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July 26, 2014: The Return of Teleology

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Title: The Return of Teleology

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7/26/2014—When I got to New York City on vacation last week, I ran into a shock—an op-ed in the New York Times by George Johnson describing new thinking about the nature of reality (Beyond Energy, Matter, Time and Space). Simply put, it is now being considered by some really smart people that there might be more to what is real than simple materialism and empiricism allow. Two such approaches are teleology and mathematics. In terms of teleology, Johnson cites in particular Thomas Nagel and Stuart Kauffman—persons readers of this blog are familiar with—and David Chalmers. The basic idea is that mind, consciousness, is built into the universe, either as goal or ingredient. The other non-purely-physical approach is that of Max Tegmark, who suggests that mathematics itself provides a kind of blueprint for reality—an idea that I have seen in Hilary Putnam. Putnam wrote somewhere that we are justified in calling mathematics real by the success of natural science in using mathematics to explain and predict the world. The reason this op-ed excited me is that once ideas get into the New York Times, those ideas must be penetrating the culture quite deeply. So, the scientific viewpoint—space/time/matter/energy—that Steven Smith rightly identified as the viewpoint of at least law's elite, is now coming into question. And that view—that reality is blind forces—is the foundation of nihilism. Maybe, we are moving to a new beginning.