

The View From Nowhere—Reading group 4

Previously, Nagel introduced his *dual aspect theory* of the mind—that objects in the world (such as human brains) possess irreducible mental properties, and that in this way subjective points-of-view can be incorporated into an objective conception of the world. He also addressed the puzzle as to which of the subjective points-of-view in the world *is me*.

Chapter 5: Knowledge

In this chapter, Nagel considers various philosophical issues regarding knowledge and scepticism. He begins with the following question:

[I]f individual appearances are not in themselves reliable guides to reality, why should the products of detached reflection be different? (Nagel, p. 67)

The question here is the following: why think that our conception of the external world is veridical? Nagel identifies three responses: (1) *sceptical*, (2) *reductive*, and (3) *heroic*:

1. "Sceptical theories take the contents of our ordinary and scientific beliefs about the world to go beyond their grounds in ways that make it impossible to defend them against doubt." (p. 68)
2. "Reductive theories grow out of sceptical arguments. Assuming that we do know certain things, and acknowledging that we could not know them if the gap between content and grounds were as great as the skeptic thinks it is, the reductionist reinterprets the content of our beliefs about the world so that they claim less. He may interpret them as claims about possible experience or the possible ultimate convergence of experience among rational beings, or as efforts to reduce tension and surprise or to increase order in the system of mental states of the knower, or he may even take some of them, in a Kantian vein, to describe the limits of all possible experience: an inside view of the bars of our mental cage." (pp. 68-69)
3. "Heroic theories acknowledge the great gap between the grounds of our beliefs about the world and the contents of those beliefs under a realist interpretation, and they try to leap across the gap without narrowing it." (p. 69)

Nagel is sceptical about the prospects for (3):

The chasm is littered with epistemological corpses. Examples of heroic theories are Plato's theory of Forms together with the theory of recollection, and Descartes' defence of the general reliability of human knowledge through an a priori proof of the existence of a nondeceiving God. (Nagel, p. 69)

In a footnote, Nagel also makes a snide comment about Moore:

A fourth reaction is to turn one's back on the abyss and announce that one is now on the other side. This was done by G. E. Moore. (Nagel, p. 69)

Nagel summarises his project in this chapter as follows:

The question is how limited beings like ourselves can alter their conception of the world so that it is no longer just the view from where they are but in a sense a view from nowhere, which includes and comprehends the fact that the world contains beings which possess it ... (Nagel, p. 70)

Nagel compares his approach to realising his goal with that of Descartes—but whereas Descartes relied on indubitable argumentation, Nagel appeals to a “method of self-transcendence” (p. 70).

Antiscepticism

Nagel turns his attention to linguistic arguments against scepticism, for example that of Putnam. These arguments have the following form:

If I were a brain in a vat, then my word “vat” would not refer to vats, and my thought, “Perhaps I am a brain in a vat,” would not be true. The original sceptical supposition is shown to be impossible by the fact that if it were true, it would be false. (Nagel, p. 72)

Nagel's response is the following:

The skeptic may not be able to produce on request an account of these terms which is independent of the existence of their referents, but he is not refuted unless reason has been given to believe such an account impossible.

Nothing here is obvious, but it seems clear at least that a few undeveloped assumptions about reference will not enable one to prove that a brain in a vat or a disembodied spirit couldn't have the concept of mind-independence, for example. The main issue simply hasn't be addressed. (Nagel, p. 72)

Question: Who has the burden of proof here?

Nagel also argues that Putnam's argument fails on its own terms:

[A]lthough the argument doesn't work it wouldn't refute scepticism even if it did. If I accept the argument, I must conclude that a brain in a vat can't think truly that it is a brain in a vat, even though others can think this about it. What follows? Only that I can't express my scepticism by saying, "Perhaps I'm a brain in a vat." Instead I must say, "Perhaps I can't even think the truth about what I am, because I lack the necessary concepts and my circumstances make it impossible for me to acquire them!" If this doesn't qualify as scepticism, I don't know what does. (Nagel, p. 70)

(Although Nagel doesn't mention it, there is also the classic problem for Putnam of 'recent envatting'.)

Self-transcendence

Nagel thinks that the challenge of scepticism can only be overcome via a process of self-transcendence:

To provide an alternative to the imaginable and unimaginable skeptical possibilities, a self-transcendent conception should ideally explain the following four things: (1) what the world is like; (2) what we are like; (3) why the world appears to beings like us in certain respects as it is and in certain respects as it isn't; (4) how beings like us can arrive at such a conception. (Nagel, p. 74)

Nagel does not think that science aids our objective understanding of the world:

Discoveries like this [e.g., the discovery of DNA] may be difficult to make, but they do not involve fundamental alterations in the idea of our epistemic relation to the world. They add knowledge without objective advance. (Nagel, p. 75)

For Nagel, rather:

All advances in objectivity subsume our former understanding under a new account of our mental relation to the world. (Nagel, p. 75)

There are various moments in history in which we have reconceptualised our relation with the world. Nagel points out the following:

- Locke's drawing of the distinction between 'primary' versus 'secondary' qualities.
- Einstein's recognition in the special theory of relativity that length, time intervals, and facts about simultaneity, are not absolute properties of the world.

Nagel rightly notes, however, that these observations don't necessarily dispel the spectre of scepticism:

Still, the fact that objective reality is our goal does not guarantee that our pursuit of it succeeds in being anything more than an exploration and reorganisation of the insides of our own minds. (Nagel, p. 77)

Evolutionary epistemology

In this subsection, Nagel takes a bit of a detour, in order to criticise attempts to account for the existence of objective minds by appeal to Darwinian evolution. He complains that evolution affords only a *genotypic*, and not a *phenotypic*, explanation:

- *Genotypic explanations*: Explanations as to why a certain trait comes to be selected.

- *Phenotypic explanations*: Explanations as to why the selected trait is possible at all.

He writes:

An evolutionary explanation of our theorizing faculty would provide absolutely no confirmation of its capacity to get at the truth. (Nagel, p. 79)

Later, however, Nagel seems to suggest that the existence of objective minds defies even a genotypic explanation:

The question is whether or not only the physical but the mental capacity needed to make a stone axe automatically brings with it the capacity to take each of the steps that have led from there to the construction of the hydrogen bomb, or whether an enormous excess mental capacity, not explainable by natural selection, was responsible for the generation and spread of the sequence of intellectual instruments that has emerged over the last thirty thousand years. (Nagel, p. 80)

Rationalism

The distinction between *rationalism* and *empiricism* stems from the Early Modern era:¹ according to rationalists (such as Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza), our primary means of gaining knowledge about the world is *a priori* (i.e., proceeds not via empirical observation, but via rational reflection); according to empiricists (such as Hume, Berkeley, and Locke) our primary means of gaining knowledge about the world is *a posteriori* (i.e., proceeds not via rational reflection, but via empirical observation). Nagel identifies himself as a rationalist:

I said earlier that the position to which I am drawn is a form of rationalism. This does not mean that we have innate knowledge of the truth about the world, but it does mean that we have the capacity, not based on experience, to generate hypotheses about what in general the world might possibly be like, and to reject those possibilities that we see could not include ourselves and our experiences. (Nagel, p. 83)

What links an objective, agent-independent conception of the world to our personal experiences? For Descartes, it was God. But for Nagel...

¹Indeed, arguably the positions have their roots in the philosophies of Plato versus Aristotle, respectively.

I have no idea what this unheard-of property of the natural order of things might be. But without something fairly remarkable, human knowledge is unintelligible. My view is rationalist and antiempiricist, not because I believe a firm foundation for our beliefs can be discovered a priori, but because I believe that unless we suppose that they have a basis in something global (rather than just human) of which we are not aware, they make no sense—and they do make sense. A serious rationalist epistemology would have to complete this picture—but our beliefs may rest on such a basis even if we cannot discover it. (Nagel, p. 85)

Nagel's basic approach to the sceptical challenge, then, seems to be the following:

1. *Assume* there is some link between the objective, agent-independent world, and our experiences. (This is motivated by his rationalism.)
2. Argue that philosophical reconceptualisations such as those pointed on p. 3 of this hand-out take us closer to a picture of that objective, agent-independent world.

Assuming that this is an accurate reading of Nagel (do you agree?), the question is: to what extent does this really address the sceptical challenge?