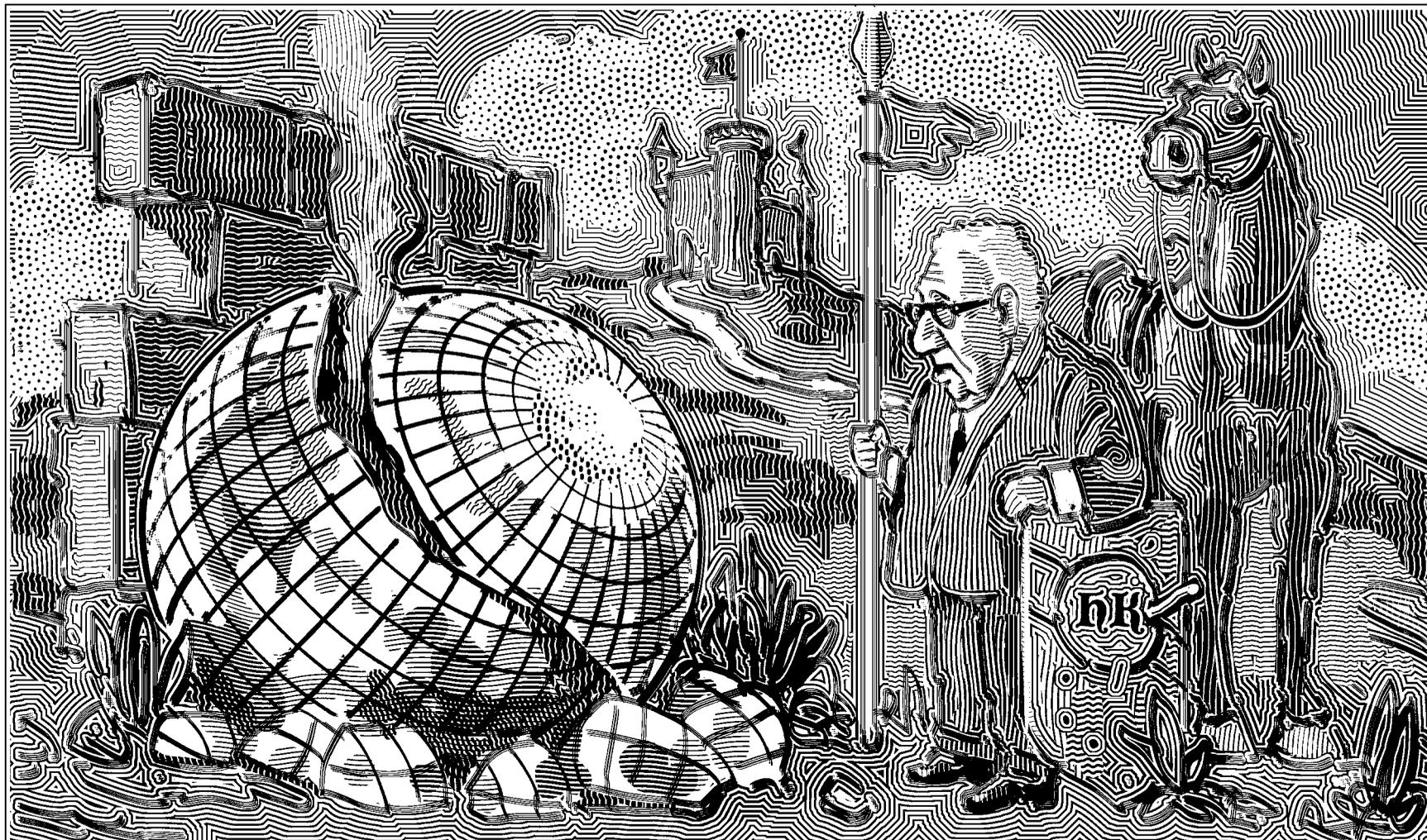


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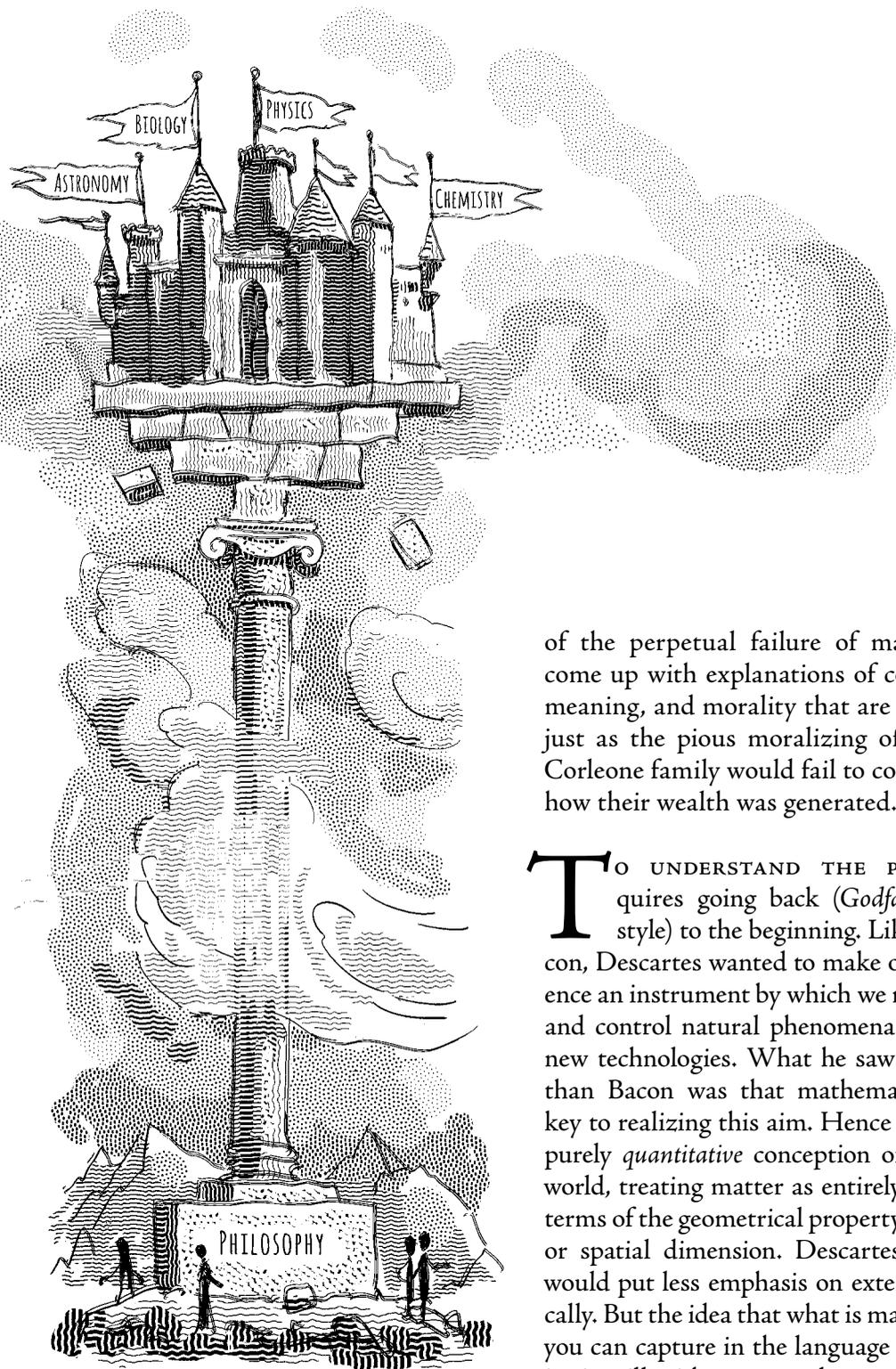
LOOKING FOR MEANING IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

The Meaning of Human Existence, by Edward O. Wilson.
Liveright, 208 pages, \$23.95

The Soul of the World, by Roger Scruton.
Princeton University Press, 216 pages, \$27.95

SUPPOSE THAT, AFTER THE EVENTS portrayed in *The Godfather Part III*, the Corleone family went completely legit. Suppose its new leaders solemnly denounced the way their forefathers Vito and Michael Corleone had acquired the family's wealth. But suppose also that they indignantly rebuffed any suggestion that there was something morally problematic about their holding on to that wealth, and refused to compensate the victims of the family's crimes. "But we don't engage in murder, extortion, or bribery!" they protest, rather missing the point. For their wealth would not have existed had such crimes not been committed, and it will remain tainted as long as these wrongs are not made right.

Contemporary materialists are a bit like that with respect to René Descartes, the father of modern philosophy and one of the fathers of modern science. They routinely denounce Cartesian dualism, Descartes's famous bifurcation of the world into mind and matter—or more precisely, into *res cogitans* or "thinking substance," and *res extensa* or "extended substance." And they do so in the name of science. Yet they remain essentially committed to Descartes's conception of the material world; indeed, modern science would not have been possible without



it. What they forget is that the *res cogitans* they deplore was necessitated by the *res extensa* they maintain. Hold onto the latter and you are implicitly committed to the former, whether you like it or not. This is the source

of the perpetual failure of materialists to come up with explanations of consciousness, meaning, and morality that are convincing—just as the pious moralizing of a reformed Corleone family would fail to convince, given how their wealth was generated.

TO UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM requires going back (*Godfather Part II*-style) to the beginning. Like Francis Bacon, Descartes wanted to make of modern science an instrument by which we might predict and control natural phenomena and develop new technologies. What he saw more clearly than Bacon was that mathematics was the key to realizing this aim. Hence he adopted a purely *quantitative* conception of the natural world, treating matter as entirely definable in terms of the geometrical property of extension or spatial dimension. Descartes's successors would put less emphasis on extension, specifically. But the idea that what is material is what you can capture in the language of mathematics is still with us, as a glance at any physics textbook will show.

Now, where does this leave the *qualitative* aspects of the world of our experience—colors and sounds, tastes and smells, heat and cold, pain and pleasure? Where does it leave the meanings and purposes we see in the world



around us, and the thoughts and choices we find within ourselves? Descartes embraced the obvious implications of the exhaustively “mathematicized” notion of matter he had introduced into Western thought, which the scientific revolution took and ran with. If matter is purely quantitative, and the qualitative features of reality cannot be reduced to the quantitative, then they cannot be material. And if these features don’t really exist in the material world but do exist in the mind’s experience of that world, then the mind itself must not be material.

Hence, Cartesian dualism was by no means a desperate rearguard action against the scientific revolution; on the contrary, it was the *logical outcome* of the scientific revolution. Matter, on the scientific conception, is comprised of colorless, soundless, odorless, tasteless, meaningless particles in fields of force, governed by mathematical laws which describe how these particles happen to behave, but no purposes for the sake of which they behave. To be sure, we might, when doing physics, *redefine* certain qualitative features in terms of some quantifiable doppelgänger. Color, for example, can be redefined in terms of a surface’s reflection of light of certain wavelengths. Sound can be redefined in terms of compression waves in the air. But these redefinitions, which even a blind or deaf person can understand, do not capture *the way red looks, the way an explosion sounds, and so forth*. Color, sound, odor, and taste *as we perceive them* can—given the scientist’s essentially Cartesian conception of matter—exist only in the conscious experiences of an immaterial mind or *res cogitans*. Meaning can exist only in this immaterial mind’s thoughts. Purpose can exist only in its volitions.

TO BE SURE, THIS CARTESIAN PICTURE is highly problematic. Not the least of its problems is that it makes of mind and matter two realms so hermetically sealed off from one another that it is utterly mysterious how they ever interact. It is no surprise that philosophers like Roger Scruton and contemporary scientists like Edward O. Wilson would like to be rid of it. Still, having followed Descartes in *defining* matter in so thoroughly “mathematicized” a way that irreducibly qualitative features, meanings, and purposes are excluded from it, modern science itself effectively closes off the possibility of a scientific explanation of these features. Thus while materialists are right to complain that Cartesian dualism leaves mind-body interaction obscure, dualists are right to complain that purported materialist explanations in fact ignore, or even implicitly deny, the existence of mind.

To get a sense of how absurd and pointless this debate is, consider another analogy, an orange. (*Godfather* fans will appreciate the symbolism.) Suppose you squeeze every last drop of juice out of the orange, put it into a glass, and set the glass next to the desiccated pulp and husk of the orange. This is analogous to “draining” the natural world of all the purposes, meanings, and qualitative features common sense attributes to it, leaving only a purely quantitative, mathematical abstraction. The Cartesian dualist, who identifies matter with this abstraction and then relocates meaning, purpose, and qualitative features to an immaterial substance—taking the world to consist in the conjunction of the two—is like someone who defines an “orange” as what you get when you stick some desiccated pulp and husk next to a glass of orange juice. The materialist, who like the Cartesian identifies matter with the mathematical abstraction but rejects immaterial substance, is like someone who denies that glasses of orange juice exist and defines an “orange” as a pile of dried-out pulp and husk alone. In reality, of course, an orange is what you had before you squeezed the juice out. And in reality, the natural world is what you have before the qualitative features, meanings, and purposes are abstracted out of it. Cartesians and materialists alike are correct to regard modern science as having given us a very penetrating grasp of *part* of the natural order, namely the part susceptible of analysis in purely quantitative terms. Where they both go wrong is in supposing that modern science gives us the *whole* of that order.

IT IS ONLY IN LIGHT OF THIS BACKGROUND that we can evaluate books like Scruton’s *The Soul of the World* and Wilson’s *The Meaning of Human Existence*. Both books are haunted by the fact that modern science seems to have stripped the natural order of any meaning or purpose and relocated it all within the narrow compass of the human mind. Both, accordingly, tend to treat religion, morality, art, and literature alike as if they were all merely artifacts of the mind, expressions of the way human consciousness *interprets* the world but not of the way the world really is in itself (though Scruton is a little more ambiguous where religion is concerned). Both nevertheless want to affirm the abiding value of these cultural artifacts (though Wilson is considerably less sympathetic where religion is concerned). Both authors acknowledge that the existence of this culture-generating mind within a natural order that is otherwise utterly devoid of meaning, purpose, or consciousness is something

of a mystery. Both attempt to mitigate this mystery in a more or less materialist fashion. And both fail dismally.

Wilson’s book is mostly a summary of current thinking in biology about how life evolved on earth and may have evolved elsewhere in the universe. This is all well and good, except that it has nothing to do with the question of exactly *how* properties like consciousness, meaning, and purpose possibly *could* have arisen from material processes that are utterly devoid of consciousness, meaning, or purpose. Wilson has nothing to offer by way of answering that question other than hand-waving references to what neuroscience and evolutionary biology may one day uncover. But saying “Evolution did it” or “The brain did it” is even less genuine an explanation than saying “Elves did it,” if you start out characterizing material processes in such a way that they *couldn’t* have done it. The problem, again, is that since the time of Descartes, science has for methodological purposes essentially *defined* matter in such a way that meanings, purposes, and irreducibly qualitative features are excluded from it. Trying to get conscious awareness, meaningful thought, and purposive action out of matter so defined is like trying to get blood from a stone, or orange juice from the desiccated husk of our example.

IT IS THE WAY MODERN SCIENCE CHARACTERIZES matter, and not particular gaps in current scientific knowledge as described by Wilson, that leaves us stuck with Descartes’s dualism. Given this characterization, we may find ever more detailed *correlations* between the mental and the physical, but we will never be able to *reduce* the mental to the physical. Two celebrated recent books by philosophers—Alex Rosenberg’s *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality* (2011) and Thomas Nagel’s *Mind and Cosmos* (2012)—see the problem more clearly than Wilson and other contemporary scientists tend to. Rosenberg’s mad but intellectually honest solution is to conclude that if matter as physics conceives of it is all that exists, mind must really be an illusion. Nagel’s sane but no less intellectually honest solution is to conclude that since mind and matter both exist but mind cannot be assimilated to matter as conceived of by physics, it follows that physics does not give us a complete account of matter. There must in Nagel’s view be more to matter than physics reveals, some additional ingredient that could account for the origin of consciousness, meaning, and value.

Scruton considers but rejects both Rosenberg’s and Nagel’s approaches. Indeed, though

well-known for his willingness to offend orthodox academic sensibilities where questions of morality, politics, and culture are concerned, Scruton is surprisingly deferential to conventional wisdom when he turns to metaphysics. To be sure, as you'd expect from a philosopher, he has a much deeper grasp of the difficulties the mind-body problem poses than the biologist Wilson does. And as you'd expect from Scruton, his writing is unfailingly erudite and elegant. Following Horace's dictum, Scruton always both instructs and delights.

UNFORTUNATELY, IN THIS NEW BOOK he also exasperates. Like Wilson, Rosenberg, and other materialists, Scruton concedes "explanatory priority" and indeed "ontological priority" to the picture of the world science gives us. That might seem to imply that he favors a reductionist account of the mind. Yet like Nagel, Scruton also thinks that the mental and the physical are "incommensurable." That might seem to imply that he favors a dualist account of the mind. And indeed, Scruton calls his position "cognitive dualism." He thinks that descriptions of human beings in terms of their conscious experiences, thoughts, and choices cannot be reduced to, translated into, or predicted from descriptions of human beings in terms of their

physical, chemical, neurological, or behavioral properties. But he thinks this entails a dualism, not of two irreducibly different *kinds* of reality, but only of two irreducibly different ways of *conceptualizing* the one physical reality revealed to us by science.

This is a muddle. Descriptions of human beings in terms of their conscious experiences, thoughts, choices, and the like either are *true* descriptions or are not. And if they are true, then there must be some objective facts *by virtue of which* they are true. Now, by Scruton's own admission, the facts in question could not be physical facts, since he concedes that nothing that the physical sciences tell us captures what we describe in the language of conscious experience, thought, choice, etc. Rosenberg, who thinks the physical facts are all the facts there are, concludes that conscious experience, thought, and free choice must be unreal. Nagel, who thinks conscious experience, thought, and free choice are real, concludes that the facts physical science reveals to us *cannot* be all the facts there are. Scruton wants to resist both conclusions, and thinks he has found a third option, but this is an illusion. What he has really put forward is merely a position that is *ambiguous between* these options.

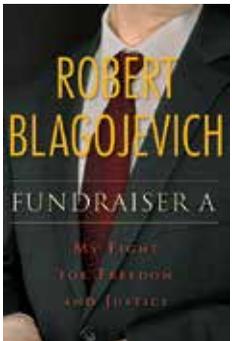
Nor are Scruton's arguments for resisting a more robustly anti-materialist position con-

vincing. Nagel proposes that we cannot make sense of how our rational faculties aim at truth unless we acknowledge (as Aristotle did but no materialist would) that there are final causes or teleological principles governing the natural world. In response, Scruton endorses Immanuel Kant's view that the truth-directed nature of our rational faculties is evident from the fact that any attempt to deny that they are so directed is self-undermining. Scruton seems to think Nagel's and Kant's positions are in competition. But they are not, and his attempt to refute Nagel by appealing to Kant is therefore confused. Kant is making an *epistemological* point, a point about what *justifies us in believing* that our rational faculties are reliable. Nagel is making a different, *metaphysical* point, a point about what *causes them to be* reliable.

We won't be free of Descartes's legacy until we face up to both halves of it, the material as well as the mental. You can't buy a clean conscience with dirty money. You can't get juice from an orange you've already squeezed dry. And you can't get human purposes and meanings out of a material world from which all purpose and meaning have been banished.

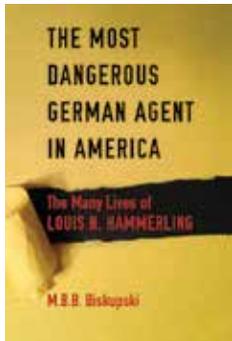
Edward Feser is the author, most recently, of Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction (Editions Scholasticae).

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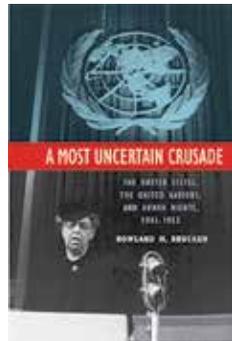
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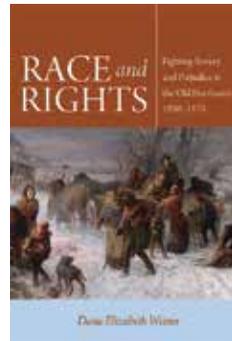
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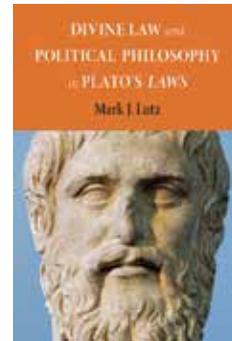
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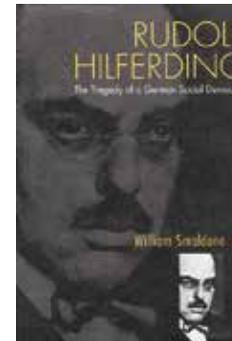
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