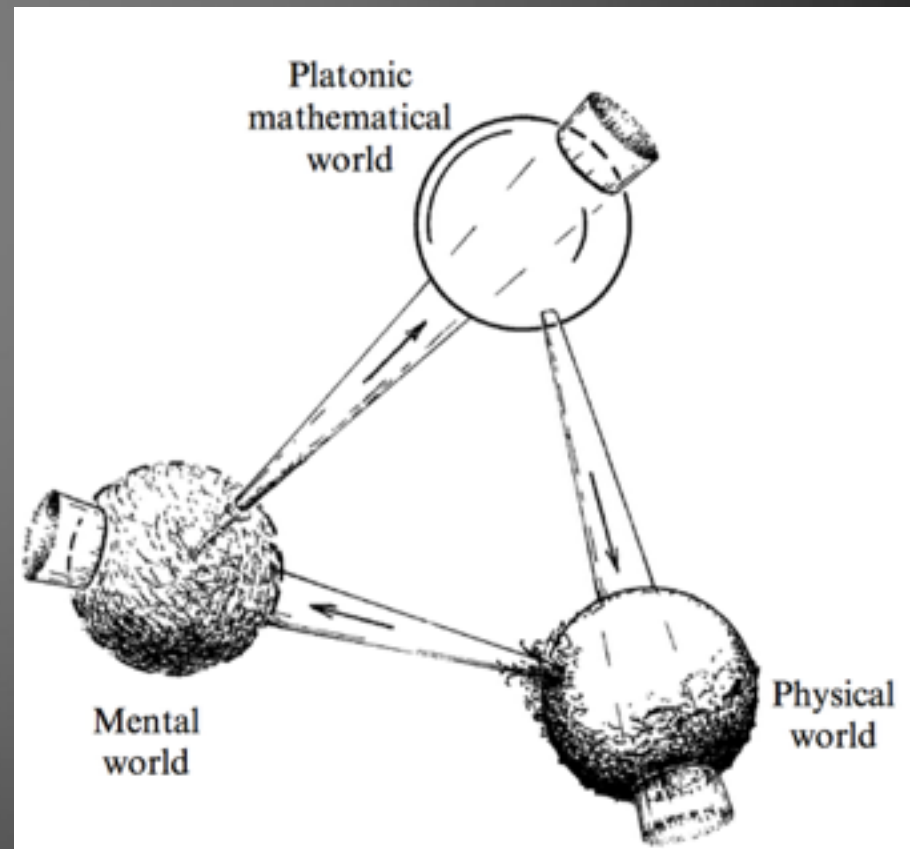
I am curious, however, whether there is anyone who is genuinely indifferent as to whether there is a God— anyone who, whatever his actual belief about the matter, doesn't particularly want either one of the answers to be correct...? (The Last Word, 1997)

Is Theism Politically Incorrect in Academia?

Physico-chemical reductionism in biology is the orthodox view, and any resistance to it is regarded as not only scientifically but politically incorrect.. I realize that such doubts [in MND] will strike many people as outrageous, but that is because almost everyone in our secular culture has been browbeaten into regarding the reductive research program as sacrosanct, on the ground that anything else would not be science.

Two powerful internal driving forces have strongly influenced the direction of theoretical research, yet which usually go unmentioned in serious scientific writings—for fear, no doubt, that these influences may seem to have drifted too far from the strict rules of proper scientific procedure. The first of these is beauty, or elegance, and I have touched upon the matter in many places elsewhere in this book. The second, namely the irresistible allure of what are frequently termed ‘miracles’, I have only hinted at so far (in §19.8, §21.5, and §31.14); yet, as I can vouch from personal experience, these can indeed exert a powerful influence on the direction of one’s research.

(R. Penrose, *The Road To Reality*, p. 1038)



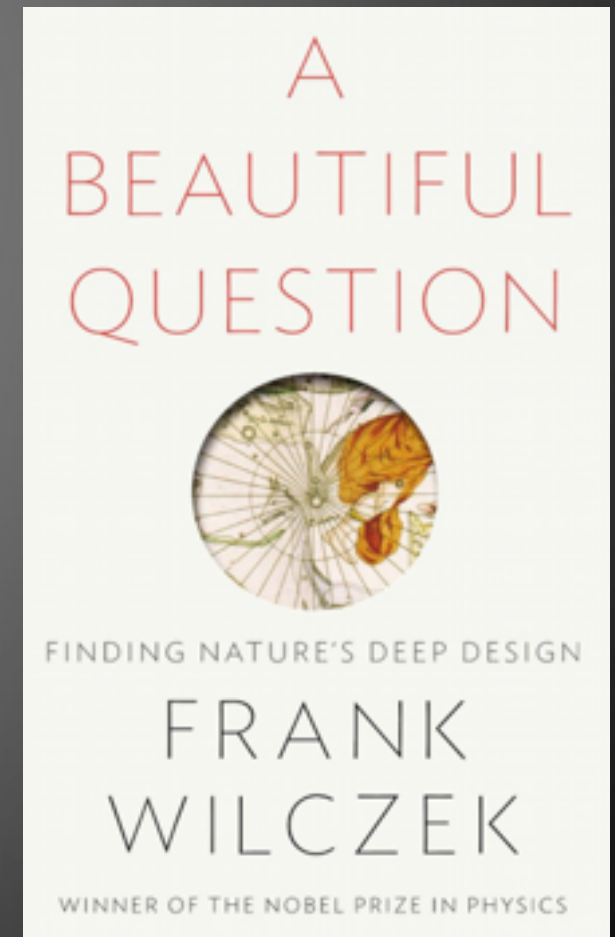
Is Theism Politically Incorrect in Academia?

Does the world embody beautiful ideas?... Is the world a work of art?... While our Question finds support in spiritual cosmology, it can also stand on its own. And though its positive answer may inspire spiritual interpretation, **it does not require one**. We will return to these thoughts toward the end of our meditation, by which point we will be much better prepared to appraise them. (Location 104)

Nevertheless, at the conclusion of this meditation, I hope you'll agree that the only fitting answer to its Question Does the world embody beautiful ideas? . . . is a resounding Yes! That answer emerges, with increasing force and clarity, from each preceding page... The most daring hopes of Pythagoras and Plato to find conceptual purity, order, and harmony at the heart of creation have been far exceeded by reality.

It is a beautiful reality, for which I gave— and give— **thanks**. (Location 4380)

Frank Wilczek, *A Beautiful Question: Finding Nature's Deep Design* (2015)



Pan-Psychism

The essential character of such an understanding would be to explain the appearance of life, consciousness, reason, and knowledge neither as accidental side effects of the physical laws of nature nor as the result of intentional intervention in nature from without but as an unsurprising if not inevitable consequence of the order that governs the natural world from within. (p. 33)

We should seek a form of understanding that enables us to see ourselves and other conscious organisms as specific expressions simultaneously of the physical and the mental character of the universe. One might object that life is hard enough to understand considered purely as a physical phenomenon, and that the mind can wait. But adding the requirement that any theory of life also has to explain the development of consciousness may not make the problem worse. Perhaps, on the contrary, the added features of the natural order needed to account for mind will in the end contribute to the explanation of life as well. (p. 69)

The End

It is perfectly possible that the truth is beyond our reach, in virtue of our intrinsic cognitive limitations, and not merely beyond our grasp in humanity's present stage of intellectual development. But I believe that we cannot know this, and that it makes sense to go on seeking a systematic understanding of how we and other living things fit into the world. In this process, the ability to generate and reject false hypotheses plays an essential role. I have argued patiently against the prevailing form of naturalism, a reductive materialism that purports to capture life and mind through its neo-Darwinian extension. But to go back to my introductory remarks, I find this view antecedently unbelievable— a heroic triumph of ideological theory over common sense. The empirical evidence can be interpreted to accommodate different comprehensive theories, but in this case the cost in conceptual and probabilistic contortions is prohibitive. I would be willing to bet that the present right-thinking consensus will come to seem laughable in a generation or two— though of course it may be replaced by a new consensus that is just as invalid. The human will to believe is inexhaustible. (p. 128, the end)