Review Essay[*]

On Thomas Nagel's Rejection of Theism

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In his most recent book—*Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*—and in numerous places in his previous work, Thomas Nagel wishes to suggest several reasons that theism is not a live option for him (to use a phrase made famous by William James). He does not seem to intend many of his criticisms to be more than suggestive, much less decisive; nonetheless, in light of the strength of his conviction that theism is somehow inherently too outrageous an option to believe, I would like to spend a bit of time identifying and assessing the criticisms he mentions.

Nagel does not seem averse to characterizing his resistance to theism as something of a bias. He is rather transparent about theism simply not being a reasonable alternative for him personally. He seems to leave open the possibility that others may find it to be reasonable, but he himself, he says, has not been blessed with the *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity). Alvin Plantinga's work in epistemology employs this term, borrowing from the writings of John Calvin, to refer to the idea that God has made God's reality known to people in a direct fashion apart from discursive inference.[1] Nagel, though, claims to have no such sense, however inchoate. The thesis of theism strikes him rather as a dead option—perhaps akin (this is my example, not his) to the difficulty if not impossibility for an evangelical Christian of endorsing doctrines of reincarnation or karma.

[*]Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[1] See Plantinga's trilogy on warrant: *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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Important to emphasize is the irenic way in which Nagel conveys this impression. There is nothing overtly tendentious or dismissive about his view toward theists in general, despite his own rejection of theism and incredulity at some of its tenets. In fact, he goes out of his way to express gratitude for the work of certain theistically motivated advocates of intelligent design—lauding them as iconoclasts—for raising important questions and pointing out salient limitations of naturalism. His recent review of Plantinga's latest book is exceedingly fair.[2] And he admits that plenty of thinkers, on seeing the limitations of naturalism, might naturally gravitate toward theism as a superior explanation of various important aspects of the human experience—a few of which I shall mention below. Nagel's fair-mindedness and collegial tone are laudable, refreshing, and a poignant contrast to the contentious animus of the New Atheists whose strident dismissiveness of their interlocutors bespeaks a troubling lack of intellectual accountability. Nagel's voice is not a divisive, partisan one but rather conveys the sincere effort of a great and scrupulously honest philosopher trying to understand reality in light of his atheism, and the seeming inability of naturalism to explain on its own principles important phenomena that he is unwilling to renounce.

Nagel's book, to express it in broad outline, argues that various features of the human condition—value, meaning, cognition, consciousness, agency—reside beyond the ability of naturalism to account for. The thesis is not a new one, although what is most striking about Nagel's book is that it displays an atheist admitting the limitations of naturalism. Usually such criticisms are lodged by theists, like Christian philosopher James Porter Moreland, who, three years ago, published his book *The Recalcitrant* Imago Dei: *Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism*.[3] Moreland argued specifically that consciousness, free will, rationality, personhood, objective morality, and intrinsic value are unable to be sustained by a naturalistic worldview. Ironically enough, in an appendix Moreland discusses Nagel at length, specifically the "dismissive strategy" Nagel employed in a 1997 book—a strategy that attempted to undercut, among other things, a theistic account of reason.[4] For present purposes, though, it is important to see that Nagel and Moreland agree that naturalism is ill-equipped to explain central features of reality.

Let us take value as a paradigmatic example to illustrate their point. The last chapter in Nagel's (as in Moreland's) book treats the question of values generally, ethics more particularly. In seeking an adequate explanation of value (as he did for the other items on his list), Nagel divides the question into the constitutive issue concerning what value is all about and the historical question of how it could

[2] Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Nagel published his review of Plantinga's book as "A Philosopher Defends Religion," *The New York Review of Books*, September 27, 2012, 62–63.

[3] James Porter Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism* (London: SCM Press, 2009).

[4] Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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come about that creatures like us could recognize objective value and be motivated by it. Causal historical accounts, he argues, inevitably are problematically reductionist, leaving out important and ineliminable parts of the picture. Historical explanations, such as those offered by theists, could indeed help explain much of what needs explanation here, but Nagel nonetheless rejects them for reasons to be discussed below. Instead, he opts for a non-intentional teleological explanation—something in the vicinity of the ideas of Aristotle, he thinks. Although he admits he is not entirely sure such an explanation makes sense, it is the direction he thinks is most likely to prove fertile. What he remains adamant about is that subjectivist and eliminativist (anti-realist) accounts, though they may be explicable with the resources of naturalism alone, are beyond his ability to embrace psychologically, involving too prohibitive a price and too big an affront to common sense. "The teleological hypothesis," he writes, in contrast, "is that these things may be determined not merely by value-free chemistry and physics but also by something else, namely a cosmic predisposition to the formation of life, consciousness, and the value that is inseparable from them."[5] The question as to which alternative is best comes down, he thinks, to a matter of relative plausibility.

Nagel, of course, admits that his notions of non-intentional teleology—a universe coming to life, coming into an ability to recognize itself, a view that resonates in certain respects with Charlie Dubar Broad's view of the mind in nature and with Bergson's picture of creative evolution—may well, in today's intellectual climate, strike many readers as implausible, in the same way that materialism and theism strike him.[6] At any rate, although much of what Nagel is suggesting here is not altogether new, in the contemporary discussion of, say, value and reality, it represents a fourth option after three well-rehearsed ones, which are as follows: 1) naturalists confident in moral realism, like Nagel, but who, unlike Nagel, retain the hope that secular ethical theory will eventually suffice to capture what is distinctive about value; 2) naturalists who, like Nagel, see naturalism as in principle unable to explain important aspects of value and who, unlike Nagel, thus reject moral realism; and 3) supernaturalists who remain staunch moral realists, like Nagel, but who, unlike Nagel, identify theistic foundations for morality. Nagel agrees and disagrees with all of these camps. Let us call his view "teleological emergentism." With respect to value, this is a realist perspective affirming objective value, seeing naturalism as unable to account for such realism and so rejecting naturalism; however, Nagel also steadfastly resists the theistic hypothesis, gesturing instead in this other direction—a view of the universe as somehow having had this teleological direction latent within it, rendering the emergence of consciousness, value, and the like more than just wild coincidence.

[5] Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, 123.

[6] Nagel cites Charlie Dunbar Broad's *The Mind and Its Place in Nature* (London: Routledge, 1925) 81–94 and Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (trans. Arthur Mitchell; New York: Henry Holt, 1911).

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Assessing the merits of his alternative proposal is a task for another day; for now, why is it that Nagel retains so strong a bias against theism, beyond his admission to not being blessed with a sense of God's reality? On my reading, he identifies several reasons to explain his philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic aversion. It is worth noting what they are, because classical theists have some important points to emphasize in reply. If the discussion is to proceed by more than merely citing one's biases, and rather by genuine, careful assessment of relative plausibilities, it is important that Nagel's concerns about theism be forthrightly addressed.

To this end, let us identify the reasons he adduces for skepticism about theism. His quest for adequate explanation functions with a few strictures, one of which is antireductionism. Others are that certain things cannot be explained as merely accidental, and "the ideal of discovering a single natural order that unifie[s] everything on the basis of a set of common elements and principles."[7] Both Cartesian dualism and classical theism reject this second criterion or aspiration, thus departing from the single natural order to which Nagel aspires. Theists who appeal to the miraculous are attempting to explain features of the world by divine intervention. Since this is not part of the natural order, it is beyond where he is willing to go. Is this merely his bias, or a reason for rejecting the theistic hypothesis? If we were to attempt to make it into a reason, the logic seems to go something like this: divine interventions seem to represent a breakdown in explanation, an unnecessary ad hoc add-on, a theological addition to the picture that is indulgent and foreign. This is why Nagel's earlier aversion seems aptly characterized as rooted in something aesthetic: he seems to be operating on the assumption that there is something explanatorily suspect about theism and the miraculous from the start. He at any rate is unable to countenance it, and he suspects that in today's intellectual milieu appeals to theism will largely be seen as troublesome.

Call it a mere bias if you will, but Nagel's concern here seems to be that an adequate explanation, to avoid appearances of being ad hoc or ontologically indulgent or something else, needs to be integrated. Its parts cannot just be slapped together in haphazard and unprincipled fashion, but must truly inform each other and combine into an organic whole. God's transcendence or the disruption of the natural order by miracles or something of the kind seems to strike him at a deep level as incongruent with this constraint imposed by integration. Although I do not share his reservations here, for reasons I shall explain below, I think I can empathize with his concern to a degree and can feel some of the force of his sentiment. It is this issue in particular, in fact, that I wish to explore further below, enlisting the assistance of C. S. Lewis to do so. First, though, let us briefly review some of Nagel's other reasons for rejecting the supernatural.

A recurring theme of Nagel's is that mind must somehow be central to the story of reality—not just an accidental product fortuitously arising billions of years into the narrative, but something that somehow guided the process from the start.

[7] Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, 7.

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Theism accomplishes such a feat impeccably, of course, but Nagel insists that this does not help. For he writes, "So long as the divine mind just has to be accepted as a stopping point in the pursuit of understanding, it leaves the process incomplete, just as the purely descriptive materialist account does."[8] This then is another reason for his rejection of the theistic hypothesis: its alleged incompleteness insofar as it makes God, in this case, a stopping point. At this point plenty of classical theists would be entitled to balk, of course, since God seems to be a natural stopping point indeed, a Being whose existence is necessary, the One who is, in fact, the very ground of all being. If anyone or anything is entitled to be a legitimate stopping point, is this not it? Nagel admits (or at least intimates) that, unlike the nomological laws of physics, God's existence is more plausibly thought of as metaphysically necessary. And even though theism accommodates Nagel's insistence that mental phenomena must be attributed to the working of a comprehensive mental source, he still finds theism no more credible than materialism as a comprehensive worldview. But why?

According to Nagel, "Theism does not offer a sufficiently substantial explanation of our capacities, and naturalism does not offer a sufficiently reassuring one."[9] The problem with naturalism construed reductionistically is that it fails to undergird our confidence in the deliverances of reason, since reason itself is explicated in a way that casts doubt on its ability to uncover the truth (an issue we will return to later). The problems identified here for theism are that it fails to provide an adequate explanation. It "amounts to the hypothesis that the highest-order explanation of how things hang together is of a certain type, namely, intentional or purposive, without having anything more to say about how that intention operates except what is found in the results to be explained."[10] Nagel continues by writing that "a theistic explanation will inevitably bring in some idea of value, and a particular religion can make this much more specific, though it also poses the famous problem of evil."[11] He then mentions the difficulty of believing in God, and claims that the disadvantage of theism as an answer to the desire for comprehensive understanding is that it does not offer explanation "in the form of a comprehensive account of the natural order. Theism pushes the quest for intelligibility outside the world."[12] Thus, a theistic self-understanding

> would not be the kind of understanding that explains how beings like us fit into the world. The kind of intelligibility that would still be missing is intelligibility of the natural order—intelligibility from within. That kind of intelligibility may be compatible with some forms of theism—if God creates a self-contained natural order which he then leaves undisturbed. But it is not

[8] Ibid., 21.
[9] Ibid., 25.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 26.

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> compatible with direct theistic explanation of systematic features of the world that would seem otherwise to be brute facts—such as the creation of life from dead matter, or the birth of consciousness, or reason. Such interventionist hypotheses amount to a denial that there is a comprehensive natural order.[13]

How do we assess Nagel's claims here? To begin with, let us identify and summarize the main sources of his concern. I suspect that the whole assortment of Nagel's concerns is predicated on his reasonable assumption that metaphysics and epistemology tie together adequately. Among his foundational epistemic commitments is what can practically be dubbed an aesthetic preference: he is rather forthright about his psychological aversion to propositions that smack of being ad hoc, to overly pluralistic pictures of the world, to views he considers ontologically indulgent, positing unnecessary and extraneous entities. Even when such entities may accomplish work in explaining some of what is in need of explanation, Nagel is hesitant to affirm them if they do not seem to resonate and dovetail enough with a single natural order. His epistemology precludes theses like Cartesian dualism and interventionist variants of theism, because these, in his estimation, amount to a denial that there is a comprehensive natural order. They push the quest for intelligibility outside the world, resulting in an inadequately integrated worldview. The epistemic strictures he maintains dictate that the right answer, the true view of reality, be a world involving an organic whole, and supernaturalism simply fails to satisfy such a constraint.

If this sort of summary is the gist of Nagel's concern about theism, how might the classical theist, one who not only believes in the supernatural realm but even in a God who can and does intervene in the natural order, defend such theism against his criticisms? Can supernaturalists answer Nagel's worries and nagging concerns? I think for the most part that they can, and where they cannot, I am inclined to say that this is so much the worse for some of Nagel's epistemic strictures. This at least is the case that I am now going to argue for. In order to do so, I want to enlist the assistance of the great literary scholar and Christian apologist C. S. Lewis, particularly some of the insights he shared in his book on miracles.

First let us dispense with a few preliminaries. Nagel writes that he lacks the *sensus divinitatis*. Even if such a sense of the divine exists, however, the fact that Nagel himself does not personally have much of an experience with it provides no evidence against theism generally or Christianity particularly. All sorts of potential obstacles can stand in the way of such religious experience. The wiser course here is to raise the relevant evidential questions about the truth of theism. Even Plantinga, a firm believer that we can be justified to be theists and indeed Christians while lacking discursive justification, remains convinced that several dozen arguments collectively provide a strong evidential case for the truth of classical theism. Let us for now simply set aside the notion of religious belief as

[13] Ibid.

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a candidate for proper basicality (properly basic beliefs do not depend on other beliefs for justification), which would simply get us off track.

Nagel, recall, also mentions the problem of evil, a big discussion in its own right that we need to set aside for now as well. Writing on the problem of evil in recent years has ballooned into an enormous literature. In the estimation of many, it is the proponents and advocates of classical theism who have had the upper hand in the debate in recent years, as skeptics advancing arguments from evil have consistently had to keep changing their approach to find a workable version of the argument. Those who are convinced by the problem of evil that belief in classical theism is irrational, though, will need to look elsewhere for considerations aiming to disabuse them of this conviction. It will not be addressed directly here.

The crux of the issue, on which I wish to focus, is Nagel's aesthetic bias in favor of an integrated picture of things, a constraint he is convinced interventionist (i.e., classical) theism cannot satisfy. By calling such a stricture "aesthetic" I do not mean to impugn its value; aesthetic considerations may well function in an important way in any right and properly expansive epistemic approach, especially as we attempt something so ambitious as identifying the true metaphysical worldview. No, rather than denying the need for the satisfaction of such a constraint, I would prefer to argue that classical theism is better at meeting such a constraint, or at least one in its close proximity, than Nagel seems to realize. Nagel's view of theism, in certain respects, seems to be inadequately nuanced and sophisticated. Rejecting Sunday school versions of theism and Christianity may well be altogether appropriate; stopping with such simplified variants would be a mistake. would be a mistake.

For a more sophisticated version of the theistic perspective, let us turn to the writings of C. S. Lewis; as we do so, it will be almost surprising to see the prescience with which Lewis anticipated just the sorts of worries that preoccupy Nagel. Recall Nagel's concern that theism (by which I will mean, henceforth, classical and interventionist theism) would preclude the "organic whole" and "comprehensive natural order" Nagel desires. His own Aristotelian-like, emergentist, teleological account of mind, though not compatible with reductionist naturalism, does not preclude the sort of organic wholeness and comprehensively naturalistic explanation he is after. For this reason, despite the obscurity of Nagel's explanation, he prefers it over classical theism with its notions of intelligent creation.

Now, by way of counterpoint, consider this passage from C. S. Lewis, from the eighth chapter of *Miracles*. It comes right after he speaks of the way some people find intolerable the notion of miraculous interventions in the world. "The reason they find it intolerable," he writes, "is that they start by taking Nature to be the whole of reality. And they are sure that all reality must be interrelated and consistent."[14] He then says he agrees with them, but he thinks that "they have

[14] C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, in *C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperOne, 2002) 297–462, at 354.

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mistaken a partial system within reality, namely Nature, for the whole."[15] He then continues:

> That being so, the miracle and the previous history of Nature may be interlocked after all but not in the way the Naturalist expected: rather in a much more roundabout fashion. The great complex event called Nature, and the new particular event introduced into it by the miracle, are related by their common origin in God, and doubtless, if we knew enough, most intricately related in His purpose and design, so that a Nature which had had a different history, and therefore been a different Nature, would have been invaded by different miracles or by none at all. In that way the miracles and the previous course of Nature are as well interlocked as any other two realities, but you must go back as far as their common Creator to find the interlocking. You will not find it *within* Nature.[16]

So Nagel and Lewis, we might say, entirely agree on the aesthetic constraint for an integrated worldview, but their views are diametrically opposite on the question of what such a constraint demands. Nagel's insistence is that such integration be found within nature, and Lewis insists that, though it is to be found, it will not be found there. "Everything is connected with everything else: but not all things are connected by the short and straight roads we expected," Lewis wrote.[17] They cannot both be right on this score. Nagel's constraint would preclude taking seriously Lewis's suggestion; and Lewis's alternate suggestion means that Nagel's effort would be bound to fail. In light of so fundamental a conflict of intuitions, argument and evidence would be useful, much more so than subjective epistemic biases. Unfortunately for Nagel, though, this is the precise point where his argument is the thinnest. Lewis, as we are about to see, is just getting started.

Nagel is no pantheist, but he definitely has resonance with panpsychism, according to which, via emergentism, the basic physical constituents of the universe have mental properties. This is how he is inclined to explain what needs explaining: that mind must somehow function centrally in the story of reality. Like pantheism, though, such an account is considerably more amorphous—and simply vague—than the account of classical theism. Nagel seems to consider this an advantage in practice over the crude and dualistic nature of theism, but Lewis would completely disagree. Speaking of pantheism, rather than panpsychism, but in a way that in salient respects could extend equally to both, Lewis writes that

> at every point Christianity has to correct the natural expectations of the Pantheist and offer something more difficult, just as Schrodinger has to correct Democritus. At every moment he has to multiply distinctions and rule out false analogies. He has to substitute the mappings of something that has a positive, concrete, and highly articulated character for the formless generalities

[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid. [italics in original].
[17] Ibid.

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> in which Pantheism is at home . . . . The ascertained nature of any real thing is always at first a nuisance to our natural fantasies—a wretched, pedantic, logic-chopping intruder upon a conversation which was getting on famously without it.[18]

Lewis notes that when people compare adult versions of other worldviews with a knowledge of Christianity acquired in childhood, they get the impression that the Christian account of God is the "obvious" one, the one too easy to be true, while its alternatives seem sublime and profound by comparison. Lewis thinks just the opposite is the case. Reality is hard and obstinate, and not at all what we might expect most of the time. Vague notions of spirituality or a diffused mind animating the universe is hardly a novel notion; it is arguably the native bent of mind and immemorial religion.

> An 'impersonal God'—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband—that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a real footstep in the hall?[19]

Interesting to note is that Nagel's problem with theism largely evaporates if it is a theism that does not involve intervention. Had God created the world in such a way that it was henceforth self-sustaining and self-regulating, then, Nagel thinks, there would be hope of reconciling such theism with the sort of worldview he is seeking. But a God who intervenes, who performs miracles, who upholds the universe by his power, who sent his Son into it to die for our sins—this sort of supernaturalism is beyond the pale, an unprincipled epistemic indulgence, an ontological foul. Interestingly, Lewis himself anticipated this very response. At the beginning of chapter twelve, Lewis captures the mentality of those who think a God who intervenes smacks of a petty and capricious tyrant who breaks his own laws. It is the good and wise kinds of gods who obey them. Even if miracles do not violate laws of nature, still the impression, in the minds of some, is that they "interrupt the orderly march of events, the steady development of Nature according to her own inherent genius or character. That regular march seems to such critics as I have in mind more impressive than any miracle."[20]

Lewis himself seems to have entertained such a mentality as an atheist, but he would change his mind eventually. As a literary scholar, he offers an analogy to soften readers up to the propriety of God's interventions. It is the stupid schoolboy, he says, who might think that the abnormal hexameters in Virgil or half-rhymes in English poets were due to incompetence. "In reality, of course, every one of

[18] Ibid., 376.
[19] Ibid., 383.
[20] Ibid., 385.

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them is there for a purpose and breaks the superficial regularity of the metre in obedience to a higher and subtler law: just as the irregularities in *The Winter's Tale* do not impair, but embody and perfect, the inward unity of its spirit."[21] Lewis's point is that there are rules behind the rules, and "a unity which is deeper than uniformity."

> A supreme workman will never break by one note or one syllable or one stroke of the brush the living and inward law of the work he is producing. But he will break without scruple any number of those superficial regularities and orthodoxies which little, unimaginative critics mistake for its laws. The extent to which one can distinguish a just 'license' from a mere botch or failure of unity depends on the extent to which one has grasped the real and inward significance of the work as a whole.[22]

The analogy is even worse for the dogmatic anti-interventionist than this, though. In his insistence that miracles are improprieties unworthy of the Great Workman rather than expressions of the truest and deepest unity in His total work, he must be reminded that "the gap between God's mind and ours must, on any view, be incalculably greater than the gap between Shakespeare's mind and that of the most peddling critics of the old French school."[23]

Employing yet another literary insight to drive home the point, Lewis highlights Dorothy Sayers's *The Mind of the Maker*, whose thesis is based on an analogy between God's relation to the world and an author's relation to his book. "The ghost story is a legitimate form of art; but you must not bring a ghost into an ordinary novel to get over a difficulty in the plot."[24] Doing the latter would be a blunder outside the realm of legitimate authorial prerogatives. Just such an analysis fuels many a suspicion that miracles are marvels of the wrong sort, involving an arbitrary interference with the organic whole of a story. Lewis admits that if he thought of miracles in such terms (as Nagel seems to), he would not believe in them either. But Lewis rests assured that if miracles have occurred, "they have occurred because they are the very thing this universal story is about. They are not exceptions (however rarely they occur), nor irrelevancies. They are precisely those chapters in this great story on which the plot turns."[25] For those, like Nagel, who seem to think that atoms and time and space are the main plot of the story of the world, Lewis would respond by suggesting that the narrative God is weaving is a long one with a complicated plot. Lewis writes, "and we are not, perhaps, very attentive readers."[26]

[21] Ibid., 386.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 387.
[24] Ibid., 388.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., 389.

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Again, Lewis and Nagel entirely agree on the epistemic preference that reality be integrated and a unity, even if they disagree on certain matters of uniformity. Lewis defends such subjective and admittedly aesthetic criteria, echoing Sir Arthur Eddington's phrase that science progresses on convictions, perhaps unjustified but nonetheless cherished, about the "innate sense of the fitness of things." A universe in which interventions were ubiquitous and irregularities omnipresent would be anathema; on this Lewis and Nagel agree. Lewis pushes this point a bit further, though, taking aim at naturalism. For we can ask, of what epistemic significance are such preferences? Lewis argues, and Nagel would likely agree, that if the true metaphysics is mindless naturalism, then such epistemic preferences we hold for order and unity are unlikely to be conducive to the truth. They would simply be facts about us. "If Naturalism is true we have no reason to trust our conviction that Nature is uniform," Lewis wrote.[27] But if theism is true, and the deepest reality is like us, the ultimate fact is a rational spirit in whose image we have been made, then our epistemic preferences are more plausibly thought to be reliable in pointing us toward the truth. This entirely turns on its head the notion that a desire for unity undermines belief in an interventionist God. Modern science, in fact, came about as a result of men believing in law in nature, expecting it because they believed in a legislator.

> But if we admit God, must we admit Miracle? Indeed, indeed, you have no security against it. That is the bargain. Theology says to you in effect, 'Admit God and with Him the risk of a few miracles, and I in return will ratify your faith in uniformity as regards the overwhelming majority of events.' The philosophy which forbids you to make uniformity absolute is also the philosophy which offers you solid grounds for believing it to be general, to be *almost* absolute.[28]

Miracles, Lewis argues—at least from the perspective of Christianity—are not arbitrary, capricious interventions, ubiquitous ad hoc interruptions, but carefully orchestrated turning points in the plot, key chapters on which the whole plot of the novel turns, the main theme of the symphony, as it were. Whether specific alleged ones among them are inherently problematic cannot be answered a priori but depends on how illuminating of the whole they prove to be. The incarnation, for example, is a picture of the divine condescending to take human flesh, one person both wholly divine and wholly human. No greater portrait of integration and rapprochement of the natural and supernatural is easy to envision. If God can so descend into a human spirit, the reality we inhabit is "more multifariously and subtly harmonious than we had suspected."[29]

[27] Ibid., 395.
[28] Ibid., 395–96 [italics in original].
[29] Ibid., 401.

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Lewis's is a classical theistic picture, and his is not the straw man to which simplistic caricatures of religious views lend themselves. If Nagel wishes to defend his aversion to classical theism—despite its superior explanatory power over naturalism—opting instead for his much less evidenced and more obscure conjectures about unintentional teleological emergentism, not only does he have a lot of work to do to defend his own view: he also needs to do considerably more to subject classical theism to critical scrutiny.

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