

The View From Nowhere—Reading group 6

In previous chapters, Nagel articulated his views in the philosophy of mind, his responses to philosophical scepticism, and the possibility that there exist limitations to that of which we can conceive. In this chapter, he will discuss issues related to *free will* and *agency*.

Chapter 7: Knowledge

Nagel begins by motivating that an objective standpoint on the world is in tension with the notion of agency:

Something peculiar happens when we view action from an objective or external standpoint. Some of its most important features seem to vanish under this objective gaze. Actions seem no longer assignable to individual agents as sources, but become instead components of the flux of events in the world of which the agent is a part. ... That conception, if pressed, leads to the feeling that we are not agents at all, that we are helpless and not responsible for what we do. (Nagel p. 110)

Here we are close to issues of *free will* and *determinism*: if the universe is governed by physical laws which evolve in some well-defined way, and we are just physical systems in the universe, what room is left for our agency? (Note, however, that determinism is not necessarily the root of the problem—see below.)

In fact, Nagel distinguishes between three problems: (pp. 110-111)

1. The “general metaphysical problem of the nature of agency” (p. 111). That is: *what is it to be an agent?*
2. “What is an action?” (p. 111) (Note that this is more general than the problem of defining free will.)
3. What makes an action *free*?

Nagel sets aside (1). His response to (2) is as follows:

I think the only solution is to regard action as a basic mental or more accurately psychophysical category—reducible neither to physical nor to other mental terms. (Nagel p. 111)

In this chapter, Nagel will focus upon (3), and in particular upon two sub-problems:

- (i) *The problem of autonomy: “a problem about our own freedom” (p. 111).*
- (ii) *The problem of responsibility: “a problem about the freedom of others” (p. 111).*

Nagel emphasises that these problems are closely related:

The same external view that poses a threat to my own autonomy also threatens my sense of the autonomy of others, and this in turn makes them come to seem inappropriate objects of admiration and contempt, resentment and gratitude, blame and praise. (Nagel p. 112)

Nagel’s position on the matter is the following:

I change my mind about the problem of free will every time I think about it, and therefore cannot offer any view with even moderate confidence; but my present opinion is that nothing that might be a solution has yet been described. (Nagel, p. 112)

Autonomy

At the start of this section, Nagel elaborates on this problem—and makes clear that determinism is a red herring:

From an external perspective, then, the agent and everything about him seems to be swallowed up by the circumstances of action; nothing of him is left to intervene in those circumstances. This happens whether or not the relation between action and its antecedent conditions is conceived as deterministic. In either case we cease to face the world and instead become parts of it; we and our lives are seen as products and manifestations of the world as a whole. Everything I do or that anyone else does is part of a larger course of events that no one “does,” but that happens, with or without explanation. (Nagel, p. 114)

Note that denying determinism does *not* necessarily help us to account for our autonomy! (Consider: would you be any more free if the universe were chancy?) The point is that your behaviour—whether deterministically-governed or not—*seems not to be under your control*.

The freedom and determinism problem

The following claims are jointly inconsistent:

1. Determinism is true.
2. If determinism is true, then no-one could have done otherwise than they actually did.
3. One acts freely only if one could have acted otherwise.
4. Some actions are free.

Hard determinists reject (4).

Libertarians reject (1).

Compatibilists reject (2) or (3).

In order to make progress here, Nagel articulates his own conception of autonomy as follows:

Although many of the external and internal conditions of choice are inevitably fixed by the world and not under my control, some range of open possibilities is generally presented to me on an occasion of action—and when by acting I make one of those possibilities actual, the final explanation of this ... is given by the intentional explanation of my action, which is comprehensible only through my point of view. (Nagel p. 115)

Nagel doesn't think that we have any good explication of our own autonomy. Thus:

I am at a loss to account for what we believe in believing that we are autonomous—what intelligible belief is undermined by the external view. (Nagel, p. 117)

Note that he's *not* saying that we have an intelligible conception of autonomy which is undermined by the external view—he's denying that we even *have* such a conception.

The parallel with philosophical scepticism

Nagel argues (pp. 118-119) that the problem of autonomy is analogous to the problem of philosophical scepticism—insofar as a heightening of objectivity makes certain philosophical concerns (whether regarding sceptical hypotheses or—as here—our own autonomy) more salient:

However objective a standpoint we succeed in making part of the basis of our actions and beliefs, we continue to be threatened by the idea of a still more external and comprehensive view of ourselves that we cannot incorporate, but that would reveal the unchosen sources of our most autonomous efforts. (Nagel p. 119)

Nagel continues, however, along a somewhat Humean line:

In practice, outside philosophy we find certain natural stopping places along the route, and do not worry about how things would look if we went further. In this respect too the situation resembles that in epistemology, where justification and criticism come fairly peacefully to an end in everyday life. (Nagel p. 119)

Question: Is there an analogy to be drawn here with epistemic contextualism?

Responsibility

Nagel turns now from his first problem (the problem of action) to his second problem (the problem of responsibility). As he sees it, similar issues arise here:

It seems to me that the problem of responsibility is insoluble, or at least unsolved, for similar reasons. We hold ourselves and others morally responsible for at least some actions when we view them from the inside; but we cannot give an account of what would have to be true to justify such judgements. Once people are seen as part of the world, determined or not, there seems no way to assign responsibility to them for what they do. (Nagel p. 120)

In a little more detail, the point is the following:

The essence of a judgement of responsibility is an internal comparison with alternatives—choices the agent did not make which we contrast with what he did, for better or for worse. In ordinary judgements of responsibility an objective view of the agent may lead us to alter our assumption about which alternatives are eligible for such a comparison. Even alternatives that seemed to the agent to be available at the time may seem to us out of the running, once our external view of him becomes more complete.

The radically external standpoint that procures the philosophical problem of responsibility seems to make every alternative ineligible. We see the agent as a phenomenon generated by the world of which he is a part. (Nagel p. 122)

Again, themes of contextualism arise here:

[T]he external standpoint is always there as a possibility, and once having occupied it we can no longer regard our internal judgements in the same way. (Nagel p. 124)

Question: To what extent is this related to e.g. Hawthorne's discussion of the context-(in)sensitivity of normative (as well as epistemic) claims?¹

Strawson on freedom

In this section, Nagel discusses Strawson's views on these matters, which he summarises thus:

Justification and criticism make sense only within the system: justification of the system from outside is unnecessary, and therefore criticism from outside is impossible. (Nagel p. 125)

Nagel is critical of this view, for the following reason:

I believe this position is incorrect because there is no way of preventing the slide from internal to external criticism once we are capable of an external view. (Nagel p. 125)

¹See John Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Again, Nagel draws a parallel with the problem of philosophical scepticism in epistemology:

The parallel with scepticism in epistemology is again clear. The extremely general possibilities of error that the sceptic imagines undermine confidence in all our beliefs in just the way that a more mundane particular possibility of error undermines confidence in a particular belief. The possibility of complete erosion by sceptical possibilities is built into our ordinary beliefs from the start: it is not created by the philosophical imposition of new standards of justification on certainty. (Nagel p. 125)

The blind spot

Nagel now “changes the subject” (p. 126): “I want to discuss some of the ways in which we can reduce the detachment from our own actions that initially results from taking up the objective standpoint ...” (p. 127). Essentially, he wants to identify a halfway house between the subjective standpoint, and the maximally objective standpoint:

Let me call this the essentially incomplete objective view, or incomplete view for short. The incomplete view of ourselves in the world includes a large blind spot, behind our eyes, so to speak, that hides something we cannot take into account in acting, because it is what acts. Yet this blind spot is part of our objective picture of the world, and to act from as far out as possible we must to some extent include a recognition of it in the basis of our actions. (Nagel p. 127)

So the creation of an objective will is not a completable task. What is wanted is some way of making the most objective standpoint the basis of action: subordinating it to my agency instead of allowing it, and therefore me, to stay outside of my action as a helpless observer. Given that I cannot do this by acting from outside the world, on the basis of a complete objective view of myself and it, the next best thing is to act from within the world on the basis of the most objective view of which I am capable—the incomplete view—in such a way as to guard against rejection by its successors in the objective sequence, both those that I can achieve and those that I can’t. (Nagel p. 129)

Objective engagement

Continuing on the lines of the previous subsection, Nagel now implores us

... to find grounds for acting within my personal perspective that will not be rejected from a larger point of view: grounds which the objective self can tolerate because of their limited pretensions to objectivity. (Nagel p. 130)

The thought is that, from this localised standpoint, we can make sense of the notions of agency, and grounds for action—but we must remember that these notions are relativised to that not-maximally-objective standpoint. Once again, the analogy with epistemology is fruitful:

The epistemological analogue would be the identification of certain beliefs as limited in the objectivity of their claims. These would be about the world of appearance, and an objective view could admit them as such. (Nagel p. 130)

But one must be wary of invoking something like the ‘reductionist’ approach to philosophical scepticism (recall chapter V):

The danger with this strategy is that it can be misused as a general escape from skepticism by reducing all apparently objective judgements to subjective claims about the appearances. But if we avoid this kind of escapist reductionism, there certainly remain some beliefs which are just about the experiences. Beliefs about the subjective character of my sensory experiences, for example, are not threatened by the prospect that they might be overthrown from a much more objective standpoint. (Nagel p. 130)

In fact, the situation here is as follows:

The belief that they do not make strongly objective claims, and therefore are not liable to being overthrown or discredited from a more objective standpoint, is now in the background of our motives. As with sensory impressions, they have a different status in our picture of the world once we have distinguished between appearance and reality. (Nagel p. 132)

Morality as freedom

In the final section of this chapter, Nagel introduces considerations of morality. He answers the question “what are values?” as follows:

Values are judgements from a standpoint external to ourselves about how to be and how to live. Because they are accepted from an impersonal standpoint, they apply not only to the point of view of the particular person I happen to be, but generally. They tell me how I should live because they tell me how anyone should live. (Nagel p. 135)

Nagel continues:

In a sense, I am agreeing with Kant’s view that there is an internal connection between ethics and freedom: subjection to morality expresses the hope of autonomy, even though it is a hope that cannot be realised in its original form. (Nagel p. 135)

Question: So is the thought that, since morality is tied to autonomy, and autonomy does not seem to make sense from the maximally objective standpoint on the world, moral claims must therefore be relativised, if not to one’s own standpoint, at least to some intermediate standpoint?