

THE MENTALISTIC CHALLENGE. Most working scientists accept some form of ‘materialism’. This label may be misleading, so far as we imply that they believe in the matter as an ultimate ingredient of the world. Perhaps that’s not so. Fields and quarks are on the physicist’s list of the ultimate ingredients, but they are not obviously ‘material’. A better label would be ‘naturalism’ or ‘physicalism’. Whatever the label, the view adopted is such that it counts mind as part of the natural order. But these labels too must be sufficiently ecumenical to provide for the claim that mind *is* part of nature, and its workings can be explained by purely empirical means continuous with the methods of physics or other sciences. 13

If, however, we challenge this integration of the mental into the physical, then we should also challenge the possibility of a physical explanation of the physical capacities that enable mental capacities. The challenge opens up an alternative possibility that mind should become a central element of the world order. Call this ‘n-idealism’ (Nagel-idealism or neo-idealism). 14 15

INTELLIGIBILITY. Why believe anything like n-idealism? One main reason is the assumption, implicit in the scientific enterprise, that the world is intelligible. It’s not terribly clear how Nagel understands this claim. I suggest two interpretations that, under closer scrutiny, may be just one. First, the problem of scepticism that itself comes in different shapes. We may wonder why our concepts and perceptions match the way things are. Specifically, we may wonder whether our idea of causation corresponds to any real relation in the world, whether the things we think are causally related are *really* so. Or we may wonder, to put the worry a bit differently, whether evidence gives us a sufficient ground—indeed, *any* ground—to predict how things will be. 16

Secondly, the problem of intelligibility might not be the problem of radical scepticism, but something much more modest (on the face of it). The world *is* partially intelligible. We can and do locate real causal relations, describe real objects as they are. But we can’t penetrate into the reason of the whole universe. Why this universe, rather than another? Why is there *a* universe at all, rather than nothing? It is often said (e.g., by Russell) that this worry is not fully scientific, and that it somehow arises from a confusion. If, however, it is not a confusion, then we are missing a very fundamental piece of understanding of the world. The worry is that this will set in motion the sceptical grinder. If we lack understanding of why the world is, perhaps we don’t (can’t) know *what* it is. That is, local intelligibility can’t be defended: we are back to radical scepticism. 20

Nagel talks about both threats to intelligibility. It is not clear how they are related—unless they are at bottom one, as I have just suggested.

DIGRESSION: WHITE’S RESPONSE. To anticipate the reading that’s coming up later: Roger White essentially argues that there is no need for a fundamental explanation. Worry: is this another explanation—namely, ‘that there is no explanation’—or is it simply a declaration of our cognitive weaknesses?

INADEQUACIES OF THEISM. Berkeleyan mysteries: to be elaborated.

INADEQUACIES OF MATERIALISM. Nagel argues that the evolutionary account (naturalised epistemology of the sort that we have seen in Quine) undermines its own credibility. The idea is this. Quine’s assumption was that science offers us the only standpoint from which to survey the world (recall that everyday beliefs are also part of science, as Quine understands it). We may concede that there is no non-circular ‘external’ justification of science: that is, there is no non-circular justification of the very capacities that science relies on. Still, we demand to have some reliability that is intelligible by the evolutionary standards. Our desired justification is, in this sense, ‘internal’. 27

But this we may not get. Nagel here endorses Platinga’s argument. Our cognitive capacities were shaped by the millions of years of evolution in the struggle for survival. But why to expect that they should be reliable also in theoretical enquiries. This argument has been especially popular in ethics. Nagel endorses Street’s version of it: evolutionary naturalism undermines our belief in moral realism. 28

Nagel finishes this discussion with a plea for common sense and ‘ordinary judgements’. Since evolutionary naturalism cannot provide a transcendental justification of our reasonings about the world, why not return to something we have great confidence already at the beginning? Even the most advanced theories face the test of plausibility. In turn, this will give an opening to n-idealism. 29

Question 1. Evaluate this last claim from a Quinean standpoint.