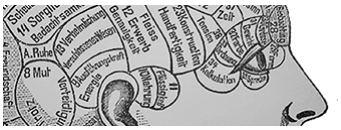

METAPSYCHOLOGY ONLINE REVIEWS

SECULAR PHILOSOPHY AND THE RELIGIOUS TEMPERAMENT

Full Title: Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament: Essays 2002-2008
Author / Editor: Thomas Nagel
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Thomas Nagel's new anthology is a sequel, in form if not thematically, to his previous volume of essays, *Concealment and Exposure*, also published by OUP, in 2002. As in that case, we are offered a choice of materials which appeared originally in the intellectual press. The exception is the first essay, which is new and which gives the title of the present volume. As in *Concealment*, most texts are reviews, with a few independent essays, notably those previously published in *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (a journal cofounded by Nagel in the late 60s), and, also a *déjà vu*, the book's content is placed under three very general section headings. This time they are: Religion, Politics, and Humanity.

Given the origins of both these volumes, they are addressed to a general educated audience. Even if reading these pages will not present the reader with the difficulties of Nagel's monographs (e.g. *The View from Nowhere*) or academic anthologies (e.g. *Other Minds*), healthy philosophical instincts will come handy. Some familiarity with the topics and authors discussed will also help, since, at points, the uninitiated reader may feel, justifiably,

that she is not spared. This is an author who can be abrupt even as a reviewer, and who makes occasional use of elusive concepts, which, given the nature of *Secular Philosophy*, are not thoroughly explained. Readers who are familiar with Nagel's philosophical stance, then, will get more from these essays. An emphasis on understanding aspects of the world from *within* a perspective, a fondness for the idea that there are things we might never understand about the universe and our place in it ('mysterianism'), and an uncompromising (and unfashionable) mix of antirelativism and antiscientism form the nucleus of Nagel's philosophical posture.

The first part of the book, which discusses religion, deserves special attention. The essay which closes this section, 'Public Education and Intelligent Design' (originally published in *Philosophy & Public Affairs* vol. 36, no. 2, 2008) has already generated violent controversies. And the new, opening essay, 'Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament' is likely to generate further question marks. Somewhat strange, for an author who confessed that he 'lost what appetite [he] ever had' for public polemic (*Other Minds*, p.9). I will say a few words about each of these papers.

Nagel is the second prominent philosopher, after Jerry Fodor (see e.g. http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n13/peter-godfrey-smith/it-got-eaten), accused in the last few years of hurting the cause of science education by expressing skepticism about the scope of 'Darwinian' explanations. In 'Public Education…', Nagel argues that intelligent design (ID), whatever the religious motivations behind it, could be regarded as a scientific proposal. ID has it that organisms are so complex, that the probability of their coming about by chance, as the theory of evolution suggests, is negligible. The complexity is evidence for their having been 'designed'. Nagel writes that this may be bad science, but it is science nonetheless. Moreover, religious motivations, of the atheistic variety, could also be identified behind the position of the 'scientific establishment' that there could not be a place for *purpose* in biological (or any kind of scientific) explanation. There is then, according to Nagel, a kind of symmetry in this debate, and the exclusion of any discussion of ID from the curriculum as non-science is not constitutionally justified (the reference is to the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the US Constitution).

The motivation for this position is the view that the theory of evolution by natural selection is, at best, an incomplete story about intelligent and conscious life. There is also an understandable irritation with the inflation of pop-evolutionary explanations of just about anything, from math to morals. But Nagel is far too generous with ID, and his take on the possibility of mentioning ID arguments in class in a way that would not implicitly favor or consolidate fundamentalist religious beliefs is unconvincing. Two further remarks are, however, in order. First, Nagel's constant critical stance regarding the idea that our present scientific views could constitute a complete understanding of the world, ourselves included, cannot be easily dismissed. One might not (and, I think, should not) endorse the position expressed in this paper, but one needs to note that Nagel does not claim to evaluate ID as a biological theory, but the reasons for its exclusion. And he never claims it should be taught as a correct theory, or as one that has comparable empirical support with the theory of evolution. Moreover, his criticism of the we-are-under-siege attitude of the scientific community is not completely misplaced. The epistemic authority of science is a fundamental element of our civilization, but this authority is kept intact, among other things, by a

willingness to question itself constantly. Reactions other than nodding to the scientific consensus of the day are possible, and allowed.

Second, even if the ideas expressed by Nagel are detrimental, criticism should be civil. Unfortunately, it has not been, and the issue has been aggravated by the fact that, in 2009, Nagel nominated Stephen C. Meyer's *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the evidence for Intelligent Design* as a book of the year for the *Times Literary Supplement* (see http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/article6931364.ece). Nagel is not a biologist and his well known zeal to temper the pretentions of the scientific community went beyond the reasonable with this choice. But the reactions, too, have been brutal. The reader can consult, for example, the popular (among philosophers) *Leiter Reports*, and learn that Nagel has been degraded to the status of 'formerly reputable' (http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2009/12/thomas-nagel-jumps-the-shark.html).

This being said, Nagel's approach remains questionable. The scientific credentials of ID are dubious, and biologists themselves, not philosophers, have the last word on the matter. Whether ID supporters have managed to come up with a proposal that can stand or fall on the usual empirical grounds does qualify as a philosophical issue, but I have doubts that Nagel's general stance puts him in a good position to deal with this problem.

Going through the first essay in the section on religion, "Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament", one may conclude that the difference between Nagel and his critics is, after all, one of temperament. The religious temperament, we are told early on, is 'a disposition to seek a view of the world that can play a certain role in the inner life – a role that for some people is occupied by religion.' (p.4). What if the disposition is there, but religion is not an option? Nagel was never ambiguous about his atheism and in this text he proposes to see whether philosophy can be of any help for those who, without being religious, find it impossible to live a 'merely human life'. Philosophy should at least 'offer a way of assimilating the fact that nothing can occupy' (p.4) the role usually played by religion. Perhaps it can do more.

Nagel considers three answers to the problem of bringing 'into one's individual life a full recognition of one's relation to the universe as a whole' (p.6): rejecting the question; answering it from within the human point of view; and answering it from a cosmic perspective. The first option would be natural for those devoid of a religious temperament. Unlike Plato, Wittgenstein or Nagel's former mentor John Rawls (see *Concealment and Exposure*, p.76 for an earlier attribution of religious temperament to Rawls), most of the 'current professoriate' in philosophy would be opaque to the need to take such a vague question seriously. For these people, science settles whatever can be settled in these matters. But, for Nagel, going this way is leaving something important out.

Unfortunately, Nagel adds to the opacity in his treatment of the remaining two options. He expresses dissatisfaction with the second perspective, the humanist one, which has it that the universe is silent and all the harmony we can find is in *our* world, between one's life and those of fellow humans. But then what are the

alternatives? All the reader gets, in terms of the third option, is yet another attack on the evolutionary biological worldview and a speculative image of a Platonic universe in which the emergence of conscious beings is not accidental, but somewhat inscribed in the natural evolution of the cosmos. It's either that or 'a sense of the absurd' (p.17).

This text, and others in the section on religion, can be easily turned into more ammunition for those who deride Nagel's 'mysterianism'. This is unfortunate. For example, later in the book, in the review of Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Nagel's inclination for speculating about there being 'teleological principles in nature' (p.23) shows up again and weakens once more his criticism of the attempt to reduce everything to our current scientific worldview (see also his review of *Unweaving the Rainbow*: http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n07/thomas-nagel/why-so-cross). Advancing such ideas seems gratuitous and could hardly be a promising antidote for the 'fear of religion' (p.25).

The other two sections of Nagel's book pose comparatively minor problems, even if the positions advanced are consequential, as are those on global justice and international law. The text that opens the section of politics, 'The Problem of Global Justice' (originally in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2005), is the most substantive of these essays. It builds on a Rawlsian conception of justice to argue that there is an important difference between what we owe to fellow citizens and what we owe to all human beings. Some will disagree, but at least Nagel's position in these matters is easier to grasp.

Many of the essays in this collection deal with authors Nagel has discussed before. He continues, for example, his critical examination of Michael Sandel's views about liberalism, and he returns to some of his intellectual heroes, notably Rawls and Bernard Williams. Outside of typical references for analytical philosophers, Nietzsche makes a number of appearances in the first section, and a text on Sartre and how we become aware of other minds makes for a surprising conclusion to this volume. Such intellectual openness is laudable.

Some will think it scandalous for a professor of philosophy to write these days that 'existence is something tremendous' (p.6) and then to struggle to come to terms with this idea under the category of temperament. However, while Nagel may be atypical, his style constitutes an important reminder. The current intellectual climate has it that philosophy is just like any other academic niche: a profession with specialized questions and specialized tools, acting in concert with the sciences. There are good reasons for such a view (there are also good reasons against it), but *any* orthodoxy, including this one, tends to become oppressive. And when this happens, philosophy, whatever else it may be, has a special responsibility of lucidity. Nagel's philosophical stance, imperfect as it is, makes it clear that he takes this responsibility seriously. Perhaps also as a matter of temperament, I agree with Nagel that the real scandal we are facing is a collective forgetting of the transforming impact of the basic philosophical questions, and the hypostatization of jargon as the only respectable expression of thought.

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