

Reasonable Doubt

Why naturalism might not be able to solve the problem of consciousness

by Anthony Matteo

One of the distinguishing marks of human beings is their ongoing quest for truth. The Catholic philosopher Bernard Lonergan wrote of the “pure desire to know” as the basic and foundational impulse motivating us to seek ever greater insight into ultimate reality. If this quest is not to be an illusory enterprise, we must suppose some fundamental correlation between our rational abilities and the nature of the universe that surrounds us.

Our scientific and philosophical struggles to make sense of our experience assume that the universe is somehow ordered and intelligible in itself, and that the human mind is capable, if only in a slow and incremental fashion, of uncovering its mysteries. It was in this context that the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote in his 1925 book *Science and the Modern World* of “the inexpugnable belief that every detailed occurrence can be correlated with its antecedents in a perfectly definite manner, exemplifying general principles.” Without this conviction, Whitehead continued, scientists’ work would be without hope, since it is this belief in logical chains of events that is the driving force of research.

Whitehead traces the historical roots of this belief to the medieval conception of God as creator and sustainer of the universe. “It must come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God, conceived as with the personal energy of Jehovah and with the rationality of a Greek philosopher,” he wrote. “Every detail was supervised and ordered: the search into nature could only result in the vindication of the faith in rationality.”

According to this conception, God was the Grand Designer. The laws of nature were his handiwork. These laws, which generate the incredible order and complexity that surround us, were viewed as secondary causes emanating from God, the primary cause. God also endowed us with the mental capacity to fathom those laws and through them, gain greater and deeper understanding of his creation. In the words of thirteenth-century church father Thomas Aquinas: “Only in rational creatures is there found a likeness of God which counts as an image ... As far as a likeness of the divine nature is concerned, rational creatures seem somehow to attain a representation of [that] type in virtue of imitating God not only in this, that he is and lives, but especially in this, that he understands.”

But the contemporary naturalist or materialist view of ultimate reality has jettisoned the designer hypothesis. Those holding this modern viewpoint are committed not just to methodological naturalism (all events of nature have a natural or scientific explanation), but to metaphysical naturalism as well (nature or the material world is all there is). From this perspective, any fundamental correspondence between the workings of our minds and the workings of the universe would seem quite mysterious. Physicist Erwin Schrödinger once mused that the human capacity to discover laws of nature is a marvel that may well be beyond human understanding. And Albert Einstein believed that the universe’s intelligibility was “a miracle or an eternal mystery.”

Contemporary evolutionary epistemology seeks to dissolve this mystery by providing an adaptive account of the rise of our mental capacities and their linkage with the world around us. As philosopher of science Michael Ruse put it in the 1989 book *Issues in Evolutionary Epistemology*:

Science is not a random, subjective phenomenon or activity, but it is rather governed and evaluated by certain commonly accepted rules and criteria ... I argue that these rules and criteria used by the scientist are not subjectively decided on by the individual scientist, nor even by a group of scientists. Neither are they reflections of absolute reality, or some such thing. They are rather the principles of reasoning and understanding that we humans use because they proved of value to our ancestors in the struggle for survival.

The logic of the argument is quite simple. If in the crucible of evolution our ancestors had not developed fundamentally reliable perceptual and mental capacities, they would have been wiped out by the power of natural selection; or, as the American philosopher W.V.O. Quine quipped in his 1969 book *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, “Creatures inveterately wrong in their inductions have a pathetic but praiseworthy tendency to die before reproducing their kind.”

At first glance, this might seem a plausible explanation for those mental operations directly linked with survival. If our evolutionary ancestors consistently mistook predators for more placid and kindly creatures, or lacked the mental wherewithal to discern edible from poisonous substances, their tenure on earth would have been short indeed. But how can this selection strategy be used to justify the reliability of theoretical investigations in which no direct survival value is at issue?

New York University professor of philosophy Thomas Nagel expressed this concern in his 1986 book *The View From Nowhere*: “In fact if, per impossible, we came to believe that our capacity for objective theory were the product of natural selection, that would warrant serious skepticism about its results beyond a very limited and familiar range. An evolutionary explanation of our theorizing faculty would provide absolutely no confirmation of its capacity to get at the truth. Something else must be going on if the process is really taking us toward a truer and more detached understanding of the world.”

The evolutionary epistemologist’s move at this point is to make a distinction between an “adaptation” and an “exaptation.” Simply put, structures or capacities that developed because of their original survival value—adaptations—can take on, over time, novel functions not necessarily related to their original function—exaptations.

Take, for example, the human hand. Presumably, its form and fundamental abilities were shaped by natural selection to execute basic operations linked directly to survival. But now, and for some time, human hands have been engaged in activities that don’t seem even remotely related to basic survival. Playing an intricate piano sonata or painting a complex landscape come to mind. These creative activities don’t have to be forced into an adaptive explanatory framework. Rather, they are offshoots—exaptations—of activities that originally did have adaptive value.

And the same applies to human intellectual inquiries, such as quantum physics, that range far beyond what survival requires. In responding to Nagel, Ruse asserted that no one argues “that human beings evolved special techniques for doing quantum mechanics, or other esoteric aspects of modern science.” Instead, he said, “The claim being made is that the elementary principles and methods of inference gave such advantage. If one allows that these principles, even for the sophisticated scientist, ultimately reduce to the simple ones of everyone else, then the evolutionary epistemological case is secure.”

But what was Ruse assuming here? He assumed that there is a coherent and credible account of the emergence of reliable intellectual abilities, brought about by natural selection sifting through chance mutations. Once established by the undirected process of evolution, these abilities were then extended by human ingenuity far beyond what survival demands—to speculations about the nature of the universe, including our own origins. He also assumed, if only in regard to the Neo-Darwinian paradigm he supports, that these further speculations give an accurate (yet always improvable) account of the workings of nature.

Is your mind reliable?

Evolutionary epistemology is an attempt to provide a thoroughly “naturalized” epistemology; that is to say, there can be no appeal to any nonnatural power to explain the origin and proper functioning of our intellectual abilities. Yet, clearly, an epistemological theory that could not give a credible account of the “reliability” of theory in general is disappointing, to say the least. In his 1947 book, *Miracles*, C.S. Lewis wrote: “A theory which explained everything else in the whole universe but which made it impossible to believe that our thinking was valid, would be utterly out of court. For that theory would itself have been reached by thinking, and if thinking is not valid that theory would, of course, be itself demolished.”

Lewis went on to assert that, as a rule, no thought can be valid if it can be fully explained as the result of non-rational causes. What Lewis has in mind here is that valid beliefs are the result of logical and inductive inferences based on arguments and evidence. At a phenomenological level, we experience these operations as mental processes that guide us in making intelligible sense of the world around us. In other words, the formation of valid beliefs seems intimately dependent on conscious, mental processes. We assiduously analyze the arguments, weigh the evidence, and on that critical basis come to decisions as to the explanatory worth of individual beliefs and more wide-ranging theories.

The mystery is how, on the purely naturalist or physicalist account to which evolutionary epistemology is committed, such mental causation producing valid inferences could have arisen. If we are committed *a priori* to an explanatory model in which mental causation is reducible to the physical causality of the brain, it is hard to see how processes such as logical inference and induction can have any true causal power in our intellectual reckonings. In this context, Lewis quoted British geneticist J.B.S. Haldane: “If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true ... and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.”

The point is that the mindless interaction of physical processes in the brain seems not to be just different in *degree*, but also in *kind*, from the mental processes we rely on for determining the validity of our beliefs. If such physical processes alone are in fact doing all the *real* causal work in belief formation, and the mental processes are a mere epiphenomenal afterglow, then indeed such beliefs have a nonrational foundation. Or, as University of Notre Dame philosopher Alvin Plantinga put it, quoting, in part, biologist J.M. Smith: “If ‘behavior, however complex, is governed entirely by biochemistry,’ there seems to be no room for conscious belief to become involved in the causal story, no way in which conscious belief can get its hand in; it will be causally inert.”

Of course, we face here the dilemma that philosopher David Chalmers dubbed “the hard problem of consciousness.” Although we are learning more and more about the physical workings of the brain (“the easy problem”), the emergence of rational consciousness from such workings *alone* remains a complete mystery. “Present-day scientific theories hardly touch the really difficult questions about consciousness,” Chalmers wrote in his 1996 book *The Conscious Mind*. “We do not just lack a detailed theory; we are entirely in the dark about how consciousness fits into the natural order.”

One can readily see why rational consciousness, once it emerged in the evolutionary process, would have adaptive value, but this tells us nothing about *how* it emerged in terms of physical processes alone. And as philosopher Steven Horst pointed out in a 1999 article for the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*: Selectional explanation “could explain the presence of consciousness in us given the assumption that it appeared in our ancestors through random mutation. But if no DNA structure could determine (the capacity for) conscious experience, then the selective story never gets off the ground ... In short a naturalist evolutionary story about consciousness presupposes a physicalistic story about the emergence of the phenotype somewhere in the history of the species. If physicalist theories cannot address the hard problem, evolutionary theories will provide the naturalist no solace.”

One can, of course, declare *a priori* that the materialist assumptions of science require that rational consciousness is *somehow* a purely emergent property of the incredibly complex array of electrochemical

processes in the brain, and that this emergence must be explicated by an adaptive evolutionary account. However, such a declaration in no way removes our utter perplexity as to how the intentional or mental causality we experience everyday in terms of “reasons” for our beliefs can be reduced to the physical causality science finds at the material level.

Furthermore, if mental causality were reducible to physical causality without remainder, then it would appear to follow that it is an epiphenomenon that has no causal role in guiding behavior. After all, according to materialist or physicalist theory, the mind is what the brain does. There is, as British philosopher Gilbert Ryle famously proclaimed, no “ghost” in the bodily machine. And lest we be tempted by our everyday experience toward a common-sense dualism such that mental states are in fact genuinely effective in guiding behavior, cognitive scientists like Steven Pinker are quick to dissuade us. “One can say that the information-processing activity of the brain causes the mind, or one can say that it is the mind, but in either case the evidence is overwhelming that every aspect of our mental lives depends entirely on physiological events in the tissues of the brain.”

Without some showing as to how physiological events in the brain can produce conscious mental content that maps onto reality in a reliable fashion—that is, some solution to the hard problem of consciousness—it is hard to see how such mental content can have any adaptive impact in the evolutionary struggle for survival. Again, absent some plausible solution to the hard problem, one wonders why the capacity for mental content would have evolved at all. The central justification for the reliability of our mental capacities from the point of view of evolutionary epistemology thus seems in great jeopardy. As philosopher William Hasker pointedly observed in his 1999 book *The Emergent Self*: “What this means is that, given the physicalist assumption, *the occurrence and content of conscious mental states such as belief and desire are irrelevant to behavior and are not subject to selection pressures*. On this assumption, *natural selection gives us no reason to assume that the experiential content of mental states corresponds in any way whatever to objective reality.*”

Philosopher Richard Taylor pressed a related point in a work entitled *Metaphysics*. One cannot, he asserted, deny the *possibility* that the physical structures underlying our perceptual and cognitive capacities are the result of natural selection working on chance or random variations. “The mere complexity, refinement, and seemingly purposeful arrangement of our sense organs do not, accordingly, constitute any conclusive reason for supposing that they are the outcome of any purposeful activity,” he wrote. “A natural, nonpurposeful explanation of them is possible, and has been attempted—successfully, in the opinion of many.”

However, these organs and the sense and cognitive capacities to which they give rise are not simply artifacts at whose intricacy we marvel. We inevitably rely on them for making our way both practically and theoretically in the world. “We assume, rightly or wrongly, that they are *trustworthy* guides with respect to what is true, and what exists independently of our senses and their origins; and we still assume this, even when they are our only guides,” Taylor wrote.

But, then, the questions arise: If they are of a nonpurposeful origin, have we good grounds for assuming their reliability? If we could provide a nonpurposeful explanation of a contrivance such as William Paley’s famous watch, would we then go on to contend that it was nonetheless a reliable time-telling device?

“It is now suggested, it would be irrational for one to say *both* that his sensory and cognitive faculties had a natural, nonpurposeful origin and *also* that they reveal some truth with respect to something other than themselves,” Taylor argues. “*If* their origin can be entirely accounted for in terms of chance variations, natural selection, and so on ... then the most we can say of them is that they exist, that they are complex and wondrous in their construction, and are perhaps in other respects interesting and remarkable. We cannot say that they are, entirely by themselves, reliable guides to any truth whatever ... If, on the other hand, we do assume that they are guides to some truths having nothing to do with themselves, then it is difficult to see how we can ... believe them to have arisen by accident, or by the ordinary workings of purposeless forces, even over ages of time.”

But what of the adaptive strategy offered by the naturalists, which attributes the fundamental reliability of these faculties to the survival value they afforded in the crucible of evolution? To Taylor, this seems farfetched, “if for no other reason than man’s capacity to understand what is true, through reliance upon his senses and cognitive faculties, far exceeds what is needed for survival.” To this point, the response would be that the ability to comprehend matters beyond what survival demands is a fortuitous spin-off of the capacity put in place by natural selection. But if this response is correct, the appeal to exaptation still begs the question of the hard problem of consciousness. Without some credible account of how the physical processes in the brain are sufficient to explain the emergence of mental states that reliably hook on to external reality, the exaptation argument just does not get off the ground.

Such considerations led Plantinga to conclude that grounding the reliability of our cognitive faculties in evolutionary arguments simply falls flat. At that point, the naturalist is caught in a cognitively vicious circle. In Plantinga’s words: “Once I come to doubt the reliability of my cognitive faculties, I can’t properly try to allay that doubt by producing an *argument*; for in so doing I rely on the very faculties I am doubting. The conjunction of evolution and naturalism gives its adherents a reason for doubting that our beliefs are mostly true; perhaps they are mostly wildly mistaken. But then it won’t help to *argue* that they can’t be wildly mistaken; for the very reason for mistrusting our cognitive faculties generally will be a reason for mistrusting the faculties generating the beliefs involved in the argument.”

It is one thing to be skeptical about an individual claim or theory, say, the existence of intelligent life on other planets or super-string theory. Intellectual life goes on relatively undisturbed. But if we become skeptical about the very reliability of our cognitive capacities themselves, intellectual life is paralyzed. And there is no way out of the paralysis, for every argument would assume the reliability of our cognitive functions, thus taking for granted the very thing being called into question.

But, of course, at a practical level we *must* rely on the fundamental soundness of our cognitive capacities. Global skepticism is only a theoretical possibility within the confines of the philosopher’s study. As a practical possibility, it dissipates as soon as one sets foot outside the door. Even eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume, following one of his lengthy skeptical musings, proclaimed: “ ‘Tis happy, therefore, that nature breaks the force of all skeptical arguments in time, and keeps them from having any considerable influence on the understanding.”

No doubt, our necessary practical reliance in this domain rests on the fact that our sense and cognitive apparatus, working in conjunction, have been remarkably successful in completing both mundane and highly theoretical tasks. But this fact requires an explanation, if we are not to simply accept it as a brute fact of the world. A purely pragmatist stance—“we rely on them because they work”—won’t do, for it simply circumvents the key question at issue. If current evolutionary epistemology is not up to the task, then the naturalist or physicalist will have to devise a new strategy. As Hasker pointed out: “What the present argument brings out is that *the correspondence between subjective experience and objective reality is an enormously important fact which requires explanation*. But on the assumptions of physicalism, no explanation can be given—this correspondence, *which we all assume to exist*, has the appearance of sheer miracle.”

Out with the new and in with the old?

So, given the fundamental epistemological dilemma discussed, what are the options?

First, adherents of evolutionary epistemology can still hold out and assure us that the objections raised by Lewis, Hasker, Taylor, and Plantinga are temporary. The explanatory gaps will be filled in as evolutionary biology and cognitive neuroscience mature and deepen our understanding of the shaping of the brain by evolutionary forces.

At a minimum, however, this future explanatory framework would have to provide an answer to the “hard problem” of consciousness. As we’ve seen, unless we have some understanding of how mental states

emerge from brain states and somehow promote survival, it's hard to see how the evolutionary explanation gets off the ground. And trying to get this explanation off the ground is a daunting task, for, as the philosopher Jerry Fodor said in a 1992 piece for the *Times Literary Supplement*, "Nobody has the slightest idea how anything material could be conscious. Nobody even knows what it would be like to have the slightest idea how anything material could be conscious." Or, in the words of philosopher Ned Block: "We have no conception of our physical or functional nature that allows us to understand how it could explain our subjective experience ... In the case of consciousness we have nothing—zilch—worthy of being called a research program, nor are there any substantive proposals about how to go about starting one."

Yet science has overcome numerous theoretical difficulties once thought to be intractable, the evolutionary epistemologist will be quick to remind us. We should not let pessimism prevail on this issue. So, we await a solid strategy for tackling the hard problem of consciousness, and then, on top of that, a credible account of how random mutation and natural selection could design a brain with cognitive capacities not only fit for survival tasks in ancestral environments, but capable by exaptation of being extended to tasks—such as evolutionary epistemology itself—far exceeding the utility of its original construction.

A second option is to suggest that a paradigm shift in evolutionary theory is necessary for this issue to be adequately addressed. Evolutionary theory, it is contended, accounts for the "survival," not the "arrival," of the fittest. In Nagel's words: "It explains the selection among those organic possibilities that have been generated, but it does not explain the possibilities themselves." It seems clear that reliable cognitive capacities would bring great survival benefit to their possessors, but that fact *alone* does not adequately account for the construction of those capacities in the first place. One not committed *a priori* to the total explanatory power of the reigning Neo-Darwinian paradigm might speculate about deeper ordering principles in nature that have to be added to the explanatory mix to account for their emergence.

In this vein, the Nobel laureate biochemist Christian de Duve wrote in his 1995 book, *Vital Dust: Life as a Cosmic Imperative*, that "life and mind emerge not as the results of freakish accidents, but as the natural manifestations of matter, written into the fabric of the universe." Perhaps there are, as theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman contended, deeper principles of self-organization operative in matter that account for its amazing creativity. "The emerging sciences of complexity begin to suggest that the order is not all accidental, that vast veins of spontaneous order lie at hand. Laws of complexity spontaneously generate much of the order of the natural world. It is only then that selection comes into play, further molding and refining," Kauffman wrote in his 1995 book, *At Home in the Universe*. "But if the forms selection chooses among were generated by laws of complexity, then selection has always had a handmaiden. It is not, after all, the sole source of order, and organisms are not just tinkered-together contraptions, but expressions of deeper natural laws."

But this talk of "necessity" and "deeper principles of self-organization" suggests that physical causality is not blind and purposeless as the reigning materialist model asserts. It is reminiscent of the Aristotelian concept of *telos* or the medieval notion of final causality, which asserts that causes are directed toward purposeful ends. Furthermore, the question naturally arises: Are the directional pathways here postulated self-explanatory? Or do they beg for some higher order of explanation, such as the Aristotelian Unmoved Mover or Cosmic Mind?

Such a revised paradigm might help us better explain the formation of a physical structure as complex as the human brain, but it does not, on its own, remove our perplexity regarding the hard problem of consciousness. It still remains profoundly difficult to see how even directed physical processes can lead to the emergence of mental life. Such considerations led Nagel to reject the current reductionist model and to search for a more suitable metaphysical alternative perhaps best termed a "neutral monism." This means, "the 'absolute' conception of reality will not be a physical conception but something richer that entails both the physical and the mental," Nagel wrote in his 2002 book *Concealment and Exposure*. "And that requires the willingness to contemplate the idea of a single natural phenomenon that is in itself, and necessarily, both subjectively mental from the inside and objectively physical from the outside—just as we are."

Of course, Nagel admitted that he is engaged here in a highly speculative exercise best termed “inference to the best explanation.” But like Whitehead, Chalmers, Hasker, and others, he has come to the conclusion that the emergence of consciousness and rationality require a more expansive metaphysical vision in which the mental dimension is in some way a fundamental feature of the nature of things, not simply an epiphenomenal derivative of the physical.

Finally, there is the option put forward by Lewis and Plantinga that we come full circle and return to the traditional view. Nature is intelligible and we are intelligent because we are both the handiwork of God. “There remains, then, the belief that God created Nature,” Lewis wrote in *Miracles*. “This, and perhaps this alone, fits in with the fact that Nature, though not apparently intelligent, is intelligible—that events in the remotest parts of space appear to obey the laws of rational thought.”

Plantinga had a similar take. He noted that the traditional theist “may indeed endorse some form of evolution; but if he does, it will be a form of evolution guided and orchestrated by God,” he wrote in his 1993 book *Warrant and Proper Function*. The traditional theist also “believes that God is the premier knower and has created us human beings in his image, an important part of which involves his endowing them with a reflection of his powers as a knower.”

This inference to God as one who guarantees the fundamental reliability of our cognitive capacities is reminiscent of, yet importantly different from, the classic version of the same argument, made by René Descartes in the *Meditations*. Descartes’ aim was to defeat skepticism in its very essence. To that end, he engaged in a process of methodic doubt—doubting all that could possibly be doubted—in search of some starting point as an indubitable foundation for all theorizing. To begin this process, he imagined that the entirety of his experience was a seamless web of deception concocted by a highly powerful cosmic deceiver. But, even if he was deceived about everything, he was still thinking! Descartes had found his unquestionable starting point, his undeniable existence as a thinking thing: *Cogito ergo Sum*—I think, therefore I am.

But, at this stage of the argument, he was caught in solipsism, unable to affirm anything else because of the as-yet-undefeated possibility of deception about all else. Descartes’ escape strategy was to assert the existence of God, whose nature rules out deception: “To begin with, I recognize that it is impossible that God should ever deceive me. For in every case of trickery or deception some imperfection is to be found; and although the ability to deceive appears to be an indication of cleverness or power, the will to deceive is undoubtedly evidence of malice or weakness, and so cannot apply to God.”

Descartes believed he could rest assured that the cognitive faculties that the benevolent creator had given him were reliable guides to understanding the external world. But, as many commentators have pointed out, there is a fundamental flaw in the Cartesian escape plan. In his proofs for the existence of God, Descartes simply assumes the reliability of his reasoning powers—axioms such as the principle of sufficient reason or the principle of adequate reality. Given his methodic doubt, such principles should more properly be held in abeyance.

About Descartes’ maneuver, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid wrote: “To remove this doubt, he endeavors to prove the being of a Deity who is no deceiver; whence he concludes, that the faculties he had given him are true and worthy to be trusted . . . It is strange that so acute a reasoner did not perceive that in this reasoning there is evidently a begging of the question . . . For, if our faculties be fallacious, why may they not deceive us in this reasoning as well as in others?”

The moral of the story is that the kind of universal doubt envisioned by Descartes is not practically possible. In the real world, we simply must depend on the fundamental reliability of our cognitive capacities. C.S. Peirce, the nineteenth-century philosopher, put the matter nicely. “We cannot begin with complete doubt . . . Hence this initial skepticism will be a mere self-deception, and not real doubt,” he wrote. “A person may, it is true, in the course of his studies, find reason to doubt what he began by

believing; but in that case he doubts because he has a positive reason for it, and not on account of the Cartesian maxim. Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts.”

The theistic argument of Lewis and Plantinga does not seek to overcome some self-induced Cartesian brand of global skepticism, but to provide a more adequate basis for our inevitable reliance on the fundamental validity of our cognitive capacities. It seeks via “inference to the best explanation” to move beyond mere pragmatism. Certainly, we rely on our mental abilities because they have functioned effectively in the past, but such effective functioning cannot be a mere *brute fact*. It requires some higher-order level of justification. As Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne put it in his 1996 book *Is There a God?*: “I am not postulating a ‘God of the gaps,’ a God merely to explain the things which science has not yet explained. I am postulating a God to explain why science explains.”

Certainly, there are some serious challenges to expounding a completely “naturalized” evolutionary epistemology. The amazing correspondence between our cognitive abilities and the complex workings of the world is not yet intelligible in terms of Darwinian mechanisms alone. Thinkers such as Nagel and Kauffman believe that the problem is insoluble in terms of the reigning Darwinian paradigm and thus seek some deeper principles of material organization, or, in the case of Nagel, a revised, nonmaterialist metaphysical vision to account for the emergence of our rational faculties. Such considerations seem like a move to re-inject some form of *telos* or final causality or even, by extension, some notion of a cosmic mind into our explanatory lexicon.

Thinkers like Lewis and Plantinga likewise reject a strictly evolutionary account in this regard, but call for a return to the traditional theistic understanding of a God who created the universe and endowed us with rational powers that allow us to comprehend it. As to the latter move, Taylor sounded the following cautionary note: “They are purely metaphysical and philosophical considerations having implications of only a purely speculative kind ... They imply almost nothing with respect to any divine attributes, such as benevolence, and one could insist with some justification that even the word God, which is supposed to be the proper name of a personal being and not just a label to be attached to metaphysically inferred things, is out of place in them.”

Certainly the arguments proffered by Lewis and Plantinga do not, on their own, bring one to the God of theism. But then, no purely philosophical argument—whether for a first cause, a necessary being, or an intelligent designer—can fulfill that task. In this sense, Taylor is surely correct. Properly construed, they are all exercises in faith seeking understanding. They are attempts to carve out a warranted metaphysical space for a faith-based belief in the almighty and providential God of theism. Viewed in that light, the Lewis-Plantinga argument is in line with other classical arguments to show that a purely materialist depiction of ultimate reality simply cannot make adequate sense of our experience. If it could, then in regard to belief in the God of theism, we should all echo the words of French scientist Pierre-Simon Laplace to Napoleon: “*Monsieur, Je n’ai pas besoin de cette hypothese.*” (Sir, I have no need of this hypothesis.) Although rational argument cannot replace faith, it can seek to demonstrate that faith is not rationally groundless.

There appear to be good grounds to doubt that evolutionary epistemology can deliver on its promise to provide a credible and convincing account of the fundamental reliability of the cognitive capacities that we inevitably employ in our ongoing search for truth. But the reigning Neo-Darwinian paradigm is firmly entrenched and adherence to such paradigms runs deep. Whether a paradigm shift, such as that suggested by Nagel and Kauffman, or even a return to a traditional theistic account recommended by Lewis and Plantinga, is in the offing, time can only tell. But it is only by raising the kinds of critical questions found in their arguments that the increasing need for such a shift can at all become evident to a wider and wider circle of inquirers.

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