

The View From Nowhere—Reading group 5

In previous chapters, Nagel articulated his views in the philosophy of mind, and his responses to philosophical scepticism. In this chapter, he will discuss *the limits of thought*.

Chapter 6: Knowledge

Distinguish two views:

Realism: The world is, in a certain sense (to be articulated), agent-independent.

Idealism: The world is not agent-independent.

Nagel is a realist—but argues that realism opens the door to there being elements of reality of *which we cannot conceive*:

I shall defend a form of realism according to which our grasp on the world is limited not only in respect of what we can know, but also in respect of what we can conceive. In a very strong sense, the world exceeds beyond the reach of our minds. (Nagel, p. 90)

Idealism

Berkeley is a traditional idealist—he regards what we take to be the external world as in fact just ideas in the minds of agents (whether humans, or God). In arguing for his idealism,¹ he makes claims such as the following:

- (i) There are no trees which are not actually perceived—because to imagine such a tree would thereby be to perceive it.
- (ii) We cannot form the thought of something that no one is actually thinking about.

Nagel finds both of these points problematic. He responds as follows:

¹See e.g. his *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713).

- (i) To imagine an unperceived tree does not thereby mean that we are (or anyone else is) perceiving that tree.
- (ii) "Clearly we can think and talk about the possible state of affairs in which no one is thinking or talking about Bishop Berkeley. The fact that we must talk about Bishop Berkeley to talk about the situation in which he is not being talked about doesn't make that situation either inexpressible or impossible." (Nagel, p. 93)

Question: Do you agree with Nagel's critiques here? (I think I do...)

Nagel is, however, quick to point out that the version of idealism with which he is concerned in this chapter is not exactly that of Berkeley. The position in which he is in fact interested is articulated thus:

[T]he form of idealism with which I am concerned ... is not the view that what there is must be actually conceived or even currently conceivable. Rather it is the position that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us, or possibly something for which we could have evidence. An argument for this general form of idealism must show that the notion of what cannot be thought about by us or those like us makes no sense. (Nagel, p. 93)

In other words, the distinction between these two versions of idealism is the following:

Old idealism: Everything which exists is actually conceived.

New idealism: Everything which exists is possibly conceived—i.e., is conceivable.

In this chapter, Nagel will react against this new idealism. As he says,

My argument will be essentially negative. I believe that the statement of a realist position can be rejected as unintelligible only on grounds which would also require the abandonment of other, much less controversial claims. (Nagel, p. 95)

Nagel against the new idealism

Here's what one might regard as being Nagel's 'master argument' against the new idealism:

There are plenty of ordinary human beings who constitutionally lack the capacity to conceive of some of the things that others know about. People blind or deaf from birth cannot understand colors or sounds.

If there could be people like that existing with us, there could also be such people if we did not exist—that is, if there were no one capable of conceiving of these things that they cannot understand. Then their position in the world would be analogous to the one which I have claimed we are probably in. (Nagel, p. 95)

Nagel rightly anticipates a critique of this argument:

An objection might be that in thinking about them I have all along been conceiving of the world—even the world from which we are absent—in terms of what we actually know about it. The feature they can't conceive are fully specifiable in our language. (Nagel, p. 96)

Question: What do you make of this objection?

In the ensuing sections of the chapter, Nagel addresses some specific versions of this argument, due to certain famous philosophers.

Kant and Strawson

Nagel's first target is Strawson—who, in articulating his views on such matters, was reacting against Kant:

- “Kant's position is that we can conceive of things only as they appear to us and never as they are in themselves: how things are in themselves remains forever and entirely out of the reach of our thought.” (Nagel, p. 99)
- “Strawson wishes to remove the Kantian opposition between thinking of things as they appear to us and thinking of them as they are in themselves by declaring the latter idea (in its Kantian version) nonsensical.” (Nagel, pp. 99-100)

Nagel reconstructs Strawson's position as follows:

He believes there is an appearance-reality distinction within what Kant regards as the world of appearance, but it is basically the distinction between how things appear to us at any particular time or from a particular vantage point, and how they would come to appear as the result of an improved view or further investigation. Application of the distinction depends, he says, on identity of reference plus a corrected view: the world that now appears to me in one way might come, as a result of procedures of corrective revision, to appear to me or others like me in another way—a way that could be seen as a correction of the first. No idea of reality is left standing by this account which could have application to anything outside the range of possible human conception, evidence, or discovery. (Nagel, p. 100)

Nagel's objection to Strawson is essentially the same as what we've seen before:

My disagreement with Strawson ... is with the way he interprets the idea that we are embedded in a world larger than we can conceive. What lies beyond our current understanding is not adequately captured in the idea of answers to questions we do not yet know how to ask. It may include things that we or creatures like us could never formulate questions about. (Nagel, p. 104)

Wittgenstein

Next, Nagel turns his attention to some themes from Wittgenstein:²

His [Wittgenstein's] later views on the conditions of meaning seems to imply that nothing can make sense which purports to reach beyond the outer bounds of human experience and life, for it is only within a community of actual or possible users of language that there can exist that possibility of agreement in its application which is a condition of the existence of rules, and of the distinction between getting it right and getting it wrong. This appears to rule out not only languages which could be understood by only one person, but also the use of language—even the general language of existence and states of affairs—to talk about what we cannot in principle make any judgements about. (Nagel, p. 105)

Nagel offers the following response:

²See in particular his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

As a desperate measure one might argue that Wittgenstein's claim about rules, if true, does not have such restrictive consequences as it is often thought to have. The possibility of agreement in judgements is a very broad condition that can be met in many ways. It need not imply, and was not thought by Wittgenstein to imply, that we could understand only what we could verify or confirm. ... In regard to the possibility that there are things about the world that we couldn't conceive and that what there is very likely extends beyond the range of possible human thought, it might be suggested that Wittgensteinian conditions of publicity and possible agreement could be met in another way. Agreement about what we do not know and cannot conceive, and about what is possible, are as important as agreement about what we do not know and what is true. That too is agreement in judgements. (Nagel, pp. 105-106)

Nagel concedes, however, that it is strained to read Wittgenstein in this way:

The position I am trying to defend is not really compatible with Wittgenstein's picture of the relation of language to the world, even of some of what he says about rules can be interpreted in a way which seems to allow it. His view of how thought is possible clearly implies that any thoughts we can have of a mind-independent reality must remain within the boundaries set by our human form of life, and that we can't appeal to a completely general idea of what there is to defend the existence of kinds of facts which are in principle beyond the possibility of human confirmation or agreement. We fall into nonsense, he thinks, if we try to take language too far from these conditions. (Nagel, pp. 106-107)

In light of the tension between his realism and Wittgenstein's arguments, Nagel reacts as follows:

But though I have no alternative, I find it completely impossible to believe Wittgenstein's view—psychologically impossible. (Nagel, p. 107)