

ARTICLE OF INTEREST

Awaiting a New Darwin by H. Allen Orr. *The New York Review of Books*, February 7, 2013, pp. 26–28.

Orr’s article is a review essay on philosopher Thomas Nagel’s recent *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*. Some reviews are at least as important as the book they are about. As it is, this essay is a valuable contribution to the intellectual discourse on the topics of evolution, mind, and life.

Professor Orr is a biologist at the University of Rochester. He argues that Nagel does not make his case that there are disabling problems with the Neo-Darwinian accounts for the vast evolutionary changes that have transpired with organisms over Earth’s history. He dismisses Nagel’s skepticism as only an “argument from incredulity.”

But he does share Nagel’s skepticism and sense of mystery regarding the reduction of mind and consciousness to “matter”: “. . . we haven’t the slightest idea how it would work.” And, “Brains and neurons obviously have everything to do with consciousness but how mere object can give rise to the eerily different phenomenon of subjective experience seems utterly incomprehensible” (the Hard Problem of Consciousness). Orr points to the writings of another philosopher, Colin McGinn, who contends that our mystery about consciousness is a reflection of our cognitive limitations. Orr adds, most pertinently, “All other species have cognitive limitations, why not us?” and, “. . . the mysteriousness is not so much a challenge to Neo-Darwinism as a result of it.”¹

Orr acknowledges “The origin of life is admittedly a hard problem. . . .”



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“A Sun of the Nineteenth Century” cartoon from *Puck* magazine showing Charles Darwin as a shining sun, chasing the clouds of religion and superstition from the sky, 1882 [reprinted in Orr’s review]

Yet he thinks that “big progress” has been made. It should be commented that there are separable questions (which Orr does not offer) regarding life: What is life?² How did it occur on Earth? And, How did life forms (organisms) change over the eons of evolutionary time? To my knowledge, Darwin did not try to tackle the first two questions.

On the first question, “What is life?”, perhaps there is a “Hard Problem” analogous to what David Chalmers called the “Hard Problem of Consciousness.” Orr does not go in this direction.³

Notes

- ¹ Those interested in pursuing this line might wish to read “Kant’s A Priori in the Light of Modern Biology” by Konrad Lorenz, in *Konrad Lorenz: The Man and His Ideas* by Richard I. Evans (1975), writings by Harry Jerison on the evolution of intelligence, and writings on evolutionary epistemology by Donald Campbell.
- ² That is, beyond the conditions and structures that enable it, just as consciousness seems not explainable by the conditions and structures that enable it.
- ³ Further reading might include *Essays on Life Itself* edited by Robert Rosen (1999), *What is Life? With Mind and Matter and Autobiographical Sketches* by Erwin Schrödinger (Foreword by Roger Penrose) (1944/ Canto Classics 2012), and *What Is Life?* by Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan (1995/2000).

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Reference

- Nagel, T. (2012). *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*. Oxford University Press, 130 pp.