

## **The View From Nowhere—Reading group 9**

In ch. 9, Nagel presented a nuanced picture of the landscape of contemporary moral theory: “Common sense suggests that each of us should live his own life (autonomy), give special consideration to certain others (obligation), have some significant concern for the general good (neutral values), and treat the people he deals with decently (deontology)” (p. 166).

### **Chapter 10: Living right and living well**

Developing on this, the purpose of the present chapter is the following:

*In this chapter I want to discuss the tension between subjective and objective standpoints that results when these demands of impersonal morality are addressed to individuals who have their own lives to lead. (Nagel p. 189)*

In other words: how are we to weigh personal and impersonal factors in our moral deliberations? To bring out the issue here, Nagel gives the following example:

*... [T]he bill for two in a moderately expensive New York restaurant equals the annual per capita income of Bangladesh. Every time I eat out, not because I have to but just because I feel like it, the money could do noticeably more good if contributed to famine relief. ...*

*... It is clear that a strongly impersonal morality, with any significant requirements of impartiality, can pose a serious threat to the kind of personal life that many of us take to be desirable. (Nagel p. 190)*

### **Williams’s question**

Nagel considers Williams’ response to above issue of impersonal moral demands; this he summarises as follows:

*The general objection [i.e., Williams’ objection] is that impersonal moralities demand too much of us, and that if we accept and act on those demands, we cannot lead good lives.*

*... adherence to different versions of impersonal morality requires a set of motives, and of priorities among them, that is according to Williams incompatible with other motives necessary for a good human life. In particular, he claims that impersonal demands rule out the commitment to personal projects that is a condition for the integrity of one's life, and that they undermine that commitment to particular other persons that is a condition of love and friendship. The cost of alienation from one's projects and one's life is too high. (Nagel p. 191)*

**Note on terminology:** Throughout his discussion, Nagel deploys the following vocabulary:

1. "The good life"—"living well". [Note: this isn't just hedonism: it's about living a life which is personally fulfilling for the agent in question.]
2. "The moral life"—"doing right".

Ultimately, Nagel does not agree with Williams:

*... while I agree with Williams that it is the task of a moral theory to tell us not only what we are morally required to do but also how to lead a good life, I do not believe that a theory can be rejected on the ground that under some conditions it requires us to live a life less good than we could if we ignored its demands. Perhaps Williams would not hold morality to such a strict standard, but he does seem to put more ethical weight than I would on living well rather than doing right. (Nagel p. 195)*

The disagreement between Williams and Nagel is subtle. For Williams, we can sometimes defer doing what is morally right in favour of living the good life—with a view to our personal flourishing. For Nagel, this undermines morality—rather, we should seek to *incorporate* living the good life into our moral system. This difference comes out in the remainder of the chapter.

### **Antecedents**

Nagel distinguishes five positions "concerning the relative priority of the good life and the moral life." (p. 195):

1. *The moral life is defined in terms of the good life.* This is Aristotle's position.

2. *The good life is defined in terms of the moral life.* This is Plato's position.
3. *The good life overrides the moral life.* This is Nietzsche's position. ("The view is that if, taking everything into consideration, a moral life will not be a good life for the individual, it would be a mistake to lead it.")
4. *The moral life overrides the good life.* Both utilitarianism and Kantianism would fall into this category. ("The idea is not that morality will necessarily conflict with the good life but that it can, and when it does it provides us with sufficient reason to sacrifice our own good.")
5. *Neither the good life nor the moral life consistently overrides the other.*

Nagel's own view on the position we should adopt is as follows:

*My own view is that the first three positions are just wrong and that the really difficult choice is between (4) and (5), though I incline to (4).* (Nagel p. 197)

*As a matter of moral conviction, I myself am inclined against ... position (5). I am inclined strongly to hope, and less strongly to believe, that the correct morality will always have the preponderance of reasons on its side, even though it needn't coincide with the good life.* (Nagel p. 199)

One way to understand the difference between Williams and Nagel is that Williams advocates (5); Nagel advocates (4). Along these lines, Nagel maintains that living a good life can be *part* of a moral system:

*We can take conflict between subjective and objective standpoints back to the objective standpoint on appeal. The result is likely to be that at some threshold, hard to define, we will conclude that it is unreasonable to expect people in general to sacrifice themselves and those to whom they have close personal ties to the general good.*

*The hard question is whether this understanding—this condition of "reasonableness"—will show itself in a modification of moral requirements, or merely in acceptance of the fact that most of us are miserable sinners, which is probably true in any case.* (Nagel p. 202)

(Again, this last dichotomy highlights the difference between Williams and Nagel.) For Nagel, "there is impersonal sanction for striking the balance between personal and impersonal reasons in a certain way" (p. 202).