

## Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Nagel, and *Journey of the Universe*

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New York University philosopher Thomas Nagel's latest book *Mind and Cosmos* is so unexpected, and so annoying to many of his fellow philosophers of mind, that we may assume he is onto something. The book's subtitle is especially provocative: *Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*.<sup>1</sup> The publication of Nagel's book provides me with the opportunity to reflect not only on the cosmic story as set forth in *Journey of the Universe* but also on the enduring importance of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955).

On the occasion of our celebrating and reflecting on *Journey*, I bring up the names of Nagel and Teilhard simultaneously because, as far apart as the two thinkers may be theologically, each agrees that a purely materialist metaphysics cannot make sense of the new scientific cosmic story in general and the fact of mind in particular. Like Brian Swimme, Mary Evelyn Tucker and Teilhard, Nagel has no problem with the standard scientific narrative of mind's gradual evolutionary emergence. Rather, his concern is with whether the materialist metaphysics in which that narrative is still being packaged, especially in the academic world, can make the story of the human mind's emergence in the cosmic story intelligible. He argues convincingly that it cannot, but he provides no coherent alternative to his formerly espoused materialism. Here I want to suggest that Teilhard provides a largely implicit metaphysical worldview that *can* contextualize contemporary versions of the cosmic story such as *Journey* in a

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is almost Certainly False* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

manner that avoids the materialist and atomistic reduction of the universe to a primordial and (eventually) final state of mindlessness.

What bothers Teilhard most is the materialist assumption that consciousness, which evolution has labored so long to produce, will eventually be lost altogether in a final energetic collapse of the universe. Ever since childhood Teilhard was preoccupied with the fact of perishing.<sup>2</sup> Were he to read *Journey* or any other account of natural history he would wonder, above all, what the authors think about the materialist prediction of the final perishing of life and consciousness. He would ask why the authors think the story matters at all, and if it does, whether it matters everlastingly. What if the cosmos comes to nothing in the end, and consciousness perishes along with it? Can we really love a universe whose destiny is the abyss of nonbeing? Teilhard writes:

Man, the more he is man, can give himself only to what he loves; and ultimately he loves only what is indestructible. Multiply to you heart's content the extent and duration of progress. Promise the earth a hundred million more years of continued growth. If, at the end of that period, it is evident that the whole of consciousness must revert to zero, *without its secret essence being garnered anywhere at all*, then, I insist, we shall lay down our arms—and mankind will be on strike. The prospect of a *total death* (and that is a word to which we should devote much thought if we are to gauge its destructive effect

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter*, trans. René Hague (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 18.

on our souls) will, I warn you, when it has become part of our consciousness, immediately dry up in us the springs from which our efforts are drawn. . .<sup>3</sup>

It is not the objective of *Journey* to consider Teilhard's preoccupation formally, of course, and I am not bringing up his concern as a criticism of the book. Yet any narration of the story of the universe does raise, at least in the minds of some readers, the question Teilhard is putting to us: Does the story really matter if absolute perishing is the end of it all?

The materialist is quite content to respond that everything including consciousness will eventually slip into final nothingness. Teilhard is not. So he would be happy to discover that Nagel, a staunch materialist throughout his academic career, now agrees with the Jesuit geologist that the union of science and materialism is an intellectual dead-end. Like Teilhard, Nagel allows that evolutionary science is correct as far as it goes, but he claims that *evolutionary materialism* is unscientific and logically self-contradictory since it cannot account for the reality of mind. Nagel agrees with contemporary cosmology that mind is stitched seamlessly into the fundamental physical features of the Big Bang universe, but he denies that a purely materialist account of mind's emergence can make sense of our capacity for thought.

Like Teilhard, and unlike most other scientists and philosophers, Nagel proposes instead that before we tell the cosmic story we must first look closely at the splendid properties of mind to which the story has recently led. He means by this that any causal narrative of the universe story must be loaded from the start with a sufficiently rich explanatory content to account for the

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<sup>3</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *How I Believe*, trans. René Hague (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 43-44.

eventual production of thought. Such a cosmic narrative would differ decisively from the standard materialist version according to which “what is *more*” is always coming out of “what is *less*.” Materialist claims about mind clearly violate the principle of sufficient reason. Whatever else it may be, after all, the cosmic journey is at the very least a mind-making enterprise and we need to ask why. According to evolutionary materialists, however, life and mind are simply unintended arrays of the mindless material bits they take to be the ultimate ground and final destiny of the cosmic journey. In other words, to materialists the emergence of mind in natural history is incidental, nothing more than a fluke that tells us little or nothing about what the universe really is. Interpreted materialistically, mind’s evolutionary emergence and its amazing properties are not enough to disturb the fundamental pointlessness of the cosmic story.<sup>4</sup>

However, in view of the narrative togetherness of mind and cosmos as depicted in *Journey* as well as in the writings of Teilhard (and now acknowledged in Nagel’s recent book), it seems arbitrary to overlook the extraordinary properties of mind while we are engaged in the business of telling the cosmic story. Doesn’t the fact of mind tell us something vital about the *whole* cosmic story, something that materialism inevitably leaves out?

Nagel suspects it does, but in acknowledging the inseparability of mind and the whole cosmic journey, he faces two problems. On the one hand isn’t materialism warranted if life and mind arose historically, without any sharp breaks, out of a fundamentally mindless cosmic process? On the other hand, how can theology be avoided if the universe is biased from the start toward the making of minds, as Nagel now suspects it is?

The fatal flaw Nagel now sees in any materialist cosmology is that it makes the universe

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Peter W. Atkins, *The 2nd Law: Energy, Chaos, and Form* (New York:

Scientific American Books, 1994), 200.

look so fundamentally mindless from start to finish that, if true, we have no good reason to trust our own minds. The physical series of events leading to life and mind, materialists claim, has no strain of directionality or intentionality, even though Darwinian evolution has brought about intelligent, intentional human subjects. Speaking on behalf of materialist naturalism, the Duke University philosopher Owen Flanagan, for example, writes that human intelligence, an admittedly splendid evolutionary product, can be accounted for in terms of blind physical laws and purely Darwinian processes. “Evolution,” he announces, “*demonstrates* how intelligence arose from totally insensate origins.”<sup>5</sup> And philosopher Daniel Dennett agrees: “the designs in nature are nothing short of brilliant, but the process of design that generates them is utterly lacking in intelligence of its own.”<sup>6</sup>

A main theme in Nagel’s new book, however, is that if indeed our minds have emerged from, and can be adequately explained in terms of, mindless physical stuff processed by blind laws of nature and aimless Darwinian processes, then why should we pay any attention to these minds? So Darwin would appreciate Nagel’s point. “With me the horrid doubt always arises,” Darwin wrote to one of his friends, “whether the convictions of man’s mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey’s mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Owen Flanagan, *The Problem of the Soul: Two Visions of Mind and How to Reconcile Them* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 11 (emphasis added).

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Dennett, “Intelligent Thought,” in *The Third Culture*, edited by John Brockman (New York: Touchstone Books, 2006), 87.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to W. Graham, July 3rd, 1881, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, Francis Darwin, ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 285.

Nagel is now asking his fellow materialists—think, for example, of Flanagan and Dennett—to look carefully at Darwin’s doubts: How can evolutionary materialists justify their own intellectual self-confidence and expect us to take them seriously if they really believe that the ultimate explanation of all mental functioning lies in a purely mindless process emanating from aimless physical stuff rushing toward a final abyss of nonbeing? I wonder how Swimme and Tucker, along with readers of *Journey*, would respond to this question.

For his part, Nagel now finds materialism intellectually unacceptable. Yet he wants nothing to do with theology either. Surely he realizes that endowing nature with even the thinnest vein of teleology opens up the universe to a theological interpretation. He suspects that the cosmic story has a kind of inbuilt purpose, namely, to produce minds, but he has no explanation for why the cosmos would be so endowed. Still clinging to the tattered remnants of his lifelong affair with materialism, he is not ready to link up with theology. Again, I wonder what response Swimme and Tucker, along with readers of *Journey*, might make to Nagel’s dilemma. *Journey* rightly refrains from dealing formally with this larger question, but it seems natural that in *reflecting* on the story *Journey* narrates, as we are doing in this volume, we would wonder about its theological implications.

To support its pessimistic assumptions about the universe, evolutionary materialism, as both Teilhard and Nagel would agree, turns its focus away from the most palpable and *immediately real* of all phenomena: the interior fact and performance of our own minds. Instead of asking what an examination of our subjectivity might tell us about the universe, materialism reduces the subjective dimension of our being to an epiphenomenon with no intelligible connection to the presumably more “real” mindlessness of physical stuff. In their attempt to make the cosmos appear completely objectifiable, some scientists and philosophers today even

deny that subjectivity or consciousness has any real existence at all.<sup>8</sup> Their materialist worldview in effect leaves no room for subjects of any kind. Consequently, to fit human beings into their “objectively” mindless universe, scientific materialists must first strip themselves of the very minds they are using to objectify the world and teach us the truth! Nagel now quite understandably wants nothing to do with this mindless self-subversion of human mental existence and functioning.

Unlike Nagel, who has no alternative metaphysics to substitute for his formerly materialist worldview, Teilhard realized that the fact of interiority and consciousness requires a non-materialist metaphysics as the setting for any coherent telling of the cosmic story. Because he was a geologist and not a philosopher, he was never fully successful in articulating an alternative worldview. However, I believe he was leaning toward what I would call a *metaphysics of the future*. Here I want to suggest that such a worldview may also intelligibly frame *Journey of the Universe*. If Swimme and Tucker, like Teilhard, do not want their narrative to be interpreted materialistically then they might consider an *anticipatory vision*, one that understands the cosmos as a drama whose intelligibility, or what we might call its *narrative coherence*, emerges only “up ahead,” in the future.

Such a vision would be consistent with contemporary scientific cosmology in allowing no sharp breaks physically and historically between the early universe and the eventual arrival of mind. But instead of diminishing mind to virtual nothingness and final insignificance, a metaphysics of the future validates the splendor of consciousness by situating *the whole cosmic story* (in which mind is embedded) within the setting of a worldview that identifies what is really

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, Paul M. Churchland, *The Engine of Reason, the Seat of the Soul: A Philosophical Journey into the Brain* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

real, fully intelligible, ideally good and maximally beautiful with *what is coming* from the future, rather than basing the reality of emergent phenomena solely on what is or what has been.

Put more succinctly, the world, as Teilhard writes, “rests on the future as its sole support.”<sup>9</sup> This means that the fullest way to contact the world’s true being, intelligibility, value and beauty is to turn our attention toward the future, putting on the habit of hope. Hope then is not only a theological virtue but also an epistemological necessity which, far from being an illusory escape from “reality” as materialists always take it to be, is essential to the orienting of our hearts and minds—and the universe along with us—toward the domain of *fuller being* arising uncertainly on the horizon of the “up ahead.” In this metaphysical setting the reality and value of mind consist of its being an especially sensitive anticipation of the infinite being, meaning, value and beauty arriving from the future that prophetic faith traditions refer to as “God.”

Again, I am not suggesting that *Journey*—since it is not a work of philosophy or theology—needs to engage in this kind of metaphysical inquiry. However, stories are always tacitly carried along by one metaphysical vision or another, so at some point, as we reflect on a story’s meaning or intelligibility—as we are doing here with the cosmic story—we need to make its implicit metaphysics explicit. In the case of *Journey*, the implied worldview must be wide enough to encompass not only the “objective” discoveries of natural science but also the anticipatory character of conscious subjectivity.

Teilhard’s implicit metaphysics of the future seems to me to have the breadth that Nagel is looking for but that remains largely unavailable in the contemporary philosophical world in which he still dwells. No doubt, what I am suggesting on the basis of my reading of Teilhard will

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<sup>9</sup> Teilhard, *Activation of Energy*, trans. René Hague (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 239.



surely seem foreign to Nagel. So, to bring out the distinctiveness of a metaphysics of the future we would have to contrast it with at least two other, more familiar, worldviews, both of which fail to render intelligible the dramatic character of the mind-making natural world that *Journey* depicts. The first of these is the persistent Platonic “metaphysics of the eternal present” assumed by most prescientific Christian thought and still influential among contemporary Christian philosophers and theologians. According to this vision, which still dominates Christian spirituality, the world’s being, intelligibility, value and beauty are the result of finite being’s “vertical” sacramental participation in the infinite God who is taken to be the eternal source of all finite being. The fact of mind is valued and becomes intelligible in this “fixist” worldview on the assumption that it is a special kind of finite participation in an infinite Intelligence. This vision of the relationship of finite being to a timeless infinite is familiar to both Christian believers and scientific skeptics, so I need not develop it further here. I only want to note that in a forthcoming book I undertake a critique of it, arguing at length that an exclusivist religious devotion to an “eternal present” is incapable of providing an intelligible context for telling the new cosmic story in which mind comes into existence *gradually*, over the course of many millions of years.<sup>10</sup>

A second alternative to my proposed metaphysics of the future is what I like to call a “metaphysics of the past.” This is the worldview taken for granted by most materialist scientists and philosophers. It strives, unsuccessfully I believe, to make the world, life and mind intelligible by reducing them analytically to the lifeless and mindless physical units that inhabited the remote cosmic past. Trying to understand everything in a purely reductive way,

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<sup>10</sup> John F. Haught, *Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015).

however, only makes the world look less, not more, coherent.<sup>11</sup> The further back our analytical journey takes us into the cosmic past, in other words, the more we see things falling apart. Neither conscious subjectivity nor any other emergent realities will ever show up in a landscape reduced analytically to atomic bits.<sup>12</sup>

We need to turn around, therefore, after making our analytical journey into the cosmic past, and scan the horizon for what is yet to come, that is, if we are interested in looking at the *real* world.<sup>13</sup> Teilhard, of course, did not oppose scientific analysis as a method of inquiry but only the atomistic metaphysics that materialists have arbitrarily built on it. He realized that it is only by breaking things down into their component parts that the stages of the cosmic journey can be laid out for us chapter by chapter. *Journey* rightly embraces the same methodological point of view. Still, a purely reductive analysis cannot by definition yield a coherence that fully satisfies the human drive to understand, as Nagel's new suspicions indicate. If the cosmos is a story, analysis alone cannot tell us what the story is about. Instead we have to follow the story as it moves forward. If the universe is a drama still unfolding, after all, how can we grasp its

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<sup>11</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Human Energy*, trans. J. M. Cohen (New York: Harvest Books/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1962), 172-73). For an extended critique of the materialist assumptions underlying what Teilhard calls the "analytical illusion" see my book *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man*, trans. Norman Denny (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1964).

intelligibility without watching where it is going?<sup>14</sup> “Like a river which, as you trace it back to its source, gradually diminishes till in the end it is lost altogether in the mud from which it springs, so existence becomes attenuated and finally vanishes away when we try to divide it up more and more minutely in space or—what comes to the same—to drive it further and further back in time. The grandeur of the river is revealed not at its source but at its estuary.”<sup>15</sup>

By looking toward the cosmic delta, an anticipatory metaphysics of the future also shows itself to be confluent with an Abrahamic theology in which God, the creative source of all being, draws all things toward coherence from out of the future. God is not so much a governor, overseer or an “eternal now” cleansed of any real contact with time. Rather God, who creates the world from out of the future, is the stimulus and not yet fully enfleshed Goal of all cosmic becoming.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly the patient, long-suffering hope prescribed by the prophetic traditions as essential to our going out to meet the coming of God, seems congruent with a cosmological imperative to *wait* patiently for the world’s intelligibility and fuller being to arise on the horizon of the not-yet.

I have not the space here to develop further what I am calling a metaphysics of the future. I merely want to suggest that the anticipatory vision I am sketching here in its barest bones on the basis of my reading of Teilhard needs to be distinguished carefully not only from the reductive and backward looking perspective of analytical science and evolutionary materialism

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<sup>14</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, trans. René Hague (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1969), 79-86; 131-32.

<sup>15</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, trans. Gerald Vann (New York: Harper Colophon, 1969), 77. See also Teilhard de Chardin, *Activation of Energy*, 239.

<sup>16</sup> As implied in Teilhard, *Activation of Energy*, 139, 239.

but also from the other-worldly metaphysics of traditional philosophy and theology. An other-worldly Platonic metaphysics may give us a sense of the imperishability of being, but it uproots us from the flow of cosmic time. A materialist metaphysics of the past acknowledges that we are immersed in the flow of time, but its focus is on what *has been* rather than on what is not-yet. Teilhard's anticipatory vision, one that he never fully articulated, recommends itself in my opinion since it locates the enduring foundation of the universe in the realm of the "up ahead." That is, it looks toward the infinite resourcefulness of the God-Omega whose reality cannot be apprehended apart from our assuming the open posture of hope. In reading *Journey*, therefore, I can make most sense of its narrative if I place it against the backdrop of a metaphysics of the future.