

## The Ethics of Metaethics: On Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos*

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One way to characterize the condition of the prisoners in Plato's allegory of the cave is that they are bound to appearances. That is, they cannot escape taking what appears to be the case in fact to be the case. It seems, even, that they are so far beholden to appearances that they lack a conception of the distinction between appearances and reality and accordingly the very concepts. It stands to reason that they would be blinkered, then, at talk of what is in fact the case as opposed to what is not. Prisoners of appearances, they are likewise prisoners of themselves. They are not free to think otherwise.

Readers will know that Socrates asks his interlocutors to imagine that one of the prisoners was freed from his bonds, forcibly removed from the cave, and exposed, painfully at first, to the light of day. In brief, he is illumined. Science is now possible, and the shadow play of the cave is revealed to him for what it is. Were he to return to the cave with this knowledge, however, he would be greeted with what Thomas Nagel calls an "untutored reaction of incredulity."<sup>1</sup> Socrates predicts even violence should any would-be liberator draw near the prisoners. For who wants to be told that his or her most basic beliefs are mistaken? Who wants to learn that the life he or she has led is founded in error?

As he predicted<sup>2</sup>, Thomas Nagel's 2012 book, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*, has provoked reactions of incredulity. Steven Pinker infamously tweeted, with a link to a critical review in *The Nation* by Brian Leiter and Michael Weisberg, "What has gotten into Thomas Nagel? Two philosophers expose the shoddy reasoning of a once-great thinker."<sup>3</sup> "Fuck him, he explained," Leon Wieseltier delicately restated Pinker's tweet.<sup>4</sup> Yet it would badly miss the mark to call all the reactions to Nagel's book "untutored." Instead, critics have appealed precisely to the distinction between appearances and reality in order to cast doubt on Nagel's project. As Leiter and Weisberg noted in *The Nation*, and the biologist H. Allen Orr noted in *The New York Review of Books*, it is Nagel who presents himself as the defender of "common sense," and it is Nagel who comes to the defense of "the untutored reaction of credulity to the reductionist neo-Darwinian account of the origin and evolution of life."<sup>5</sup> Orr comments:

His intuition recoils from the claimed plausibility of neo-Darwinism and that, it seems, is that. (Richard Dawkins has called this sort of move the argument from personal incredulity.) But plenty of scientific truths are counterintuitive (does anyone find it intuitive that we're hurtling around the sun at 67,000 miles per hour?) and a scientific education is, to a considerable extent, an exercise in taming the authority of one's intuition.<sup>6</sup>

Leiter and Weisberg comment at greater length:

[W]hat could be more common-sensical, obvious or evident than the notion that the earth is flat and the sun revolves around the earth? All ordinary evidence supports that verdict: we know from experience that people fall off things that are spherical, especially when trying to hang upside down from them, and we know that the sun rises in the sky in one direction and sets in the other as it revolves around the seemingly flat earth. Happily, Nagel does not attempt to repudiate the Copernican revolution in astronomy, despite its hostility to common sense. But he displays none of the same humility when it comes to his preferred claims of common sense—the kind of humility that nearly 400 years of nonevident yet true scientific discoveries should engender. Are we really supposed to abandon a massively successful scientific research program because Nagel finds some scientific claims hard to square with what he thinks is obvious and “undeniable,” such as his confidence that his “clearest moral...reasonings are objectively valid”?<sup>7</sup>

An irony, however, should not go unnoticed.<sup>8</sup> Nagel finds materialist naturalism problematic because, among other reasons, he thinks it undermines the distinction between appearances and reality in matters of value: in brief, moral realism. In other words, one reason why Nagel defends “common sense” and “the untutored reaction of credulity” against materialist naturalism (and, *pace* Leiter and Weisberg, not “scientific claims” without further ado) is that, in his judgment, it would thrust us back into the cave with respect to judgments about morality. In his words, it would “almost certainly require us to give up [...] the natural conviction that our moral judgments [more precisely: at least certain of these judgments, those that we cannot even imagine abjuring] are true or false independent of our beliefs.”<sup>9</sup> Only appearances would remain. To the objection that this “natural conviction” is no better founded than the natural convictions of the prisoners in Plato’s cave, Nagel’s reply in turn is that the highly speculative nature of evolutionary explanations of our mental faculties makes such explanations

too weak a ground for putting into question our most basic forms of thought. Our confidence in the truth of propositions that seem evident on reflection should not be shaken so easily (and, I would add, cannot be shaken on these sorts of grounds without a kind of false consciousness).<sup>10</sup>

Readers will likely know that Nagel’s case against materialist naturalism does not rest on his account of its implications for moral realism, which of course has long been contested. Nagel’s argument begins by calling into doubt the reducibility of the mental to the physical: “Consciousness,” he writes, “is the most conspicuous obstacle to a comprehensive naturalism that relies only on the resources of the physical sciences.”<sup>11</sup> He goes on to argue that, like consciousness, cognition—our faculties of thought and reasoning—cannot be accounted for in the terms of materialist naturalism.<sup>12</sup> And then finally, he claims that “value presents a further problem for scientific naturalism.”<sup>13</sup> (Readers unfamiliar with Nagel’s book might see the synopsis that he published in the *New York Times*.<sup>14</sup>)

As Gary Gutting has observed, discussion of Nagel's book has tended to focus on his philosophy of mind and philosophy of science.<sup>15</sup> Some commentators, like Gutting, have focused as well on the book's implications for the dialogue between science and religion.<sup>16</sup> But Nagel's argument about morality has gotten much less attention.<sup>17</sup> The purpose of this iteration of *Ethics in Focus* is to determine what can be learned by engaging with this argument.

Nagel's principal interlocutor here is his colleague at New York University, the moral philosopher Sharon Street. In her paper "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," which Nagel cites multiple times, Street claims that it is impossible to reconcile the view that there are "evaluative facts which hold independently of all our evaluative attitudes"—in brief, moral realism—with "recognition of the role that Darwinian forces have played in shaping the content of our values."<sup>18</sup> The opening premise of her argument for this claim is that "our system of evaluative judgments is saturated with evolutionary influence."<sup>19</sup> This premise granted, Street puts to the moral realist the question of what relation there is between "the selective forces that have influenced the content of our evaluative judgments, on the one hand, and the independent evaluative truths that realism posits, on the other."<sup>20</sup> This, Street seeks to show at length, the moral realist (whether "non-naturalist" or "naturalist"<sup>21</sup>) cannot plausibly explain in terms that do not undermine moral realism. By contrast, according to her the antirealist has no trouble accounting for the "significant overlap between evaluative truths and the kinds of evaluative judgments that natural selection would have pushed us" toward.<sup>22</sup> The antirealist, on Street's account, understands evolutionary causes to have given us "our starting fund of evaluative attitudes."<sup>23</sup> Evaluative truth—on which Street takes a constructivist view<sup>24</sup>—is understood as "a function of the evaluative attitudes we have": more fully, a function of these attitudes brought into reflective equilibrium by evaluative judgments drawing on precisely our fund of attitudes shaped by selective pressures.<sup>25</sup> Nagel summarizes: "Street holds that a Darwinian account is strongly supported by contemporary science, so she concludes that moral realism is false."<sup>26</sup> As he states later, "[F]rom a Darwinian perspective, the hypothesis of value realism is superfluous—a wheel that spins without being attached to anything."<sup>27</sup> But then:

I follow the same inference in the opposite direction: since moral realism is true, a Darwinian account of the motives underlying moral judgment must be false, in spite of the scientific consensus in its favor.<sup>28</sup>

Several lines of inquiry might be pursued. First, is Nagel right to think that there is a conflict between moral realism and evolutionary theory (at least in its materialist, naturalist interpretation)? In other words, is he right to agree with Street? (To indicate one possible question: Is evolution a threat to moral realism or to our confidence in our ability to cognize moral reality?) Reviewing Nagel's book for the *Boston Review*, Elliott Sober agreed that

[Y]ou don't need to postulate moral truths to have an evolutionary explanation for why we have the moral beliefs we do. But that doesn't mean that evolutionary theory justifies denying that there are such truths. Nagel is assuming that if moral

realism is true, then the truth of moral propositions must be part of the explanation for why we believe those propositions. I disagree; the point of ethics is to *guide* our behavior, not to *explain* it, a thesis that Nagel defended in *The View from Nowhere* (1989 [sic]) but has now apparently abandoned.<sup>29</sup>

Is Sober's criticism on the mark, or has he misunderstood Nagel and Street in turn? (Has Nagel reversed himself? If so, was it with reason or without?)

Attention might also be directed to Nagel's non-metaphysical, non-naturalist realism, which he discusses briefly in *Mind and Cosmos*, after elaborating it at greater length in *The View from Nowhere*.<sup>30</sup> In that earlier book, Nagel writes,

Normative realism is the view that propositions about what gives us reasons for action can be true or false independently of how things appear to us, and that we can hope to discover the truth by transcending the appearances and subjecting them to critical assessment.<sup>31</sup>

He is emphatic, however, that his conception of realism "is not a form of Platonism": for him, "Ethical thought is the process of bringing objectivity to bear on the will," not the discovery of "a new aspect of the external world, called value," or the "bringing [of] our thoughts into accord with an external reality."<sup>32</sup> His realism might then be called an "objectivism."

In *Mind and Cosmos*, a new wrinkle enters: Nagel now emphasizes, following Street, that "value is tied to life," such that "its content will depend on particular forms of life."<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, "Human good and bad depend in the first instance on our natural appetites, emotions, capacities, and interpersonal bonds."<sup>34</sup> But Nagel sees no reason here to abandon or modify his realism, which after all countenances, in his terminology, both agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons.<sup>35</sup> Instead, it appears that all reasons become relative, namely, to the diverse forms of life.<sup>36</sup> One upshot of this value pluralism is that "the recognition of what is objectively valuable in the life of one creature does not automatically settle the question of what reasons it implies for the actions of another."<sup>37</sup> Perhaps this is perfectly right. Further, perhaps we must simply acknowledge that what is objectively valuable for one form of life might conflict with what is objectively valuable for another. But, if so, how to adjudicate such conflicts? Is there some way to reconcile, objectively, objective conflicts? Or does value pluralism devolve into value chaos? Can Nagel speak still of a view from nowhere that is not, in fact, a view from somewhere, namely, that of a particular form of life? Or does human life enjoy some privilege here, given the capacity of human persons to take an objective view of themselves (that is, to transcend or to stand outside themselves)? If so, it seems that much elaboration is needed.

Finally, it might be considered on what grounds to choose between Nagel and Street. To recall, Nagel writes that he follows the same inference as Street, but "in the opposite direction."<sup>38</sup> That is, for her *modus ponens*—"if the evolutionary facts are roughly as I speculate, here is what might be said philosophically..."<sup>39</sup>—he substitutes a *modus tollens* to the effect that the evolutionary facts must not be as materialist naturalists hold, because philosophically they cannot be right. Instead, he tentatively develops an alternative cosmology with the goal of

making “mind, meaning, and value as fundamental as matter and space-time in an account of what there is.”<sup>40</sup> This cosmology takes the form of a naturalistic, non-reductionistic (yet non-theistic) teleology, which revises the Darwinian picture by postulating that “the existence of the genetic material and the possible forms it makes available for selection...may be determined not merely by value-free chemistry and physics, but also by [...] a cosmic predisposition to the formation of life, consciousness, and the value that is inseparable from them.”<sup>41</sup>

In brief: Are there reasons to choose one of these cosmologies over the other that would appear decisive to someone not already committed one way or the other? Are there reasons sufficient to lead someone to abandon one cosmology for the other? If so, what is the nature of these reasons? (Are they theoretical, practical, or both?) Further, has Nagel adequately articulated any such reasons, or at least pointed his readers in promising directions?

This line of inquiry can be extended a bit further. Nagel states that he finds “the confidence among the scientific establishment” that the appearance of life, and all the more conscious life, “will yield to a purely chemical explanation hard to understand, except as a manifestation of an axiomatic commitment to reductive materialism.”<sup>42</sup> He then quotes in a note from Richard Lewontin’s 1997 review of Carl Sagan’s *The Demon-Haunted World*: “materialism is absolute,” Lewontin writes, “for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.”<sup>43</sup> Nagel’s suggestion here is that it is aversion to theism, if not a more general “fear of religion,”<sup>44</sup> that explains what he calls, earlier in the book, the “priority given to evolutionary naturalism.”<sup>45</sup> Yet it might be asked—Alvin Plantinga has asked—whether Nagel’s own rejection of a theistic alternative to materialist naturalism is better grounded.<sup>46</sup> In *The Last Word*, Nagel notoriously wrote, acknowledging his own “fear of religion,”

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<sup>47</sup>

—though he did not explain like *what*, which is what made these lines notorious.

In brief then, one last time: Are there reasons to choose Nagel’s naturalistic teleology over a theistic cosmology, or the other way around, that would appear decisive to someone who, unlike Nagel and Plantinga, was not already committed one way or the other? (For example, is Nagel right that the appeal to God lacks explanatory power?<sup>48</sup> Or is his understanding of explanation too demanding, even arbitrary?—a complex topic itself.<sup>49</sup>) Are there reasons sufficient to lead someone to abandon one of these cosmologies for the other? If there are any such reasons, are they theoretical, practical, or both? An interesting possibility is that the case for or against moral realism may need to be made, at least in part, on moral grounds—hence this introduction’s title. Whether we can find moral grounds unbiased toward realism or antirealism, however, seems doubtful.

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## Notes

1. Nagel 2012, 6.
2. Ibid., 7.
3. Pinker 2012.
4. Wieseltier 2013, 65.
5. Nagel 2012, 5–6.
6. Orr 2013, 27.
7. Leiter and Weisberg 2013, 28.
8. The deliberateness of Nagel's provocation also appears lost on some of critics. His book's subtitle alludes to chapter 4 of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, "Why There Almost Certainly Is No God," which Nagel reviewed in *The New Republic* (see Nagel 2006), and his intention "to defend the untutored reaction of credulity" is surely meant to call to mind—and tweak—Dawkins' "argument from personal incredulity."
9. Nagel 2012, 28.
10. Ibid., 28–29. Cf. Dworkin 1996, 117 and 128.
11. Ibid., 35.
12. See *ibid.*, 74.
13. Ibid., 98.
14. Nagel 2013.
15. Gutting 2013, 15. See, for example: Dupré 2012 and Kitcher 2013.
16. Ibid. See also: Haught 2013.

17. But, see Sober 2012.
18. Street 2006, 141. Contrast Dworkin 1996, 123, who rejects “the widespread but plainly mistaken assumption that a successful Darwinian explanation of moral concern [...] would have skeptical implications” as “a lingering viral residue of the defeat of crude anthropomorphic religion.”
19. Ibid., 121. See also: 113–114.
20. Ibid.
21. In Street’s terminology, *non-naturalist* versions of realism hold that “evaluative facts or truth are not reducible to any kind of natural fact,” are not the kinds of things that play a role in causal explanations, and are instead irreducibly normative. By contrast, *naturalist* versions of realism hold that “evaluative facts are identical with or constituted by (certain) natural facts” and are the kinds of things that play a role in causal explanations. See Street 2006, 111–112.
22. See *ibid.*, 129, for the three respects in which she takes the so-called adaptive link account to be superior to the so-called tracking account: in terms of parsimony, clarity, and explanatory power. See 154 for the claim that “[t]he difference [between these accounts] is that the antirealist [adaptive link] account [...] is consistent with science.” Compare: Street 2008, 220–221, n. 30—“one attractive feature of metaethical constructivism—indeed, an important part of what I think ultimately forces us to the view—is its compatibility with a naturalistic worldview.”
23. Ibid., 154.
24. See Street 2008. Interestingly, she rejects the quasi-realism about normativity associated with Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard. See Street 2011, 9: “We cannot prevent our naturalistic understanding of the nature and origins of normative judgment from interacting with and ultimately helping to undermine the view that there are independent normative truths—*even if* we understand this latter view as an internal normative claim,” as quasi-realists propose to do [emphasis in original].
25. Street 2006, 154.
26. Nagel 2012, 105.
27. Ibid., 109.
28. Ibid., 105.

29. Sober 2012, 53.
30. See Nagel 2012, 101–105; Nagel 1986, 138–163 (chapter 8).
31. Nagel 1986, 139.
32. Ibid.
33. Nagel 2012, 119.
34. Ibid.
35. See for this distinction: Nagel 1986, 152–153—“If a reason can be given in a general form which does not include an essential reference to the person who has it, it is an *agent-neutral* reason. For example, if it is a reason for anyone to do or want something that it would reduce the amount of wretchedness in the world, then that is a neutral reason. If on the other hand the general form of a reason does include an essential reference to the person who has it, it is an *agent-relative* reason. For example, if it is a reason for anyone to do or to want something that would be in *his* interest, then that is a relative reason [. . .] (Both agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons are objective, if they can be understood and affirmed from outside the viewpoint of the individual who has them.)”
36. Nagel 2012, 119: “[V]alue must be seen as pluralistic: The Domain of real value, if there is such a thing, is as rich and complex as the variety of forms of life, or at least of conscious life.” It would be interesting to hear more about this last qualification.
37. Ibid., 120.
38. Ibid., 105: “Street holds that a Darwinian account is strongly supported by contemporary science, so she concludes that moral realism is false. I follow the same inference in the opposite direction: since moral realism is true, a Darwinian account of the motives underlying moral judgment must be false, in spite of the scientific consensus in its favor.”
39. Street 2006, 112.
40. Nagel 2012, 20. Nagel writes further here: “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.”
41. Nagel 2012, 123.
42. Ibid., 49.
43. Ibid., n. 11.



44. See Nagel 2006; Nagel 1997, 127–143 (chapter 7).
45. Nagel 2012, 29: “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—which is to be rejected as a mere projection of our internal self-conception onto the universe, without evidence.”
46. See Plantinga 2012, 39–40.
47. Nagel 1997, 130.
48. See *ibid.*, 132–133; Nagel 2012, 26.
49. Compare Gutting 2013, 15. See Nagel 2012, 45 (on “significant explanation”), 46, 47 (on “illuminating explanation”), 48, 50 (on “satisfactory explanation”), 53. It is worth considering that Nagel presents himself as “an objective idealist in the tradition of Plato and perhaps also of certain post-Kantians, such as Schelling and Hegel.” As such, for him, “pure empiricism is not enough. The intelligibility of the world is no accident” (17).

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