

# Fatalism or Determinism?

(2)

Douglas Lockhart

## Postmodernism's radical reassessment of what constitutes the 'human' questioned as to its validity and effect

*However much it may be asking of us to look past our dreads, griefs, and regrets - to locate the thatness of Being within every what - once we do so in a sufficiently sustained and intensified contemplation of our immediate consciousness, its implicit forms are raised into symbolic awareness and so revealed as grace, love, surrender, faith, and freedom. Immanence fully realised is transcendence*

*Contrary, however, to the predominant popular view of modern science, in terms of "alien us in an impersonal alien universe", the common source of corresponding metaphors for both physics and mystical experience . . . re-introduces a perspective in which we are actually very much "at home" in the universe - as our place of genuine dwelling. We can see "from within" that its organising principles are very much our own, and this revealed precisely in our most developed levels of intuitive consciousness.*

Harry Hunt

'The Truth Value of Mystical Experience'

*Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 12, 2006, pp. 34, 39.

Life is Nature's way of keeping meat fresh.

Dr. Who.

### The Territory Between Theism and Blind Chance

Francis Crick's delightfully adventuresome non-terrestrial explanation for life on earth in his book *Life Itself: Its Origin and Nature* (1981) does not explain how life managed to generate elsewhere. Augmented bacteria designed by some advanced civilisation under cosmic threat sent out to ensure the continuation of intelligent life in the universe does not explain how this was accomplished, or how this advanced civilisation managed to arise in the first place. We are

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confronted by the problem of infinite regress, the problem of life's origin being the result of an infinite number of advanced civilisations seeding one another with no conceivable starting point. Are our options then only God, or chance? Given that theism's God is a historical and theological quagmire, and a chance ricochet between particles to produce rudimentary life forms is ruled out by Crick (and others) as astronomically improbable, is there some other way in which the problem of life's origins can be addressed?

Thomas Nagel, an American philosopher whose neck is presently on the deterministic chopping block, offers a *natural* teleological explanation in response to this question. Having understood the improbability factor involved in the appearance of life on earth by chance, he bites the deterministic bullet in reverse and concludes that something really interesting is going on in matter, something that ought to make us question our present scientific and philosophical trajectory. Sandwiched as we Christian-based westerners are between theism and materialism, we take up either one or other of these positions as feasible explanations for life without considering the possibility of a third position, a territory between them<sup>1</sup> that Nagel himself now occupies. The *I don't give a damn camp* is also an alternative, but that entails *not thinking at all* and that doesn't concern us. Nagel, by contrast, is thinking, along with not a few others, and he is asking us politely to broaden our intellectual horizons. Not because he has abandoned his intellectual roots, but because the distinctly physicalist values of our age are patently questionable. Those who hold such values don't think so, of course. It's all a matter of perspective, they say. Choose the wrong point from which to view such questions and you end up with distortions of empirical reality. Philosophy has many viewing platforms; science has only one. Philosophers are notoriously at odds among themselves; scientist work from the same exacting methodological page. Nagel isn't a scientist; he's a philosopher. He may be well read in science, but that makes him no more than a dilettante when it comes to the complex issues science actually deals with. And that, in essence, is the problem: Science is more difficult than philosophy in that it deals only in empirically arrived at facts. Philosophy can't match science's progressive, nuts and bolts unveiling of the material world, merely assist with the verbal formulations required to accurately define and conduit its discoveries into the public domain. Scientist may appear to be highhanded, but it is a highhandedness based on assessments of reality most philosopher are, dare it be said, intellectually incapable of carrying out on their own.

I think that's a fair description of how many scientists view philosophers, and it harbours some obvious truths. At its extreme edge science *is* difficult; but that does not entirely rule out criticism when it adopts an ultra reductionist position: its philosophical "stance" or "premise" may be deficient. The findings of science may be technically beyond the competence of most philosophers to unravel, but that does not apply to its evaluative statements. Once stated, the ramifications of even the most obscure discoveries in physics can be matched with

what is already known and understood, and that fact allows philosophy back into the conversation no matter how obtuse the technical details may be. Hence Nagel's effrontery; he is busy doing his job in spite of science's paradigmatically physicalist evaluation of its own technical findings. Which tells us what? Well, to my mind it tells us that scientists unskilled in the technicalities of philosophy are doing philosophy, and that its physicalist answer to everything is not a properly thought out position, merely a logical extrapolation. There's nothing the matter with good logic, of course, but logic is only as good as its premise; get your premise wrong and your logic isn't worth buttons. One's logic may be consistent within itself, but consistency in this sense does not automatically guarantee sensible conclusions.

And that, basically, is the detectable difference in the positions held by Thomas Nagel and Francis Crick. In spite of admitting that pure chance is astronomically beyond statistical probability, Crick conveniently ignores the infinite regress component in his *alien's did it* explanation, whereas Nagel, equally convinced that chance is not the answer, goes straight to the heart of the problem and admits to detecting a philosophical anomaly in physicalist doctrine. As a steadfast upholder of that doctrine, Crick remains safe from attack, whereas Nagel the perceived iconoclast is mercilessly set upon. Mimicking Stephen Pinker's brutal neuroscientific summation of the human condition, Crick voices the received wisdom: "You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules."<sup>2</sup> Really? Shouldn't he have been paying a little more attention to his *aliens did it* notion? Physicalist extrapolations aside, Crick may well be right in his avant guard suggestion, but if an advanced extraterrestrial civilisation really did do it, then what exactly are we as a species? Are we evolved animals due to natural selection and an initial nudge from an already advanced form of alien DNA, or are we evolved animals housing the DNA of an alien species in the deepest recesses of our biological being? This may seem like a non-question to some, but when cosmologists speak of we humans as *children of the stars* they may in fact be mouthing a literal truth housing extraordinary implications in relation to junk DNA.

### **Is There a Phenomenal Aspect to Information?**

Bertrand Russell described the sciences as having developed from what was most remote to what was nearest.<sup>3</sup> First came the stars, then the earth, then animals and vegetable life, then, imperfectly, mind. Quite a lot has been discovered about the conscious mind since Russell made this observation, but what the unconscious mind might be is still uncertain. Not to everyone, of course. Neuroscientists are pretty sure they know what the unconscious is. They define the term as a hazy 19th century concept now properly understood as neuronal calculations taking place

deep in the brain. Our intuitions, insights, revelations and unvoiced suspicions are actually mathematically computed possibilities thrown up by our neural networks in response to surface events and interactions. Yes, there are inner sensations, but these are just the gurglings and complainings of the biological machine in relation to biological process: the body has its own cause and effect language. We are, in effect, awareness machines, the all-embracing term "consciousness" carrying a false notion in relation to what we sense to be the self. There is a self, but it is not an "entity" sporting individual consciousness; it is a network of cause and effect responses perceived through a biofeedback loop in the brain.

This brings us to the philosopher David Chalmers' definition of information being "phenomenal" as well as physical, the phenomenal aspect of information being roughly equivalent to what we experience as personal subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> This is a truly remarkable notion that hypothetically answers the question of what subjectivity is by postulating a phenomenal *effect* from information in terms of the "meanings" information carries. In this sense meaningful information gives us a personal sense of meaning in relation to the meanings we carry (having meanings generates the side effect of feeling personally meaningful), and it is this transaction that kindles the illusion of the self *being a self in the way we imagine the self to be*. Self is then a conjuring trick, a built-in sleight-of-hand illusion we constantly fool ourselves with due to a deeply ingrained individual and collective naivety. Breaking out of this naive state of mind will constitute the beginnings of a new type of consciousness, the beginnings of a new type of society on the lines intuited, tongue-in-cheek, by the science journalist John Horgan in his book *The End of Science* (1996). And this "change of consciousness" should not be confused with the kind of changes undergone in the past - it will be a radical break with the past, a whole new consciousness, a whole new way of perceiving self, other and world, a new way of thinking by way of a new conception of language.

To my mind that is an idea pushed, as Horgan senses, way too far by dint of the already established physicalist notion of how things *ought to be perceived*. Sleight-of-hand is certainly at work, but not in the sense advanced by neuroscience, or by those who happen to uphold neuroscience's reductionist vision. It belongs to the kind of explanation being drummed up for mind in relation to the general physicalist doctrine where intention, volition, and every other aspect of mind is, by fiat, made out to be an expression of brute matter. What life is in itself is perceived as a non-question because of the *presumption* that life resulted from a chance collisions among particles later augmented by natural selection. It is a scientific *fait accompli*; no more need be said. Some arrangements of matter are alive, some are not, but that is due to molecular arrangement and an information halo effect, or efflorescence, not to "aliveness" being a phenomenal dimension in its own right. In some deep cosmic sense we are an information matrix of extraordinary complexity, a fortuitous accident of space and time now known to have developed in a prebiotic soup over a course of billions of years.

### The Parodying of Religious Certainty

Let me say immediately that I have no argument with the billions of years scenario in relation to how life forms evolved, but there does appear to be something wrong with the idea of life emerging from matter due to a chance collision between particles - particularly a one-off collision. An organised complexity such as DNA/RNA emerging from brute matter is apparently too difficult to demonstrate statistically: a self-replicating system so complex cannot be statistically modelled whatever the length of time allowed. The chemical interactions involved in the production of a self-replicating system require the assembly of proteins within DNA, and as proteins are composed of long chains of amino acids, and DNA could neither be made nor replicated in the absence of proteins, the instructions necessary to fit such chains together would have had to exist *prior* to the appearance of DNA itself.<sup>5</sup> Such is the nature of the problem facing anyone tracking the question of life to its source, and it is the question Crick faced squarely, then conveniently ducked by ignoring the principle of infinite regress in his *aliens did it* explanation. Neither Nagel, Horgan or myself argue against evolution being the key factor in the formative development of all organic life, but if Francis Crick was correct in his objection, then evolution appears to have kicked in on a situation already inherently too sophisticated at the molecular level. There's a gap in the reasoning, and plugging it with bluster is not the best solution. Understandable, but not acceptable in spite of creationists and their troublesome God.

It does not seem all that long ago that anyone mentioning the possibility of life elsewhere in the universe was met either with a wry smile, a frown, or outright derision. Such a possibility was infinitesimally small, we were told. It required the formation of a planetary system much the same as our own, and the chances of a planet being exactly the right size and in just the right orbit to its sun to produce life was, well, all but inconceivable. Our planetary system was a fluke, we were a fluke, life was a fluke. We were almost undoubtedly alone in the universe, a mere speck of blue and green in an immensity of darkness scheduled for a fiery extinction at some point in the distant future. The earth's position in the solar system was the key to everything having turned out the way it did, and that kind of lucky arrangement was just way too lucky to have been repeated. Our prebiotic soup could not have formed or been induced by natural forces to produce the first simple building blocks of life if earth's orbit had been other than it turned out to be.

Planetary systems much like our own are now known to be common place, the possibility of an earth-like planet having formed no longer statistically improbable. Earth-like is however not enough of a condition for advanced forms of life to have resulted. All of the earth-like planets discovered so far are too big, too gaseous, too different in terms of optical spectra to

have produced even bacteria. The possibility of there being a planet out there with earth's advantages is nevertheless envisaged now as *probable*, and that raises the question of whether evolved life has managed to express itself elsewhere, and what it would mean if it has. Would it mean that life harbouring the possibility of high intelligence is the result of particle collisions elsewhere in the universe in spite of Crick's statistical objections? Are we to consider the possibility of a statistically improbable happening repeating itself just because some other planetary system is similar to our own? Why should that be the case given that blind chance is always blind chance? Blind chance and improbable statistics do not change; they are forever the same, particularly in a universe governed throughout by consistent laws. The probe now on the point of leaving our solar system and entering deep space is nonetheless equipped with a highly detailed description of what and who we are. For whom, one might ask? Do we sneakily suspect blind chance isn't as blind as we make it out to be? What is it about the universe that we suspect it capable of defying the odds against life appearing not just once, but twice? Or three or more times, perhaps? Or lots more than that. What if it turns out that the universe, like planet earth itself, is *infested* with life? What then? Could we entertain the notion that matter, under the right conditions, is capable of producing not only bacteria that natural selection can whip into shape, but that it was capable after the big bang of producing what would eventually flower into intelligent, self-aware creatures capable of asking the kind of questions we are now asking? This is not a theistic question. To see it only in religious terms is to disable the question's integrity and render it analytically mute. It is, as Nagel the atheist ably conveys a necessary question in that it forces us to consider how "a system as staggeringly functionally complex as a self-reproducing cell, controlled by DNA, RNA, or some predecessor, could have arisen by chemical evolution alone from a dead environment."<sup>6</sup> Some predecessor? That sounds like Crick talking, and it is. Having flippantly described life's appearance on earth as *almost a miracle*, Crick returned to the consensus fold, whereas Nagel, unable to ignore the core question of blind chance being responsible for "life", swapped the *aliens did it* formula for the possibility of a natural teleology. That, to my mind, does not constitute a religious stance; it is the rightful questioning of a secular belief system inadvertently parodying religious certainty. A "natural" teleology is problematical in the extreme, I admit that, but it's still better than an academic tantrum.

### **The Significance of Significance**

Let's dig a little deeper. We humans are composed of particles arranged in a predetermined pattern. Everything extant is composed of particles, and in being extant has either a predetermined animate shape such as plants, animals, birds or fish have, or an undetermined inanimate shape such as rocks, clouds and rushing water have. It could of course be argued that

even the shape of rocks, clouds and rushing water are determined in that they are the result of an interaction with natural forces, but that would be to introduce a false analogy in relation to the hugely complex building blocks responsible for animate life. Rocks, clouds and rushing water have no animate dimension, no phenomenal dimension; they constitute, as far as we know, dead matter as opposed to living matter. And yet, as we know, they are composed of the same basic particles as we humans, as plants, animals, birds or fish are, but in a form within which no guiding pattern other than pure chance is at work. Rocks, clouds and rushing water have no apparent internal directive, no self-organising element beyond that of their integral atomic structure; they are just *there* as the world is *there*. We, too, are just *there*, but our *thereness*, or "hereness", can register on us beyond the fact of our being physically present, and that because our *hereness* has a context, a *location* in space and time recognised, to one degree or another, by our conscious minds. We are sometimes conscious of our own existing; we sometimes become present to ourselves in a fashion beyond not only the capacity of rocks, clouds or rushing water, but beyond our own generally submerged and engaged minds. Which tells us that something is going on in the particles of which we are composed that is not going on in the particles constituting the world's inanimate *thereness*. Animals we may once have been, but we are now animals with a difference: we are *gathered together* in such a way as to form persons, units of organisation so complex we are capable of love and hate, fear and hope, ambition and self-sacrifice, stupidity and creative genius that will either carry us to the stars or plunge us into a final, awful reckoning with our own stupidity.

In terms of physicalist, reductionist thinking, the phenomenal, mentalistic aspect of living matter in relation to self-awareness and self-scrutiny is, as already observed, treated as a halo effect or efflorescence of matter due to complex levels of particle organisation. Plants are obviously not conscious, whereas animals are conscious and capable of task-oriented behaviour. Plants have to be genetically manipulated to change their structure and behaviour. Human animals, by contrast, are capable of high intelligence and everything that high intelligence signifies. We are quite obviously head of the evolutionary heap; we spearhead creation in relation to the great chain of being. But wait a minute, does high intelligence and everything it signifies include *significance* as an experience? Sorry, that's a non-question to some; it doesn't go anywhere. You can ask the question, but it has no philosophical validity. You might as well ask Why anything? Why reason, or knowing, or understanding? Things such as significance, reason or knowing are *fait accompli* processes that do not require existential explanation. They simply *are*.

The problem with this approach is that it ignores, in turn, the *fait accompli* necessity of significance, reason and knowing having existed *in potentia* within the structure of matter *prior* to it developing the capacity to express these mentalistic qualities *through* the chance collision of particles. If that possibility had not existed prior to any such collision, then nothing would have come from a collision of particles no matter what time signature was involved. It's hen or

egg stuff, and on this occasion there had to be a hen, else no egg. Which tells us that chance had nothing whatsoever to do with the generating of life and the capacities life eventually exhibited: life and its propagation was indelibly written into matter *before* the code *for* life eventuated. If you'll excuse the effrontery, it was a deterministic certainty that that is how things would turn out. And it doesn't matter how you push this material around, you can't escape the cause and effect consequences involved; if the potential for life had not existed in matter from the first instance of the Big Bang, it would not have come about no matter the number of particle collisions that followed. The genetic code is, by definition, a hugely complex blueprint for life in all of its myriad forms, life itself a recipe with unimaginable potential in relation to how any one of those forms will eventually express itself. Once the recipe is in operation you can't deterministically tell what's going to happen next, and that in spite of life's obvious deterministic base in terms of form.

Suddenly, and again confrontingly, we are faced with the fact that most of our non-questions aren't anything of the kind; they are questions pregnant with philosophical implications which, if ignored, will cause us to veer even more erratically in the direction of an ill-founded fatalism. That the latter part of our incredible journey through geologic time was dependent on the process of natural selection is beyond doubt, but along with Nagel, and others, I find myself unable to accept the validity of our origins having been sculpted out of matter by way of blind chance. And I must again stress that this is not a theistically driven conclusion, or in some unvoiced sense a religious point of view; it is to embrace, as a secularist, as a non-theist, an element of mystery as a corrective to our present nihilistic trajectory. Not because I harbour some secret fear of the dark, but because reason dictates that I face the linear facts that cosmology has placed before me. Stephen Pinker and others may claim that an acceptance of the prevailing mood of fatalism in western society can be offset by the excitement of boldly going, in terms of science (particularly neuroscience) where no man has gone before, but to my mind that is the same kind of shortsightedness as exhibited by the philosopher Don Cupitt and the sociologist John Carrol. For Cupitt there is the possibility of reconciliation through "The old topic of the soul's relation to God [having been] transposed into a new key, involving a much more bodily and emotional response to Nature and to natural forces",<sup>8</sup> whereas for Carrol it is the possibility of a Second Reformation through which "[A] restoration of Western culture will again . . . draw on the great sources of authority from the past."<sup>9</sup> What can I say, I am overcome by wild anticipation.

Thomas Nagel has upset the philosophical/scientific applecart by daring to question key elements of the accepted physicalist paradigm. His most penetrating questions, however, are deceptively simple: What makes a newly discovered property or phenomenon physical? How do we determine what is physical and what is not? What do we actually mean by *physical*? In reply

to these questions, Nagel observes how we infer physicality from properties already classed as physical, and how we automatically exclude any notion of the "mental" from the properties so inferred. Mental explanations are proffered for behaviour, but never in relation to physical properties. The consciousness of a system is never implied, nor the consciousness of the observer. Causal connections are perceived as fundamentally physical in relation to mind; there is no traffic going in the opposite direction. And that in spite of the fact that mental properties cannot be reached by "a chain of explanatory inference from physical phenomena alone, for physical data alone would provide no grounds for postulating explanatory theories that also had mentalistic consequences."<sup>10</sup>

What this breaks down to for Nagel is that "an account of how mental states necessarily appear in physical organisms cannot be satisfied by the discovery of uniform correlations between mental states and physical brain states",<sup>11</sup> no mental state can be honestly inferred from the data, merely claimed on the basis of physicalist theory. So what's the alternative? Give up and accept that no explanation is possible, or consider the possibility of there being only "one chain of inference leading from the mental and the physical to a common source"<sup>12</sup> This would explain causal interactions between mental and physical phenomena, and allow behavioural events to have both a mental and physical component. Two distinct chains of explanation pointing to two distinct sets of basic properties from one fundamental source disallows the need to describe such properties as either mental or physical, and that, odd as it may sound, suggests that fundamental particles have an undetected non-physical aspect to their nature from which the physical itself emerges. Which in turn suggests that there are properties of matter that are not physical, and that it is from such properties that "mind" is derived<sup>13</sup> due to it being a parallel expression.

Thomas Nagel may appear to be all alone in his suspicions, and in his theoretical offerings, but that is a misconception; other professionals have voiced similar reservations in relation to life and mind being no more than an efflorescent halo of matter. The physicist Paul Davies is on Nagel's side when says, "I have come to the point of view that mind - i.e. conscious awareness of the world - is not a meaningless and incidental quirk of nature but an absolutely fundamental facet of reality."<sup>14</sup> So too Professor of psychology Harry Hunt: "Consciousness . . . cannot be ultimately inconsistent with the system principles of the universe that generates it. In this version of the weak anthropic principle, if consciousness qua systems was not broadly consistent with the universe as understood by physics, it would not be here". And he adds for good measure: "A further implication is that consciousness, as this maximally complex system organization, must in some sense, and however distantly, already be "latent" and specifically potential, within this universe - even down to the period of post big bang inflation and its

originating singularity."<sup>15</sup> Hans Jonas, an early student of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, was of the same opinion: "[Consciousness] cannot be entirely foreign to nature, which brought forth precisely this kind of being . . . The very least that we must grant to matter that developed from the Big Bang, in regard to what ultimately emerged later on, is an original endowment with the possibility of eventual awareness. This means that right from the beginning matter is *subjectivity in its latent form*, even if aeons, plus exceptional luck, are required for the actualizing of this potential."<sup>16</sup> (author's italics) Carl Jung and Karl Kerényi were also exponents of "mind" stretching all the way down into the darkness of physical matter. At base, mind and matter were, for them, intrinsically related, mind, at depth, giving way to the mystery of matter's rather curious constituent properties.

The question of whether mathematical coherence is an invention of the conscious mind, or detected in matter itself arises at this point.<sup>17</sup> If the former, then we can be said to literally invent "world" for ourselves; if the latter, then "world" generates our sense of coherency in strict relation to its own inherent coherence in terms of *laws*. Which raises a question voiced by Harry Hunt: "If the cognitive symbolic form of mathematics "corresponds" beyond itself, why in principle should not other faculties and forms of mind?"<sup>17</sup> Which suggests that mind and matter might be reflective of one another at some deep level of coherence not yet detected by physicists or neuroscientists. The very fact that *all* conceptual thought rests on core metaphors extrapolated from concrete perception (height/depth, hard/soft, hot/cold, etc) strikes Hunt as conceptually significant. This is certainly true in terms of surface, utilitarian correspondences between percept and concept in relation to everyday experience, but it may also signify a connection between mind and matter well beyond such correspondences. For if mathematical coherence is inherent to matter in terms of "measurement" and "event", then matter is by nature *a carrier of coherence*, and that tells us that matter has a capacity for expression beyond that of its physical characteristics; there is in fact a *parallel* system of phenomenal coherence of which mind is an extension. Which suggests, in turn, that "meaning" is inherent to matter, for how can matter have inherent, law-governed coherence and predictability factors without meaning being in some sense an attendant factor? In this sense "meaning" is not something we superimpose on measurement and event, it is something phenomenally inherent to measurement and event.

The law-governed coherence of matter not only *shouts* meanings at us, it could be said to *cause* meaning in us because we are composed of matter and the laws of coherence that matter embodies. That of course introduces a further complication: our capacity to *focus in on* the multiple range of meanings under offer. Crick was interested in this question; he wanted to know how the brain attends to, or becomes aware of, a single issue. Which is to ask what

"focus" is as an experience. Or what "attention" is? Or "judgment"? Are these aspect of experience merely the brain as *instrument* doing its own automated thing in relation to computation? Or is it "my" brain, or "your" brain as *subject* doing our thing in relation to *the desire to know*? Reality is a smorgasbord of potential meanings, metaphorically usable meanings and measurements graspable at ever deeper levels of complexity by mind depending on the type of questions asked. Ask *this* question and you will get a particular answer; ask *that* question and you will get a quite different answer *from the same data set*. Which tells us that the logic of our questioning is dependent on subjective factors, factors that will govern not only the extent of our comprehension, but also the ongoing quality of the questions we tend to ask. This is not Chalmer's "information theory" causing the phenomenal dimension of mind in terms of mind being some kind of abstracted linguistic cloud grounded in material texts; or a halo or efflorescence effect of matter similar, say, to the "shining" of a diamond. It is more likely the inherent phenomenal dimension of the physical brain as matter resonating with the inherent phenomenal dimension of *matter* in terms of the latent meanings matter carries.

Mind derives from the physical just as materialists and reductionists contend, but it may be a physicality carrying its own phenomenal (quantum?) dimension in two spatio-temporal locations: the *in here* of personal physicality and the *out there* of the world at large. If such is the case, then we may be approaching an explanation for both mystical experience and Kant's "transcendental realm" from an unexpected angle, the angle of "meaning" constituting the fundamental nature of nature itself.<sup>18</sup> As Crick later admitted to deducing the complex double-helix structure while on an LSD trip, and there is a telling amino acid connection between LSD and DNA, and an equally telling connection between LSD and *natural* mystical experience, his sudden illumination takes on interesting hypothetical properties.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Problem of Meaningfulness**

The repercussions of such thinking are considerable; a new, intriguing route to the "self" is flung open, the so-called subject/object divide rendered intelligible in a unique manner. Also the opposition between subjective and objective states of mind where an experience can be interpreted either in relation to life as it is actually lived, or in relation to scientific principles such as the physics of a chair over its general purpose. The divide between these approaches becomes particularly pertinent in relation to how we handle "meaning", there being, for everyone, multiple meanings in relation to events and experiences in general, and for some, simultaneously, a singular, overarching meaning in relation to life as a single event. Viewed from an objectivist, externalist perspective, we have no meaning other than the meanings we accrue, but nevertheless function as if personally meaningful in spite of holding that

perspective. Viewed from a subjectivist, internalist perspective, we probably believe life has personal meaning and significance over and above the general meanings it carries, yet experience it as lacking in meaning when life gets particularly difficult. Or, if religious, believe that life is meaningful and personally significant no matter how empty or meaningless we might occasionally feel.

Functioning *as if* personally meaningful yet believing the opposite is an interesting, contradictory state of mind; functioning *as if* meaningful and believing life to be so equally interesting in that it is the *natural* route taken even by deniers of personal meaning. There is however a reason for this unity in diversity: one would have to be a mentally deficient individual to attempt living one's life *as if* it were a moment by moment meaningless exercise. Those who deny meaning as fundamental to the process of life will respond by saying that that is not the case for them. Moment by moment living supplies them with all the meanings they require. Meaning is necessarily composed of meanings; there is no such thing as personal meaning beyond the convenient fantasy of thinking it is so: everyday meanings shelter us from this existentially confronting fact. Constant distraction is our saviour. Without distraction we would probably go mad. We are, all of us, meaningless in terms of personal and collective existence, existence itself meaningless outside of the meanings we generate socially and intellectually, the larger physical reality within which all of this takes place a meaningless conglomerate of cosmic proportions. Life started with a collision of particles, and life will end with a collision of galaxies. Dr Who accurately summed up our situation when he said: "Life is nature's way of keeping meat fresh". A brutal, logical truth, perhaps, but a truth nonetheless.

Yet the question of what allows deniers of life having meaning to live *as if* it has meaning remains, their claim that everyday meanings suffice to hold their lives together not an altogether convincing reply. Living *as if* life has meaning in its own right is the position we naturally adopt because it answers to how we and others *feel* things to be, how they have to be *presumed* to be for sanity's sake - it is an unavoidable side-effect of being an alive being engaged with self, other and world. We interact, all of us, not just *with* or *through* meanings but because there seems to be something meaningful *about the act of interacting itself*, something tantalisingly suggestive in our coming together, and in our parting. Particularly our *final* partings. Interacting with self, other and world has a quality to it beyond mere practicality, a quality beyond the needs of community and the society at large. There seems to be another factor at work, an unconscious quality in everything we do and think, an embracing of meaning beyond the meanings we constantly share with others. We just can't help but feel meaningful in and to ourselves when we greet a new day, or sink back into the lively, dream-infested darkness of sleep. Our sense of personal meaning may be in tatters, but it is still *there*, our feeling of being *alive* something over and above our feeling of being physically alive.

In some inexplicable sense our being alive is also a form of *knowing*, an instinctive, unvoiced acknowledgment that our existence, personal and collective, has meaning beyond

anything we meaningfully know to be meaningful. Tosh? I don't think so. It is what underlies our more sensitive moments, our little *gatherings together of the self* into something substantially *there*, or *present*. It is our secret interior sense of being alive, our hidden depth signature and, unless I'm very much mistaken, it is also Nagel's "one chain of inference leading from the mental and the physical to a common source." And I'm not using Nagel's hypothesis out of context: I'm not using it in support of my way of seeing things because it's handy. I'm using my way of seeing things in support of Nagel's hypothesis, a way of seeing things that he, as a philosopher, may well reject. So be it. But he is not alone in his radical questioning of the ultra-reductionist standpoint in relation to the origin of life, mind, intelligence and consciousness, and he is not alone in attempting to do this outside of a religious framework in spite of sounding, at times, like an advocate for quasi-religious ideas. Avoidance of theism's reality constructions is one thing, but avoidance of reality's more subtle, more challenging offerings for fear of being thought even vaguely religious is not a strength, it is a phobia become an avoidance technique that disables and truncates both scientific and philosophical inquiry. The nature of matter may not be as clear cut as we think it is; we may have to consider the possibility of it carrying its own phenomenal dimension, a dimension expressed in animals and humans as mind, consciousness and intelligence in relation to matter's capacity to express the principle of *life*, never mind the principle of "meaning?" as an *active* and *detectable* dimension.

#### References and Notes:

- 1) Nagel, Thomas, *Mind and Cosmos*, Oxford University Press, New York 2012. p. 22.
- 2) Crick, Francis, *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, as cited by John Horgan in *The Undiscovered Mind*, A Phoenix Paperback 1999.
- 4) Horgan, John, *The Undiscovered Mind*, (see above) p. 242.
- 5) Hancock, Graham, *Supernatural*, Arrow Books 2005. pp. 575-596. I make no apologies for including Graham Hancock's popularly written work as a text to be consulted. It is thorough, well-documented, well-developed and intelligent. It is also creatively insightful.
- 6) Nagel, Thomas, *Mind and Cosmos*, (as above) p. 123.
- 7) Ibid, pp. 125-125.
- 8) Cupitt, Don, *Mysticism After Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers 1998. p. 140.
- 9) Carrol, John, *Humanism*, Fontana Press 1993. p. 226.
- 10) Nagel, Thomas, *Mortal Question*, Cambridge University Press UK., 1979. p. 184.
- 11) Ibid, p. 187.
- 12) Ibid, p. 184.
- 13) Ibid, p. 185.
- 14) Davies, Paul, *The Mind of God*, Simon & Shuster, 1992. p. 16.
- 15) Hunt, Harry, 'The Truth Value of Mystical Experience', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 13. No. 12, 2006. p. 9-10.
- 16) Jonas, Hans, *Mortality and Morality* (1996) as cited by Harry Hunt in 'The Truth Value of Mystical Experience', (see above) p. 10.
- 17) See Roger Penrose's *The Large and the Small, and the Human Mind* (1997). Penrose was apparently puzzled by the way mathematics functioned, and by the way we are not sufficiently puzzled by that functioning. Philosophical objections aside, science seemed to be in contact with an objective reality housing a precision beyond the level of mathematical coherence alone, that is, beyond the mathematical precision we mentally superimposed upon physical reality. Harry Hunt (see ref. 15) follows through on this and asks why the cognitive symbolic form of mathematics "corresponds" beyond itself, and why, if this is so, mind should not follow suit. (p. 13) He suggests that the traditional "science of analysis" should be

swapped for the "science of synthesis" as envisioned by Leibnitz and Whitehead. (p.11) He also points out that Bertrand Russell claimed we do not create numbers any more than we create Indians, William James being of the same opinion when he asserted that our ideas must somehow match elements of reality.

18) See Bernard d'Espagnat *On Physics and Philosophy*, Princeton University Press 2006. p. 305 where he speaks of "existence" as prior to "knowledge", and of failing to notice "that our theories, though built up in strict observance of all conceivable logical necessities, sometimes break down under the weight of experimental disproof [a fact] hardly comprehensible if even the experimental data stemmed exclusively from our mind."

19) *The Mail on Sunday*, 8 August, 2004. With regard to Crick's sudden double-helix illumination, should we perhaps entertain the notion of his having stumbled, in some sense yet to be understood, into a knowledge of that information-laden structure from an interaction with this structure itself? This may sound far-fetched, but the nature of creative experience at depth is still under discussion; we may have creative capacities beyond the usual limits of the conscious imagination.