Thomas Nagel (2010) *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament: Essays 2002-2008* Oxford: Oxford University Press

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The work comprises 15 essays, all but one of which are 'slight revisions' of previously published pieces. The essays are evenly distributed under three headings:

'Religion':

1. 'Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament' (new essay)
2. 'Dawkins and Atheism' (review of *The God Delusion*, *New Republic*, 2006)
3. 'Why is there Anything?' (review of Bede Rundle's *Why there is Something Rather than Nothing*, *TLS*, 2004)
4. 'Nietzsche's Self-Creation' (review of Rüdiger Safranski's *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, *New Republic*, 2002)
5. 'Public Education and Intelligent Design', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 36, 2, 2008

'Politics:

6. 'The Problem of Global Justice' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 33, 2, 2005
7. 'The Limits of International Law' (review of Jeremy Rabkin's *Law without Nations? Why Constitutional Government Requires Sovereign States*, *New Republic*, 2005)
8. 'Appiah's Rooted Cosmopolitanism' (review of *The Ethics of Identity* and *Cosmopolitanism*, *New Republic*, 2006)
9. 'Sandel and the Paradox of Liberalism' (review of *Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality and Politics*, *New York Review of Books*, 2006)
10. MacKinnon on Sexual Domination (review of *Women's Lives, Men's Laws*, *TLS*, 2005)

'Humanity':

11. 'Williams: The Value of Truth' (review of *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, *New Republic*, 2002)
12. 'Williams: Philosophy and Humanity' (review of *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy*, *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, and *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, *London Review of Books*, 2006)
13. 'Wiggins on Human Solidarity' (review of *Ethics: Twelve Lectures on the Philosophy of Morality*, *TLS*, 2006)
14. 'O'Shaughnessy on the Stream of Consciousness' (review of *Consciousness and the World*, *New York Review of Books*, 2002)
15. 'Sartre: The Look and the Problem of Other Minds' (from *Situating Sartre: The Florence Gould Lectures*, 2006-2007)

In a very brief *Preface*, Nagel says that in the years prior to the publication of this work, he had been 'occupied mainly with thoughts about the relation between science and religion, and also secondarily with the interpretation of liberal conceptions of

justice and their application to the world as a whole'. He then goes on to say that the third set of essays 'contains reflections on admired philosophers, all with a pronounced absorption in the human world'.

The book reviews are polished; most raise interesting wider questions, and some point to serious difficulties for the works under review. Moreover, the grouping of the reviews together makes some sense: there are continuities in the focus of, say, the reviews of Williams and Wiggins, and the reviews of Dawkins and Rundle. Nonetheless, these reviews are plainly minor works, connected principally by Nagel's underlying philosophical preoccupations.

The fragment on Sartre is, I think, quite interesting. Here, Nagel argues that Sartre 'makes a compelling case that our basic conception of other minds is not arrived at by analogy, and that we find it instead in our primitive feelings—which on analysis reveal themselves as feelings of being-for-others' (168). Nagel suggests that perhaps Sartre's examples—shame and pride—are too sophisticated; perhaps we should direct more attention to the kinds of experiences that infants can have of the world 'looking back at' them. Nagel's suggestion has been pursued—and, in my estimation, confirmed—by developmental psychologists during the past twenty years. (For an early example of the work that I have in mind, see Meltzoff and Gupnik (1993).

The two pieces from *Philosophy and Public Affairs* are the most substantial philosophical contributions in the work. In the interests of brevity, I shall here focus on what Nagel has to say about public education and intelligent design. On Nagel's view, 'evolutionary reductionism'—the view that 'the sources of genetic variation are uniformly random'—defies commonsense and is not obviously supported by the available scientific evidence, but is nonetheless enthusiastically embraced by many atheists and deists. Moreover, on Nagel's view, 'intelligent design' is a rationally entertainable alternative hypothesis about the origins of life for many who believe in God. But how, then, can matters concerning the development of life on earth be addressed in public school biology classes without violating the constitutional bar on the establishment of religion?

> So far as I can see, the only way to make no assumptions of a religious nature would be to admit that the empirical evidence may suggest different conclusions depending on what religious beliefs one starts with, and that the evidence does not by itself settle which of those beliefs is correct even though there are other religious beliefs, such as the literal truth of Genesis, that are easily refuted by the evidence. I do not see much hope that such an approach could be adopted, but it would combine intellectual honesty with respect for the Establishment Clause. (53)

Nagel goes on to add that he is favour of 'a frank discussion of the relation of evolutionary theory to religion in some part of the high school curriculum' (56).

There is quite a bit to discuss (and to dispute) here.

First, Nagel's argument depends upon his claim that 'ID' is best construed as rejection of the claim that *the sources of genetic variation are uniformly random*. There is, I think, good reason to be suspicious of this claim. On any standard account of mutation,

it is hard to see that there is any good sense in which the sources of mutation are 'random', let alone 'uniformly random'. The sources of mutation are multifarious. Some mutations are caused by the presence of particular chemicals; some mutations are caused by radiation; some mutations are caused by viral infections. In these cases, the distribution of the causes of the mutations is certainly not 'uniform' across the surface of the earth, nor across the populations of organisms within which mutations may occur. Other mutations are often claimed to be 'spontaneous': mutations that arise as a result of transposons, or 'errors' in meiosis and replication. But here, too, it would be a mistake to suppose that we are in the domain of objective chance—i.e. of events analogous to, say, β-decay. In these cases as well, it is just wrong to suppose that the distribution of the underlying physical causes—what it is, for example, that causes this transposon to be active in this particular cell at this particular time, but not in that particular cell at that particular time—is 'uniform' across the surface of the earth or across the populations of organisms within which mutations may occur (at particular times, or over time).

Second, if we cast about for a better characterisation of 'evolutionary reductionism', it seems to me that it will be framed in terms of the kinds of causes that are operative in evolutionary history. Setting aside considerations about objective chances—which, on some interpretations of quantum mechanics, may have some role—the important question is whether natural mutation and natural selection are the sole evolutionarily important causes. If we could survey the entire causal history stretching back over, say, the past 3.5 billion years, would we see only natural mutation and natural selection, or—as IDers suppose—would we also see cases of divine intervention, e.g. divine bringing about of particular mutations? (Of course, there are other *conceivable* alternatives here: it is conceivable that there are evolutionarily significant causes other than natural mutation, natural selection and divine intervention—but, at least for the purposes of this discussion, I simply follow Nagel's lead in ignoring this consideration.)

Third, in the light of this better characterisation of the parties to the dispute between evolutionary reductionists and IDers, we can ask how the biological evidence bears on the hypotheses of evolutionary reductionism and ID. The answer, it seems to me, is this: it is uncontroversial that we have masses of biological evidence that natural mutation and natural selection are evolutionarily significant causes; it is equally uncontroversial that we have no biological evidence that divine intervention is an evolutionarily significant cause. (What is an example of an evolutionarily advantageous mutation that we have good reason to suppose had divine rather than 'natural' causes?) Of course, our knowledge of causal history stretching back over the past 3.5 billion years is massively incomplete: that we have no biological evidence that divine intervention is an evolutionarily significant cause does not *entail* that we shall never have such evidence, nor does it *entail* that evolutionary reductionism is correct. However, as things now stand, ID hypotheses play no working role in evolutionary biology: there is no biologically fruitful line of inquiry about, say, the evolutionary history of some particular organism that depends up an ID hypothesis. *Fruitful* contemporary biological inquiry into evolutionary history is exclusively concerned with natural mutations and natural selection.

Fourth, quality curricula for high school biology need not pay any attention to the dispute between evolutionary reductionists and IDers. In my home state, there is a

curriculum that is legislated for all schools (government and private). The biology curriculum—across years 7-12—contains quite a bit of material about evolution, including some material about some mechanisms of mutation. However, there is nothing in the curriculum about disputes about the origins of life, and nothing about the dispute between evolutionary reductionists and IDers. Moreover, there is nothing in the curriculum that is controversial, or that somehow favours evolutionary reductionists over their opponents. (Curiously, this has not protected us from visits by 'ID experts' from the US, who have been primarily concerned to join with local opposition to the teaching of 'joint ancestry of humans with other animals'.) In particular, it is worth noting that merely teaching about some *known* mechanisms of mutation is not to favour evolutionary reductionists over their opponents.

Fifth, I think that there are reasons for refraining from teaching about the dispute between evolutionary reductionists and IDers in high school. It is quite clear that this dispute should not be taught about in biology class. As I noted above, ID hypotheses play no working role in contemporary biology; hence, on the assumption that we should only teach good, well-established science to children in science classes, there is no reason to mention ID to children in biology classes. (Note that this reason for not teaching ID in biology classes does *not* rely on the assumption that ID is not science, or the assumption that it is dead science, or the assumption that it is bad science. In particular, this reason is silent on the question whether ID could *become* a part of good, well-established science.) While this may be more controversial, I'm inclined to say that same about the hypothesis of evolutionary reductionism: it also plays no working role in contemporary biology, and so there is no reason to mention it to children in biology classes. (Remember: it is one thing to accept that, wherever we have acquired knowledge of mechanisms of mutation, those mutations have been natural; it is quite another to suppose that there *could not be* other kinds of mechanisms of mutation.)

Sixth, if we are to consider teaching about the dispute between evolutionary reductionists and IDers in some other part of the school curriculum, then we need to think about the end that we think will be served by this teaching. In the US context, this might well amount to an establishment of religion (since the ID hypothesis is certainly not neutral between religions—there are many religions that reject the idea that reality is grounded in intelligence, while also rejecting the hypothesis of evolutionary reductionism). In any case, it would certainly amount to teaching about a particular kind of dispute about religious beliefs. But why teach this particular dispute? Why not include elements of comparative religion, higher criticism, and philosophical analysis of arguments about God in the high school curriculum? After all, it is not plausible to suppose that high school students are less well-equipped to understand and discuss disputed matters in these domains than they are to understand and discuss the conflict between evolutionary reductionists and IDers. (Of course, supporters of ID are likely to see political gain is getting ID onto the biology curriculum and political danger in having comparative religion and higher criticism gain similar standing in other parts of the curriculum. But that's not a reason that should weigh with a self-confessed atheist.)

While the above comments are insufficient to address all of the controversial claims in Nagel's remarks on public education and intelligent design, there is no space here to add to what I have said so far. I close, instead, with a more general observation. In

his (new) introductory essay on secular philosophy and the religious temperament, Nagel discusses five responses to 'the cosmic question', i.e. roughly the question 'How can one bring into one's individual life a full recognition of one's relation to the universe as a whole?' In considering these responses—hard-headed ('reductive') atheism, humanism, religion, radical Platonism and 'the absurd'—Nagel expresses a preference for religion or radical Platonism over hard-headed atheism or humanism (though, in the end, his own choice is between radical Platonism and 'the absurd'). However, it seems to me to be a mistake to think that sympathy for religion or radical Platonism somehow motivates sympathy for the cause of those who would have 'intelligent design' added to high school curricula. One need not disagree with Nagel's claims about the sins of many hard-headed atheists in public debates about 'intelligent design' if one is reasonably to defend the claim that, as things now stand, 'intelligent design' should not be taught in biology classes.

References

Meltzoff, A. and A. Gopnik. 1993. The Role of Imitation in Understanding Persons and Developing a Theory of Mind. In S. Baron-Cohen, H. Tager-Flusberg, and D. Cohen *Understanding Other Minds: Perspective from Autism*, 335-66. New York: Oxford University Press.