

# IFH MONTHLY

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Irish Freethinkers & Humanists March. 2026

Saorsmaointeoirí & Daonnachaithe na hÉireann

## What's in IRISH FREETHINKER SPRING 2026

The Spring 2026 edition of *IRISH FREETHINKER* is now out and has been dispatched by post to subscribers; it is otherwise available for purchase in shops.

The contents include the following:

- *Chinese Non-Theism*
- *Losing Religion, Finding Myself*
- *19<sup>th</sup> Century Humanism*
- *Incarnation in the Andes*
- *La Mettrie*
- *'The War on Science'*
- *The Death of Reading*
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- *Links in the Chain*
- *The Consolation of the Philosopher*

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION OF MATERIAL FOR THE SUMMER '26 EDITION OF *IRISH FREETHINKER*:

**16 May 2026** (Editor: ifh.sde@gmail.com)

Thomas Nagel's philosophical project is among the most ambitious of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century Anglo-American philosophy. Across more than three decades, he has pursued a single, unifying question: what does it mean for human beings to aspire to objectivity while remaining irreducibly subjective creatures? His explorations of this problem appear in different guises across three central works: *The View from Nowhere* (1986), *The Last Word* (1997), and *Mind and Cosmos* (2012). Each text examines a different dimension of the same overarching issue - the status of subjectivity, the authority of reason, and the implications for the structure of the natural

world.

Although each book stirred its own controversies, they are best understood not as isolated interventions but as components of a single philosophical trajectory. *The View from Nowhere* develops Nagel's account of objectivity: how we move from the personal, internal standpoint to an impersonal, external one. *The Last Word* defends the authority of reason that

such a movement requires, arguing that rational norms cannot be treated as arbitrary, contingent, or merely evolutionary. Finally, *Mind and Cosmos* attempts to integrate the earlier epistemological and phenomenological

**THE VIEW  
FROM NOWHERE**  
*Noel Byrne*

insights into a comprehensive metaphysical challenge to materialist naturalism. Together, the three works mount a sustained argument against the reductionist tendencies of contemporary philosophy, cognitive science, and evolutionary theory.

In *The View from Nowhere*, Nagel identifies perhaps the most fundamental tension in human cognition: we are beings who experience the world from a particular, subjective perspective, yet we also possess the capacity - and indeed the drive - to transcend that perspective and seek an objective understanding of reality. For Nagel, the ambition to achieve a "view from nowhere" - an impersonal perspective not tied to any particular standpoint - is neither illusory nor pathological. It is a central feature of rationality, embedded in the structure of thought itself. Science, mathematics, moral reasoning, and even interpersonal understanding all involve attempts to abstract away from the contingencies of our immediate experience. Yet, Nagel insists, the aspiration toward objectivity can never fully erase subjectivity. The subjective dimension of experience - what it is like to be a particular organism with a particular point of view - cannot be translated into purely objective terms.

The heart of *The View from Nowhere* is its account of consciousness. Borrowing from his earlier work, particularly his seminal essay 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?' (1974), Nagel argues that subjective experience has a first-person character that cannot be captured by third-person physical description. Consciousness, in this sense, is irreducible - no matter how complete a physical or neuroscientific description we provide, something essential - the subjective character of the experience - remains outside the description. This irreducibility is not merely epistemic but ontological: physical description and subjective experience

belong to different kinds of understanding. Scientific objectivity, however powerful, cannot subsume the domain of the mental. Nagel does not reject objectivity; he celebrates its achievements. But he emphasizes that objectivity requires abstraction rather than elimination. The subjective perspective must be incorporated, not replaced, in an adequate account of the world. This view underlies his later critiques of reductive theories of mind - if objectivity obliterates subjectivity, it becomes false objectivity, a self-undermining attempt to ignore the very phenomenon it seeks to explain. Nagel's exploration of objectivity extends beyond consciousness into ethics. He argues for a rationalist form of moral realism grounded in the movement from the personal to the impersonal standpoint. Ethical reasoning involves recognizing that one's own interests are not special simply because they are one's own. Thus morality emerges from the same dialectic between subjectivity and objectivity that shapes other domains of reason.

If *The View from Nowhere* describes our capacity for objectivity, *The Last Word* defends its authority. The book responds to what Nagel perceives as a growing intellectual trend: scepticism about reason itself, manifesting in cultural relativism, postmodernism, naturalized epistemology, and even some strands of analytic philosophy. Nagel's central argument is simple but profound - any attempt to challenge the authority of reason inevitably presupposes the use of reason. Arguments against rationality - whether psychological, sociological, evolutionary, or pragmatic - must themselves rely on logical inferences, conceptual distinctions, and truth claims. Thus, they cannot deliver what they promise. This is a transcendental argument reminiscent of Kant - reason is inescapable. We cannot step outside it to evaluate it because our very act of evaluation is governed by the norms of rationality. A key aspect

of Nagel's critique is directed at evolutionary accounts of reasoning. Some naturalists argue that our cognitive faculties are products of survival-driven processes and therefore need not track truth. Nagel argues that this position is self-undermining: if evolution selected beliefs for their fitness value rather than their truth, then we lose the capacity to trust the very reasoning involved in forming such theories. This argument becomes crucial in *Mind and Cosmos*, where Nagel expands it into a broader critique of Darwinian naturalism. *The Last Word* thus provides the epistemological foundation for the metaphysical arguments he later constructs.

For Nagel, reason is not merely a psychological capability; it is a normative authority. When we engage in reasoning, we commit ourselves to standards that hold independently of our desires, cultures, or evolutionary histories. This independence explains why rational persuasion is possible - when reasons are given, they are not simply expressions of social conventions but appeals to universal standards. By defending rationality's authority, Nagel preserves the possibility of the "view from nowhere." Without confidence in objective rational standards, the aspiration toward objectivity collapses into relativism or pragmatism. Thus, *The Last Word* is the glue that binds *The View from Nowhere* to *Mind and Cosmos*. It secures the epistemic foundations required for his later critique of reductionist naturalism.

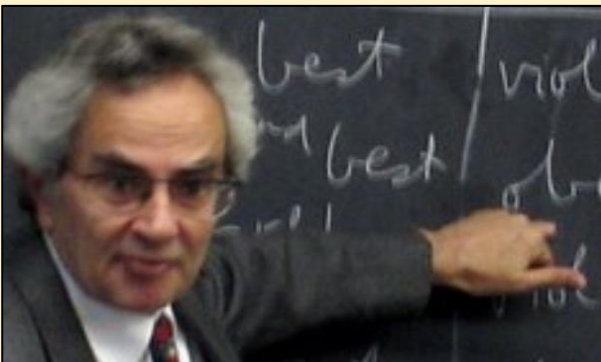
With *Mind and Cosmos*, Nagel takes the bold step of applying his previous insights to the most fundamental question - can reductive materialist naturalism account for life, consciousness, cognition, and value? His answer is unambiguously no. Nagel argues that the materialist neo-Darwinian conception of nature is almost certainly false. This provocative thesis rests on several interconnected arguments, all

developed directly from the positions defended in his earlier works. From *The View from Nowhere*, Nagel brings the claim that consciousness is irreducibly subjective. Materialist accounts explain behaviour, brain states, and functional roles, but they cannot capture "what it is like" to experience the world. This "subjective character of experience" remains outside physical description. Reductionists either deny this or reinterpret consciousness in purely functional terms, but Nagel argues that such strategies fail to engage with the phenomenon itself. From *The Last Word*, he imports the argument that rational thought cannot be understood as merely an adaptive mechanism. Evolutionary explanations can account for why certain cognitive capacities are biologically useful, but they cannot account for the intrinsic normativity of logical principles, the truth-tracking nature of reasoning, or the capacity to grasp objective mathematical and moral truths. If reason genuinely tracks truths that are independent of us, then the universe must be structured in such a way that organisms capable of recognizing these truths can arise. This cannot be an accident; it implies that the cosmos has built into it certain rationally accessible necessities.

Nagel provocatively suggests that the natural world may contain teleological principles not captured by current physical science. This is not a return to Aristotelian metaphysics but a tentative proposal - evolution might be guided by lawful tendencies toward the emergence of life, consciousness, and reason. Materialism resists teleology, but Nagel argues that without it, we cannot explain how complex mental phenomena fit into the natural order. The ultimate claim of *Mind and Cosmos* is that the world is structured such that rational beings can discover objective truths. This echoes his earlier position: reason cannot be an accident, nor can it be merely adaptive. The intelligibility of the

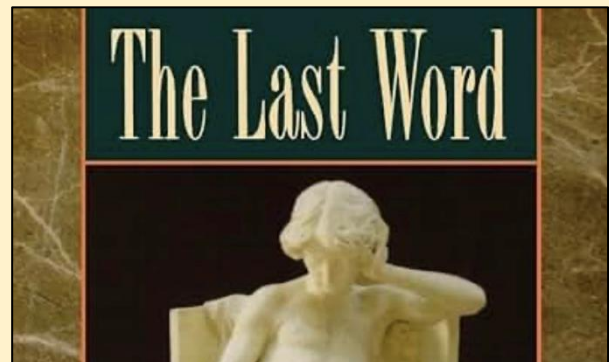
world is not a human projection but an objective feature of reality that precedes and enables the emergence of rational agents.

To appreciate Nagel's project, one must see how the works fit together. *The View from Nowhere* analyses the phenomenological tension between subjectivity and objectivity. *The Last Word* defends the epistemic authority of rationality and objectivity. *Mind and Cosmos* draws the metaphysical conclusions - if consciousness and rationality cannot be reduced, then the natural world must contain irreducible mental and teleological aspects. Seen in this light, *Mind and Cosmos* is not a surprising departure but the culmination of decades of consistent philosophical commitments. All three works argue that conscious experience is not reducible to physical processes, rationality is not reducible to evolutionary or sociological causes, and moral objectivity is not reducible to subjective desire or cultural practices. Thus, Nagel's challenge to materialism is a natural extension - not a sudden leap. Nagel's project is deeply rationalist. He defends objective moral truths, objective logical norms, and objective metaphysical facts about consciousness. For Nagel, objectivity is not merely a stance; it is a real feature of the world. His flirtation with teleology in *Mind and Cosmos* might seem surprising, but it follows from his earlier positions. If consciousness and reason are fundamental aspects of reality, then naturalistic explanations must accommodate them as such.



While Nagel's views are bold and coherent, like all philosophy they have attracted significant criticism which I will not go into here. Across *The View from Nowhere*, *The Last Word*, and *Mind and Cosmos*, Thomas Nagel develops one of the most ambitious philosophical projects of the last half-century. His central aim is to understand how human beings - creatures with subjective standpoints - can aspire to genuine objectivity. Through meticulous argument, he concludes that consciousness and reason are irreducible features of reality, not derivative or accidental. They reveal aspects of the world that cannot be captured by physicalist or evolutionary explanation. In *The View from Nowhere*, he shows that subjective and objective perspectives are both legitimate and irreducible. In *The Last Word*, he defends the authority of reason itself against relativistic and reductionist attacks, and in *Mind and Cosmos*, he draws the metaphysical conclusion that a proper understanding of nature must take mind, value, and reason as fundamental.

Whether one agrees with Nagel or not, the arc of his work represents a profound challenge to mainstream naturalism. His insistence that the world must be understood in a way that fully incorporates consciousness, reason, and value remains a compelling and provocative position - one that continues to influence debates in philosophy of mind, epistemology, and metaphysics. His integrated project demands that we rethink the nature of objectivity, the role of reason, and the structure of the cosmos itself.



**Daniel Dennett (1942:20-24), Professor of Philosophy, Tufts University, Massachusetts, USA.**

## DENNETT ON NAGEL

In *Consciousness Explained* (1991), Daniel Dennett develops one of the most sustained critiques of the conception of consciousness associated with Thomas Nagel, particularly the view articulated in Nagel's seminal essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" Dennett's target is not merely Nagel's conclusions but the underlying picture of subjectivity that, in his view, distorts philosophical thinking about consciousness and impedes scientific explanation.

Nagel famously argues that conscious experience possesses an irreducibly subjective character - a "what-it-is-like" - that resists objective, third-person explanation. Dennett's central response is to deny that consciousness contains such ineffable, intrinsic, and private qualia. He contends that this conception rests on an unexamined intuition rather than on clear argument. Once scrutinised, purported qualia dissolve under analysis: experiences can be reported, compared, corrected, and functionally explained. If a feature is truly beyond all possible discrimination or report, Dennett asks, in what meaningful sense does it exist?

A key element of Dennett's critique is that Nagel confuses epistemic difficulty with metaphysical impossibility. The fact that we cannot know what it is like to be a bat does not entail that consciousness is inaccessible to scientific explanation. Science routinely explains phenomena that humans cannot directly experience, and consciousness should be no exception.

Dennett also argues that Nagel's position implicitly relies on the idea of a Cartesian Theatre—a central inner arena where experiences

are presented to a unified observer. Dennett rejects this model and instead proposes a distributed, multiple-drafts account of consciousness, in which no single moment or place marks the emergence of conscious experience. Consciousness arises from parallel processes whose contents gain prominence through their functional roles.

Nagel grants first-person experience a special epistemic authority, but Dennett challenges this by arguing that introspection is fallible and theory-laden. Self-reports are shaped by expectations, language, and context, and therefore cannot be treated as incorrigible. Dennett

proposes heterophenomenology as a method that takes subjective reports seriously while remaining scientifically neutral.

Underlying Dennett's critique is a commitment to demystifying consciousness rather than preserving mystery. While Nagel is willing to suggest that consciousness may require

new, non-reductive conceptual resources, Dennett argues that such moves are premature. The real task is to abandon misleading intuitions and continue the naturalistic project.

Dennett's critique is thus a systematic rejection of the picture of consciousness Nagel represents. Nagel's challenge forced philosophers to confront consciousness seriously, but Dennett insists that progress depends on relinquishing the very intuitions that make consciousness seem inexplicable.



## GENERAL VIEWS ABOUT NAGEL

Nagel has always evinced a sympathy for Intelligent Design creationism, and in fact he chose Stephen Meyer's ID book *Signature in the Cell* as his 'Book of the Year' in the respected *Times Literary Supplement*.

***Jerry A Coyne (American Biologist & Professor Emeritus at University of Chicago).***

Nagel's teleological biology is heavily human-centric or at least animal-centric. Organisms, it seems, are in the business of secreting sentience, reason, and values. Real biology looks little like this and, from the outset, must face the staggering facts of organismal diversity. There are millions of species of fungi and bacteria and nearly 300,000 species of flowering plants. None of these groups is sentient and each is spectacularly successful. Indeed mindless species outnumber we sentient ones by any sensible measure (biomass, number of individuals, or number of species; there are only about 5,500 species of mammals). More fundamentally, each of these species is every bit as much the end product of evolution as we are. The point is that, if nature has goals, it certainly seems to have many and consciousness would appear to be fairly far down on the list.

*Also:*

The question, then, is not whether teleology is formally compatible with the practice of science. The question is whether the practice of science leads to taking teleology seriously. Nagel may find this question unfair. He is, he says, engaging in a "philosophical task," not the "internal pursuit of science." But it seems clear that he is doing more than this. He's emphasizing purported "empirical reasons" for finding neo-Darwinism "almost certainly false" and he's suggesting the existence of new scientific laws. These represent moves, however halting, into science proper. But science,

finally, isn't about defining the space of all formally possible explanations of nature. It's about inference to the most likely hypothesis. And on these grounds there's simply no comparison between neo-Darwinism (for which there is overwhelming evidence) and natural teleology (for which there is none). While one might complain that it's unfair to stack up the empirical successes of neo-Darwinism with those of a new theory, this, again, gets the history wrong. Teleology is the traditional view; neo-Darwinism is the new kid on the block.

***Allen Orr (Professor of Biology at University of Rochester).***

We conclude with a comment about truth in advertising. Nagel's arguments against reductionism are quixotic, and his arguments against naturalism are unconvincing. He aspires to develop "rival alternative conceptions" to what he calls the materialist neo-Darwinian worldview, yet he never clearly articulates this rival conception, nor does he give us any reason to think that "the present right-thinking consensus will come to seem laughable in a generation or two." *Mind and Cosmos* is certainly an apt title for Nagel's philosophical meditations, but his subtitle - "Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False" - is highly misleading. Nagel, by his own admission, relies only on popular science writing and brings to bear idiosyncratic and often outdated views about a whole host of issues, from the objectivity of moral truth to the nature of explanation. No one could possibly think he has shown that a massively successful scientific research program like the one inspired by Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection "is almost certainly false." The subtitle seems intended to market the book to evolution deniers,

intelligent-design acolytes, religious fanatics and others who are not really interested in the substantive scientific and philosophical issues. Even a philosopher sympathetic to Nagel's worries about the naturalistic worldview would not claim this volume comes close to living up to that subtitle. Its only effect will be to make the book an instrument of mischief.

**Brian Leiter (Professor of Jurisprudence, University of Chicago) & Michael Weisberg (Professor of Philosophy, University of Pennsylvania) in 'The Nation'.**

Current science may suffer from fundamental flaws, but Nagel has not made a convincing case that this is so. And even if there are serious explanatory defects in our world picture, I don't see how Nagel's causally inexplicable teleology can be a plausible remedy. In saying this, I realize that Nagel is trying to point the way to a scientific revolution and that my reactions may be mired in presuppositions that Nagel is trying to transcend. If Nagel is right, our descendants will look back on him as a prophet - a prophet whom naysayers such as me were unable to recognize.

**Elliott Sober (Philosopher Emeritus, University of Wisconsin-Madison) in 'Boston Review.'**

[Re *Mind and Cosmos*] Nagel thinks one must go beyond the Darwinian story to explain the appearance of "conscious organisms, and not

merely behaviourally complex organisms."

This is not the most persuasive part of the book. He puts little faith in the notion that consciousness and cognition might have offered some survival advantage; or for that matter, that ethics, as they evolved, might have had survival value. He rather undervalues the notion that an animal with insight stands a better chance of surviving to reproduce, or that a species which has evolved a social or moral contract among its confreres, similarly, might get luckier.

**Louis B Jones, author of 'Particles and Luck'.**

Well, no doubt possibilities are, or begin life by being, endless. But what we are looking for from Nagel is probabilities, and he cannot be said to have provided any. For, with all respect to him (and he can be an original and cogent writer), his argument in regard to the "universe" and the "cosmos" strikes one as fatally unspecific, indeed almost impalpable. His language about the universe is bizarre. He speaks ... of "our understanding of the entire cosmos and its history"; but, apart from the very latest millennium or two, the universe has no history. The dinosaurs, the drifting of the continents, and the Big Bang are not links in a historical chain; they are, and very properly, called pre-historic.

**P N Furbank, biographer of Denis Diderot.**



# HUMANIST MEETINGS IN IRELAND

## **Belfast Freethinkers**

Meeting quarterly at 8.00 p.m.  
Holiday Inn, University St, Belfast.  
Contact: Roger Kelly 0777 858 3435  
rogerkelly263@gmail.com

## **North Down Humanists**

Usually 2nd Tuesday of month.  
Hamilton Community Hub, Hamilton Rd,  
Bangor  
Contact: Andy Barr 078 889 20063

## **North Dublin Humanist Cmty**

3<sup>rd</sup> Monday of month at 8.00 p.m.  
Hedigan's Pub (Brian Boru),  
Phibsborough.  
Contact: Alan Tuffery  
atuffery@tcd.ie

## **South Dublin Humanist Cmty**

[Meetings currently suspended.]  
Soutdublinhumanistcommunity  
@gmail.com

## **Humanist Association of Ireland**

Monthly meeting at rotating venues,  
mostly Dublin.  
Details of next meeting at [humanism.ie](http://humanism.ie), or  
Facebook: Humanist Association of  
Ireland.

## **Westport Humanists**

2nd Sunday of month at 12.30 p.m.  
Wyatt Hotel, Westport.  
Contact: Séamus O'Connell 087 245 3536  
shayoc37@gmail.com

## **Cork City Humanists**

3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday of month (Sept-June) at 7.30  
p.m.  
Belle Vue Bar, 175 Old Youghal Rd, Cork  
city.  
Contact: Dominic Moore 087 231 0838  
corkhumanists@gmail.com  
Web: <http://corkhumanists.weebly.com>  
X: @CorkHumanists  
Instagram: corkhumanists

## **West Cork Humanists**

[Group to be established, interested per-  
sons sought.]  
westcorkhumanists@gmail.com

## **Humanists West**

Last Sunday of month at 12.00 noon.  
Ardilaun House Hotel, Taylor's Hill. Gal-  
way city.  
Contact: Sheila Garrity 086 603 5104  
spgarrity@hotmail.com  
humanistswest@gmail.com

## **Kerry Humanist Group**

Thursday each month at 6.30-8.00 p.m.  
Tralee Cmty Development Project, Rock  
Business Pk,  
Contact: Claire O'Mahony 086 245 2576  
[omahonycc@gmail.com](mailto:omahonycc@gmail.com)

## **Kilkenny Humanists**

2nd Wednesday of month at 8.00 p.m.  
Langton House Hotel, Kilkenny.  
Contact: Patrick Cassidy 089 463 0005;  
patrickacassidy@gmail.com

## **Mid-West Humanists**

(Limerick, Clare, Tipperary)  
3rd Wednesday of month at 8.00 p.m.  
Flannery's Pub, 2 Denmark St, in Limerick  
city.  
Contact: Peter O'Hara 086 815 5102  
info@midwesthumanists.com  
Web: <https://midwesthumanists.com>

## **North West Humanists**

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of month at 2.00 p.m..  
Radisson Hotel, Sligo.  
Contact: Gill Bell 087 295 8206  
humanistgb@gmail.com  
Facebook: North-West Humanists

## **North Coast Humanists**

2<sup>nd</sup> Monday of month at 6.30 p.m.  
Ballysally Community Centre, Coleraine.  
Contact: Brendan Mullen+44 7740 047  
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# **IRISH FREETHINKER**

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