

The View From Nowhere—Reading group 2

Recap from Chapter 2: Nagel's proposal is to incorporate minds—the subjective—as irreducible components in the objective world, alongside the physical—even though we can only have *access* to our own minds:

I believe we can include ourselves, experiences and all, in a world conceivable not from a specifically human point of view, and that we can do this without reducing the mental to the physical. (Nagel, p. 17)

In Chapter 3, Nagel explores the relations between these irreducible subjective elements of reality, and the physical world. He is thus engaging with the *mind-body problem*.

Chapter 3: Mind and body

Dual aspect theory

How to incorporate the irreducibly subjective into an objective conception of reality? One answer would be to turn to *dualism*:

[S]omething else must be added, which may as well be called the soul, and this is the bearer of mental properties, the subject of mental states, processes, and events. No matter how closely it interacts with the body, it is something different. (Nagel, p. 29)

Nagel's central objection to dualism is the following:

[I]t postulates an additional, non-physical substance without explaining how it can support subjective mental states whereas the brain can't. Even if we conclude that mental events are not simply physical events, it doesn't follow that we can explain their place in the universe by summoning up a type of substance whose sole function is to provide them with a medium. (Nagel, p. 29)

Unlike a dualist, Nagel doesn't think that one has to introduce new *entities* into one's ontology in order to support anti-reductionism about the mental:

The falsity of physicalism does not require nonphysical substances. It requires only that things be true of conscious beings that cannot, because of their subjective character, be reduced to physical terms. (Nagel, p. 29)

In essence, the idea of Nagel's *dual aspect theory* is to associate the mental not with irreducible *objects* (as in dualism), but instead with irreducible *properties*:

Why should the possession of physical properties by the body not be compatible with the possession of mental properties—through some very close interdependence of the two? (Nagel, pp. 29-30)

[I]f both mental and physical aspects of a process are manifestations of something more fundamental, the mental need not entail the physical nor vice versa even if both are entailed by something else. (Nagel, p. 48)

Skipping ahead a bit: later on, on the basis of his dual aspect theory, Nagel identifies the brain with the self, as he takes the brain to be the bearer of these subjective, mental properties:

[A] type of objective identity can settle questions about the identity of the self only if the thing in question is both the bearer of mental states and the cause of their continuity where there is continuity. If my brain meets these conditions then the core of the self—what is essential to my existence—is my functioning brain. ... But the brain is the only part of me whose destruction I could not possibly survive. The brain, but not the rest of the animal, is essential to the self. (Nagel, p. 40)

It's worth noting that, near the end of the chapter, Nagel himself shows some hesitance about his own view! For example:

[Dual aspect theory] ... has the faintly sickening odor of something put together in the metaphysical laboratory. (Nagel, p. 49)

In any case, before discussing *prima facie* problems with dual aspect theory, Nagel turns to an (apparently) distinct problem in philosophy: that of personal identity over time.

Personal identity and reference

How do I know which object in the world is *me* (the challenge of *synchronic personal identity*), and how do I trace which object in the world is me across times (the challenge of *diachronic personal identity*)? Nagel discusses two possible approaches to personal identity (in particular, to diachronic personal identity): (Nagel, p. 38)

1. Reduce personal identity to psychological continuity (i.e., factors such as thought, memory, and perception).
2. Treat personal identity as an independent psychological concept: “the self is something that underlies the psychological continuities where they exist but has no necessary or sufficient conditions specifiable in terms of them” (p. 38).

Nagel favours the second option:

I believe that whatever we are told about continuity of mental content between two stages of experience, the issue logically remains open whether they have the same subject or not. In addition, it is clearly part of the idea of my identity that I could have had a completely different mental life, from birth. (Nagel, p. 38)

Parfit

Nagel assesses the first of the two options above. He notes that this leads to a certain conundrum:

If what we are depends not only on our concepts but on the world, the possibility arises that nothing in the world satisfies the concept perfectly. (Nagel, p. 43)

Here, Nagel has in mind certain well-known discussions from Parfit:

Parfit begins by describing a natural conception of the self which he calls the Simple View. This says that nothing can be me unless (a) it determines a completely definite answer to the question whether any given experience—past, present, or future—is mine or not (the

all-or-nothing condition); and (b) it excludes the possibility that two experiences both of which are mine should occur in subjects that are not identical with each other (the one-one condition). Subjectively, these seem like nonnegotiable essential features of myself.

But the brain is a complex organ, neither simple nor indivisible. While there are no examples of gradual replacement of its cells over time, for example by grafting, there are the famous examples of its division by commissurotomy, with striking psychological effects. As Parfit points out, if my survival depends on the continued functioning of my brain, it seems that I might be able to survive as two distinct selves, not identical with each other, and this would violate the one-one condition. Similarly, he has observed, if the cells of my brain could be gradually replaced, with accompanying gradual transformation of my personality and memories, then a future experience might belong to someone else about whom there was no answer to the question whether he was me or not, and this would violate the all-or-nothing condition.

Parfit himself concludes that the conditions of the ordinary concept of personal identity cannot be met if such things are possible. ... If, as appears to be the case, the subject of our mental lives is a complex, divisible brain, then it is not a suitable bearer of the identity of the self, and we should adopt instead a more complex view of our own nature. His suggestion is that we should withdraw our special self-interested concern from the identity of the organ that underlies our mental lives, and be concerned instead about the psychological continuities themselves, however they are produced, which may hold to different degrees and need not be one-one. (Nagel, pp. 43-44)

Unlike Parfit, Nagel prefers to reject the Simple View of personal identity itself (rather than accept the Simple View but claim that it is not satisfied in the real world):

This would be one of those cases where some of our most important beliefs about the reference of one of our concepts may be false, without its following that there is no such thing. (Nagel, p. 44)

The thought, presumably, is that this move allows Nagel to continue to maintain that the brain is identical with the self, in spite of Parfit's examples.

Panpsychism and mental utility

Nagel worries that one consequence of dual aspect theory is *panpsychism*—the view that every physical system displays some degree of consciousness/possesses some mental properties. Note, however, that other philosophers of mind who hold something like a dual aspect view—e.g., David Chalmers—embrace this result.