

The Project of Natural Theology

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Natural theology is the practice of philosophically reflecting on the existence and nature of God independent of real or apparent divine revelation or scripture. Traditionally, natural theology involves weighing arguments for and against God's existence, and it is contrasted with *revealed theology*, which may be carried out within the context of ostensible revelation or scripture. For example, revealed theology may take as authoritative certain New Testament claims about Jesus and then construct a philosophical or theological model for understanding how Jesus may be human and divine. Natural theology, on the other hand, develops arguments about God based on the existence of the cosmos, the very concept of God, and different views of the nature of the cosmos, such as its ostensible order and value. Natural theology is often practiced in the West and the Near East with respect to the theistic view of God, and thus the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But natural theology has also been carried out by those who reject such religious traditions (e.g. Voltaire (1694–1778) endorsed theistic natural theology, but he put no credence in Christian revelation), and philosophers have employed natural theology to argue that God has attributes and a character that is either slightly or radically different from orthodox, religious concepts of God. The philosophy of God developed by Spinoza (1632–1677) is an example of a natural theology, according to which God is radically different from the theism of his Jewish and Christian contemporaries.

Plato (428–348 BCE), Aristotle (384–322 BCE), and their successors in ancient and medieval philosophy developed substantial arguments for the existence of God without relying on revelation. In the West, Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), and Duns Scotus (1266–1308) are among the most celebrated contributors to natural theology. Muslim philosophy has also been a rich resource for natural theology, especially for cosmological theistic arguments. This may be due, in part, to the immense emphasis by philosophers such as Ibn Sina (or Avicenna, 980–1037) on the necessary, noncontingent reality of God in contrast to the contingent cosmos.

Natural theology played a major role in early modern philosophy. Some of the classics in the modern era, such as the *Meditations* by Descartes (1596–1650), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* by John Locke (1632–1704), *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* by George Berkeley, the *Theodicy* by Leibniz (1646–1716), the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* by David Hume (1711–76), and the *Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant

(1724–1804) all constitute major contributions to assessing reasons for and against theism, without making any appeal to revelation. The last two works are commonly thought to advance the most serious challenges to carrying out natural theology at all, but in point of fact, they still remain works in the tradition of natural theology, insofar as they reflect on the credibility of believing that there is a God, employing arguments that do not explicitly appeal to revelation. It is difficult to exaggerate the role of natural theology in the history of modern philosophy. The first substantial philosophical work published in English was a work in natural theology: *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* by Ralph Cudworth (1617–88).

In this chapter, I explore the prospects of employing natural theology in its traditional role of supporting a theistic understanding of God. In the first section, I bring together a series of arguments to the effect that a theistic natural theology is either unintelligible or, in principle, at a major disadvantage over against naturalism. These objections include critical arguments from Hume and Kant contra natural theology as employed to justify theism. I then address each of these, and bring to light reasons why today there is a renaissance in the field of natural theology in contemporary philosophy. I conclude with observations about the role of natural theology in addressing nontheistic accounts of God, along with a modest observation about the virtues of inquiry. The goal of this chapter is to address the general framework of natural theology in order to pave the way for the chapters that follow, which address specific strands in natural theology.

Does Theistic Natural Theology Rest upon a Mistake?

According to classical theism, there is a creator and sustainer of the cosmos who is omniscient, omnipotent, necessarily existing, nonphysical, essentially good, omnipresent, without temporal beginning or end, and everlasting or eternal. How these attributes are understood with precision is a matter of controversy. For example, some theists understand God as not temporally extended but transcending temporal passage (for God, there is no before, during, and after), while others see God as temporal and still others think that “prior” to God’s creation of time, God is timelessly eternal, although temporal after the creation. In what follows, I shall not enter into such fascinating questions about the divine attributes. (For in-depth coverage, see Wierenga 1989; Swinburne 1994; Taliaferro 1994, 1999; Hoffman & Rosenkrantz 2002).

In the current intellectual climate, the closest competitor with theism, and the customary launching pad for antitheistic natural theology arguments, is naturalism. *Naturalism* has been variously described and is sometimes characterized so broadly as to be without substance. For current purposes, naturalism may be described as a scientifically oriented philosophy that rules out the existence of God, as well as the soul. Some naturalists do not deny that there are nonphysical processes or states (e.g. consciousness is not itself a physical process or state), but most embrace some form of physicalism, according to which there is no thing or process that is nonphysical. Here is a current description of naturalism by Richard Dawkins that seems to restrict reality to that which is physical or “natural.”

[A] philosophical naturalist is somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no *supernatural* creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles – except in the sense of natural phenomena

that we don't yet understand. If there is something that appears to lie beyond the natural world as it is now imperfectly understood, we hope eventually to understand it and embrace it within the natural. As ever when we unweave a rainbow, it will not become less wonderful. (Dawkins 2006, p. 14)

Far from becoming less wonderful, Dawkins and some (but not all) naturalists argue that the natural world is more accurately and deeply appreciated aesthetically, once theistic natural theology is set to one side. Four of the five arguments against a theistic natural theology that follow reflect some form of naturalism, a worldview that is advanced as more elegant and powerful than theism.

Argument I

There is no logical space for theism. According to D. Z. Phillips, theism can be faulted for its positing a reality that is independent of the structure of the world. He not only proposes that it makes no sense to think about what is beyond the world but also proposes theism can be faulted for its advancing what might be called a theory of everything. Phillips writes:

What kind of theory is a theory about the structure of the world? If by "the world" one wants to mean "everything", there is no such theory. Certainly, science has no such theory, nor could it have. "Everything" is not the name of one big thing or topic, and, therefore, there can be no theory concerning a thing or topic of this kind. To speak of a thing is to acknowledge the existence of many things, since one can always be asked which thing one is referring to. Science is concerned with specific states of affairs, no matter how wide the scope of its questions may be. Whatever explanations it offers, further questions can be asked about them. It makes no sense to speak of a last answer in science, one that does not admit of any further questions. Science is not concerned with "the structure of the world", and there are no scientific investigations which have this as their subject." (Phillips 2005, pp. xv–xvi)

Phillips's critique of theories of everything may also be seen as cutting against naturalism insofar as it advances a theory covering all of reality. Physicalist forms of naturalism would seem to fit that description, for example, as physicalists hold that everything is physical. However, insofar as naturalism involves a negative thesis (there is no God not identical with the cosmos), Phillips's reasoning is very much in keeping with a naturalistic perspective.

For another representation of the *no logical space for theism argument*, consider Kai Nielsen's challenge:

What does or could "transcendent to the universe" mean? Perhaps being "beyond the universe"? But how would that be other than just more universe? Alternatively, if you do not want to say that, try – thinking carefully about the sense of "beyond" – to get a handle on "going beyond the universe." Is not language idling here? (Nielsen 2004, p. 474)

If successful, this objection rules out any evidential case for theism in the offing from natural theology. Kai Nielsen counsels us to set aside the search for theistic evidence, even if such ostensible evidence were something fantastic like the claim "GOD EXISTS" appearing in the heavens.

We are no better off with the stars in the heavens spelling out GOD EXISTS than with their spelling out PROCRASTINATION DRINKS MELANCHOLY. We know that something has shaken our world [if “GOD EXISTS” appeared in the heavens], but we know not what; we know – or think we know, how could we tell which it was in such a circumstance? – that we heard a voice coming out of the sky and we know – or again think that we know – that the stars rearranged themselves right before our eyes and on several occasions to spell out GOD EXISTS. But are we wiser by observing this about what “God” refers to or what a pure disembodied spirit transcendent to the universe is or could be? At most we might think that maybe those religious people have something – something we know not what – going for them. But we also might think it was some kind of big trick or some mass delusion. The point is that we wouldn’t know what to think. (Nielsen 2004, p. 279)

Argument II

Theism fails in terms of explanatory power. Some see theism as a quasi-scientific hypothesis. This is Richard Dawkins’s position:

I pay religions the compliment of regarding them as scientific theories and . . . I see God as a competing explanation for facts about the universe and life. This is certainly how God has been seen by most theologians of past centuries and by most ordinary religious people today. . . . Either admit that God is a scientific hypothesis and let him submit to the same judgment as any other scientific hypothesis. Or admit that his status is no higher than that of fairies and river sprites. (Dawkins 1995, pp. 46–7)

But once we introduce theism as a scientific thesis, it seems utterly unable to carry out the kinds of work we expect in terms of science. This objection is articulated by Jan Narveson:

It ought to be regarded as a major embarrassment to natural theology that the very idea of something like a universe’s being “created” by some minded being is sufficiently mind-boggling that any attempt to provide a detailed account of how it might be done is bound to look silly, or mythical, or a vaguely anthropomorphized version of some familiar physical process. Creation stories abound in human societies, as we know. Accounts ascribe the creation to various mythical beings, chief gods among a sizeable polytheistic committee, giant tortoises, super-mom hens, and, one is tempted to say, God-knows-what. The Judeo-Christian account does no better, and perhaps does a bit worse, in proposing a “six-day” process of creation.

It is plainly no surprise that details about just *how* all this was supposed to have happened are totally lacking when they are not, as I say, silly or simply poetic. For the fundamental idea is that some infinitely powerful mind simply willed it to be thus, and, as they say, Lo!, it was so! If we aren’t ready to accept that as an explanatory description – as we should not be, since it plainly doesn’t *explain* anything, as distinct from merely asserting that it was in fact done – then where do we go from there? On all accounts, we at this point meet up with mystery. “How are we supposed to know the ways of the infinite and almighty God?” it is asked – as if that put-down made a decent substitute for an answer. But of course it doesn’t. If we are serious about “natural theology,” then we ought to be ready to supply content in our explication of theological hypotheses just as we do when we explicate scientific hypotheses. Such explications carry the brunt of explanations. Why does water boil when heated? The scientific story supplies an analysis of matter in its liquid state, the effects of atmospheric pressure and heat, and so on until we see, in impressive detail, just how the thing works. An explanation’s right to be called “scientific” is, indeed, in considerable part earned precisely by its ability to provide such detail. (Narveson 2003, pp. 93–4)

Matthew Bagger is equally convinced that theistic explanations should be discredited over against a naturalist alternative. He holds that no occasion can arise that would offer reason for questioning the adequacy of naturalism.

We can never assert that, in principle, an event resists naturalistic explanation. A perfectly substantiated, anomalous event, rather than providing evidence for the supernatural, merely calls into question our understanding of particular natural laws. In the modern era, this position fairly accurately represents the educated response to novelty. Rather than invoke the supernatural, we can always adjust our knowledge of the natural in extreme cases. In the modern age in actual inquiry, we never reach the point where we throw up our hands and appeal to divine intervention to explain a localized event like an extraordinary experience. (Bagger 1999, p. 13)

Bagger's position closely resembles that of David Hume's on miracles, although his position is more comprehensive than explaining away events within the cosmos. Bagger thinks that there cannot, in principle, be any supernatural or theistic account of the cosmos itself. Accounts of what exist, according to Bagger, must be naturalistic, which he describes as amenable to scientific investigation. Because theism involves descriptions and explanations involving a reality that is not itself subject to scientific inquiry, it cannot be employed in accounting either for events in the cosmos (ostensible miracles or religious experience) or of the cosmos itself. Both Narveson and Bagger propose that theism fails because of its comparative paucity to explanations in the natural sciences.

Argument III

Theism and anthropomorphism – there are at least two versions of this line of reasoning. The first comes from Hume and maintains that theism receives whatever plausibility it has in natural theology by comparing God to a human person. In one version of the argument from design, for example, theists argue that God must be like us because the cosmos resembles artifacts we make intentionally. But, Hume reasons, is there not something grossly anthropomorphic (and anthropocentric) to suppose that the creator or cause of the cosmos must resemble us when there are so many other possible sources of causal explanation? There is an implicit charge that theism is too human-centered in the following lines:

But allowing that we were to take the operations of one part of nature upon another for the foundation of our judgement concerning the origin of the whole (which never can be admitted), yet why select so minute, so weak, so bounded a principle as the reason and design of animals is found to be upon this planet? What peculiar privilege has this little agitation of the brain which we call thought, that we must make it the model of the whole universe? Our partiality in our own favor does indeed present it on all occasions, but sound philosophy ought carefully to guard against so natural an illusion. (Hume 1988, p. 19)

According to another version of this objection, theism is to be faulted not only for its somewhat hubristic identification of humanity as a model for the cause of the cosmos but also for a deeper reason: just as we have come to see in the philosophy of human nature that there is no sense to be made of humans having a nonphysical soul, we may similarly see that there is no sense to be made of the concept of the cosmos having a nonphysical creator. Bede Rundle has recently developed a version of this argument.

According to Rundle, our language and concepts that describe and explain intentional action are essentially references to material behavior. As God is nonphysical, the notion that God can act, hear, or know about the world is necessarily false or incoherent.

We have no idea what it means to speak of God intervening in the affairs of the world. . . . We may well have to broaden our conception of what this universe contains; why should there not be many species of being more intelligent than us, some of whom make their presence felt locally from time to time? However, such a concession leaves us within the physical universe. The difficulty with a supernatural agent is that it requires one foot in both domains, so to speak. To qualify as supernatural it must be distanced from any spatio-temporal character which would place it in our world, but to make sense to us as explanatory of changes therein it must be sufficiently concrete to interact with material bodies, and the more convincingly a case is made for the former status, the greater the difficulty put in the way of the latter. (Rundle 2004, pp. 10, 27, 28)

Rundle contends that the very notion of nonmaterial intentions, knowledge, and so on is incoherent, and he takes particular aim at what he sees as the misuse of language in theistic religion.

Someone who insists that God, though lacking eyes and ears, watches him incessantly and listens to his prayers, is clearly not using “watch” or “listen” in a sense in which we can recognize, so while the words may be individually meaningful and their combination grammatical, that is as far as meaningfulness goes: what we have is an unintelligible use of an intelligible form of words. God is not of this world, but that is not going to stop us speaking of him as if he were. It is not that we have a proposition which is meaningless because unverifiable, but we simply misuse language, making an affirmation which, in light of our understanding of the words, is totally unwarranted, an affirmation that makes no intelligible contact with reality. (Rundle 2004, p. 11)

Rundle’s main justification for this stridently confident conclusion lies in ordinary language and a general materialism (“if there is anything at all, it must be matter” (Rundle 2004, p. ix)).

Rundle’s appeal to ordinary language may seem strained over against linguistic and conceptual flexibility of contemporary science with its quarks, leptons, dark matter, energy, and so on. But Rundle’s thesis may be bolstered by what appears to be an implicit *naturalism* in natural sciences. The sciences have not revealed clear marks of the divine, and theism as a hypothesis about reality does not help us with predictions. If theism is true, is it more or less likely that our sun will collapse in 4–5 billion years, turn into a red giant, and vaporize the earth? Daniel Dennett prizes physicalistic explanations that can answer such questions in terms of matter and energy, without bringing in theism or any kind of framework that privileges mental explanations that appeal to experience and intentions. For Dennett, Rundle’s line of reasoning is sound. Theism is discredited for its extracting from the natural world intentional, mental terms (knowing, thinking, loving, and so on) and then projecting them on to a nonphysical, supernatural subject.

Argument IV

An argument from uniqueness – this argument received one of its most famous versions in Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. According to this argument, the project

of theistic natural theology cannot get off the ground because there is no framework in which we can test the plausibility of theism over against its alternatives. In the *Dialogues*, Hume reasons that we may well reach conclusions about the cause of some object, such as a house, because we have seen many houses built in the past. But when it comes to the cosmos itself, we have no reference point by which to weigh alternative hypotheses.

But how this [design] argument can have place, where the objects, as in the present case, are single, individual, without parallel or specific resemblance, may be difficult to explain. And will any man tell me with a serious countenance, that an orderly universe must arise from some thought and art, like the human; because we have experience of it? To ascertain this reasoning, it were requisite, that we had experience of the origin of worlds; and it is not sufficient surely, that we have seen ships and cities arise from human art and contrivance. (Hume 1988, p. 21)

According to Hume, when we compare the cosmos itself to human artifacts and speculate about whether the cosmos resembles an artifact, we are simply moving from what we are familiar with in a commonsense context to form an analogy that is far beyond what we can properly evaluate.

If we see a house, . . . we conclude, with the greatest certainty, that it had an architect or builder; because this is precisely that species of effect, which we have experienced to proceed from that species of cause. But surely you will not affirm, that the universe bears such a resemblance to a house, that we can with the same certainty infer a similar cause, or that the analogy is here entire and perfect. The dissimilitude is so striking, that the utmost you can here pretend to is a guess, a conjecture, a presumption concerning a similar cause. (Hume 1988, p. 16)

This line of reasoning is used by Hume to undermine an argument from design.

Argument V

Natural theology is not enough. David Hume and Immanuel Kant both object to theistic natural theology on the grounds that the God that appears in natural theology is not sufficient to justify belief in the God of theistic tradition. So, while Kant is impressed by an argument from design, one of his objections is that the God evidenced by design would not thereby be shown to be omniscient, omnipotent, essentially good, and so on. Kant writes:

The proof could at most establish a highest architect of the world, who would always be limited by the suitability of the material on which he works, but not a creator of the world, to whose idea everything is subject, which is far from sufficient for the great aim that one has in view, namely that of proving an all-sufficient original being. If we wanted to prove the contingency of matter itself, then we would have to take refuge in a transcendental argument, which, however, is exactly what was supposed to be avoided here. (Kant 1998, p. A627)

Hume also proposes that the tools of natural theology are unable to fashion a concept of a “supreme existence” that would befit the divine. Building a case for a God that resembles human minds would seem to be hopeless given the limited, elusive, and fluctuating nature of human minds.

All the sentiments of the human mind, gratitude, resentment, love, friendship, approbation, blame, pity, emulation, envy, have a plain reference to the state and situation of man, and are calculated for preserving the existence, and promoting the activity of such a being in such circumstances. It seems therefore unreasonable to transfer such sentiments to a supreme existence, or to suppose him actuated by them; and the phenomena, besides, of the universe will not support us in such a theory. All our ideas, derived from the senses, are confessedly false and illusive; and cannot, therefore, be supposed to have place in a supreme intelligence. (Hume 1988, p. 27)

A Foundation for Natural Theology

I believe that the most promising reply to these arguments is to start with a challenge to the physicalism that lies behind most (although not all) forms of naturalism. It is first essential to set up a nonphysicalist alternative before addressing the *no logical space for theism argument* and so on. The importance of linking the philosophy of mind with the philosophy of God is not apparent *only* in the arguments by Rundle and Narveson. Consider Anthony Kenny's observation:

If we are to attribute intelligence to any entity – limited or unlimited, cosmic or extra-cosmic – we have to take as our starting point our concept of intelligence as exhibited by human beings: we have no other concept of it. Human intelligence is displaced in the behavior of human bodies and in the thoughts of human minds. If we reflect on the active way in which we attribute mental predicate such as “know,” “believe,” “think,” “design,” “control” to human beings, we realize the immense difficulty there is [in] applying them to a putative being to which is immaterial, ubiquitous and eternal. It is not just that we do not, and cannot, know what goes on in God's mind, it is that we cannot really ascribe a mind to God at all. The language that we use to describe the contents of human minds operates within a web of links with bodily behavior and social institutions. When we try to apply this language to an entity outside the natural world, whose scope of operation is the entire universe, this web comes to pieces, and we no longer know what we are saying. (Kenny 2006, pp. 52, 53)

If Kenny is right, the most promising theistic starting point must be to question whether or not terms such as “consciousness,” “know,” “act,” and so on are thoroughly physical or reducible to bodily states and behavior.

Given a thoroughgoing physicalism, theism is not likely to receive a friendly hearing. For some naturalists, theism and consciousness itself are in the same boat. Alisdair Hannay rightly recognizes how contemporary physicalists seek to marginalize consciousness, granting it only secondary or a provisional status to be explained away in nonconscious categories. Something even more negative can be said about the receptivity to theism.

The attitude of much physicalism [to consciousness] has been that of new owners to a sitting tenant. They would prefer eviction but, failing that, are content to dispose of as much of the paraphernalia as possible while keeping busy in other parts of the house. We should, I think, feel free to surmise that the current picture of consciousness eking out a sequestered life as a print-out monitor or raw feeler fails in a quite radical way to capture the facts. (Hannay 1987, p. 397)

How certain should we be that consciousness and other mental states are in fact marginal or thoroughly physical and identical to a bodily “web of links”? I suggest in what follows

that once we recognize that some conscious, purposive explanations should count as *bona fide* accounts of human (and perhaps other animal) lives, one may see that the theistic appeal to consciousness, and the purposive account of the cosmos itself, should be taken seriously as well.

Consider first the project of marginalizing consciousness. To see the problem with treating consciousness as secondary to observable, bodily processes, witness the work of Daniel Dennett. Dennett has made a career seeking to displace what may be considered the apparent primacy of consciousness in terms of certitude. Early modern philosophy began with Descartes' stress on the indubitability of self-awareness. One early effort by Dennett to combat Cartesianism was to promote what he called "heterophenomenology," a method that did not completely dismiss introspection from the outset but treated people's reports on their states of consciousness as data that required additional scientific evidence before those reports could be taken seriously. Over the years, he has become increasingly hostile toward those who attribute to conscious experience an ineliminable, primary status. In a recent exchange, Dennett contends that David Chalmers needs "an independent ground for contemplating the drastic move of adding 'experience' to mass, charge, and space-time" (Dennett 2000, p. 35). Chalmers replies that "Dennett challenges me to provide 'independent' evidence (presumably behavioral or functional evidence) for the 'postulation' of experience. But this is to miss the point: conscious experience is not 'postulated' to explain other phenomena in turn; rather, it is a phenomenon to be explained in its own right . . ." (Chalmers 2000, p. 385)

I suggest that Chalmers is absolutely convincing in this reply. There can be no "contemplating" or observations of this or that evidence about behavior or functions or any theories about mass, charge, and space-time unless there is conscious awareness. Consciousness is antecedent to, and a presupposition of, science and philosophy. To emphasize the primacy of consciousness, note Drew McDermott's effort to defend Dennett against Chalmers. McDermott offers this analogy against Chalmers and in favor of Dennett: "Suppose a lunatic claims he is Jesus Christ. We explain why his brain chemicals make him think that. But he is not convinced. 'The fact that I am Jesus is my starting point, a brute explanandum; explaining why I think this is not sufficient.' The only difference between him and us is that he can't stop believing he's Jesus because he's insane, whereas we can't stop believing in phenomenal consciousness because we are not" (McDermott 2001, p. 147). But surely, this analogy is wide of the mark, ignoring the unique, radically fundamental nature of consciousness and experience. Without consciousness, we should not be able even to think that someone is sane or insane, let alone Jesus. Recognition of the reality of conscious awareness is not simply an obstinate belief; the reality of consciousness seems to be a precondition of inquiry. (As a side note, it is peculiar that in his defense of Dennett, McDermott implies that we are not insane because we believe in phenomenal consciousness.)

Once the existence of consciousness is conceded as no less and perhaps even more assured than Dennett's "mass, charge, and space-time," it becomes difficult to see how consciousness can turn out to be the very same thing as brain activity or other bodily states and behavior. The following observation by Michael Lockwood is telling:

Let me begin by nailing my colours to the mast. I count myself a materialist, in the sense that I take consciousness to be a species of brain activity. Having said that, however, it seems to me evident that no description of brain activity of the relevant kind, couched in the currently available languages of physics, physiology, or functional or computational roles, is remotely

capable of capturing what is distinctive about consciousness. So glaring, indeed, are the shortcomings of all the reductive programmes currently on offer, that I cannot believe that anyone with a philosophical training, looking dispassionately at these programmes, would take any of them seriously for a moment, were it not for a deep-seated conviction that current physical science has essentially got reality taped, and accordingly, *something* along the lines of what the reductionists are offering *must* be correct. To that extent the very existence of consciousness seems to me to be a standing demonstration of the explanatory limitations of contemporary physical science. (Lockwood 2003, p. 447)

There is a powerful, enduring argument against identifying consciousness and brain activity that is very much in favor now and that highlights the limitations of physicalist treatments of consciousness. A wide range of philosophers argue that it is possible for us to have an exhaustive observation of a person's physiology, anatomy, all outward behavior, and language use and still not know that the person is conscious (for a defense of this argument and reply to objections, see Taliaferro 1994, 2002; Swinburne 1997; Goetz & Taliaferro 2008; Moreland 2008).

It would be premature to refer to a consensus in philosophy of mind, but there is a strong, growing conviction that "solving" the problem of consciousness may require a revolution in the way that we conceive of both consciousness and the physical world. Thomas Nagel puts the matter as follows:

I believe that the explanatory gap [linking consciousness and physical processes] in its present form cannot be closed – that so long as we work with our present mental and physical concepts no transparently necessary connection will ever be revealed, between physically described brain processes and sensory experience, of the logical type familiar from the explanation of other natural processes by analysis into their physico-chemical constituents. We have good grounds for believing that the mental supervenes on the physical – i.e. that there is no mental difference without a physical difference. But pure, unexplained supervenience is not a solution but a sign that there is something fundamental we don't know. We cannot regard pure supervenience as the end of the story because that would require the physical to necessitate the mental without there being any answer to the question *how* it does so. But there *must* be a "how," and our task is to understand it. An obviously systematic connection that remains unintelligible to us calls out for a theory. (Nagel 1998, pp. 344–5)

Nagel's confidence that we will somehow bridge the gap and understand how consciousness may turn out to be brain activity does not inspire enthusiasm: "I believe," writes Nagel, "it is not irrational to hope that someday, long after we are all dead, people will be able to observe the operation of the brain and say, with true understanding 'That's what the experience of tasting chocolate looks like from the outside'" (Nagel 1998, p. 338).

The difficulty of explaining away the obstinate reality of consciousness, and the ostensible contingency of the relationship between consciousness and physical processes, should caution those who dismiss theism in light of a confident form of physicalism.

Reply to Argument I

I shall later reply in some detail to Rundle's argument that theism is incoherent, but I shall assume (provisionally) in my reply to the first argument that consciousness does indeed exist and that there are problems with explaining away what appears to be a contingent