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### October 18, 2014: Can Materialism Be True?

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Title: Can Materialism Be True?

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10/18/2014—We are used to asking this question about God and religion, for a variety of reasons. But we never ask it about the only alternative we know to some form of teleology—materialism. I am not speaking of the spiritualized forms of materialism that are open to religion but insist always on a physical link underlying all human experience. That kind of spiritualism is manifest in Robert John Russell, the physicist/theologian, who writes of science as a “constraint” on theology. No, I mean the hard kind of materialism that considers all form of spiritual life as a kind of unintended spillover from physical reality. This is the sort of account that a Steven Weinberg gives. Can that account of materialism be true? Thomas Nagel has been casting doubt on the thoroughness of a purely physical account of reality, but I also don’t mean here a technical question about whether materialism works. Instead, I mean, can it be true when it is bad for us? The hard material account goes like this—no one knows why the Big Bang happened. But it did. It was a kind of inevitable accident. Same thing for all that happened next. Life was also a kind of inevitable accident with all those amino acids lying around. Everything after that was random selection and the process went up and down and many species changed not at all or became extinct. Life almost ended at several points on Earth and presumably did so end in countless other planets—maybe including Mars. Human life could end here any time, from an asteroid or Ebola or wars spurred by climate change. Eventually it will, when the sun explodes or later when the universe speeds so far apart that everything freezes. There is no significance to any of this in this account. Humans happened to happen. Now this account is wildly different from the sense that each of us has about our own lives. We live in a drama in which we star and which is enormously significant. And we feel that way about humanity itself and its self-consciousness. This form of life is nature’s highest achievement. Even materialists feel that way—they believe that it is important that humans understand the truth of our situation, even though by their own account, it is not important at all what humans believe because truth has no significance. The material account is bad for humans because it undermines the meaning that all humans seek. Why would evolution produce a being able to learn the material truth of things, but unable to live with the knowledge produced? If materialism is true, we are maladapted for it. Meaning seeking is also a product of evolution, but has no value now. It only gets in the way, according to materialism. Was meaning seeking ever adaptive? I’m inclined to believe that the truth of things cannot be bad for us to know. If it is bad for us, as materialism is, then perhaps it is not true.