

The View From Nowhere—Reading group 3

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.

Chapter 4: The objective self

In Chapter 4, Nagel explores a further philosophical puzzle, regarding the self:

The world so conceived, though extremely various in the types of things and perspectives it contains, is still centerless. It contains us all, and none of us occupies a metaphysically privileged position. Yet each of us, reflecting on this centerless world, must admit that one very large fact seems to have been omitted from its description: the fact that a particular person in it is himself.

What kind of fact is that? What kind of fact is it—if it is a fact—that I am Thomas Nagel? How can I be a particular person? (Nagel, p. 54)

Being someone

Nagel divides the puzzle here into two parts:

1. “How can a particular person be me?” (p. 54)
2. “How can I be *merely* a particular person?” (p. 55)

Nagel expands a little on (2) as follows:

It can seem that as far as what I really am is concerned, any relation I may have to TN or any other objectively specified person must be accidental and arbitrary. I may occupy TN or see the world through the eyes of TN, but I can't be TN. I can't be a mere person. (Nagel, p. 55)

Nagel does not think that (1) can be answered in a purely objective, 'centerless' conception of the world:

No further fact expressible without the first person will do the trick: however complete we make the centerless conception of the world, the fact that I am TN will be omitted. There seems to be no room for it in such a conception. (Nagel, p. 56)

The problem here arises because we don't think that an objective conception of the world can contain *irreducibly indexical facts*. Somehow, a solution to (1) must resolve this tension:

If this problem has a solution, it must be one which brings the subjective and objective conceptions of the world into harmony. That would require an interpretation of the irreducibly first-person truth that TN is me and some development of the centerless conception of the world to accommodate that interpretation. (Nagel, p. 57)

A semantic diagnosis

In this subsection, Nagel considers a possible objection to (1)'s being a genuine philosophical problem:

The statement "I am TN" is true if and only if uttered by TN. ... On this view the world just is the centerless world, and it can be spoken and thought about from within partly with the help of expressions like "I," which form statements whose truth-conditions depend on the context of utterance, a context which in turn is fully accommodated in the centerless conception of the world. (Nagel, p. 58)

Nagel responds to this concern as follows:

It should be a sign of something wrong with the argument that the corresponding semantic point about "now" would not defuse someone's puzzlement about what kind of fact it is that a particular time is the present. The truth-conditions of tensed statements can be given in tenseless terms, but that does not remove the sense that a tenseless description of the history of the world (including the description of people's tensed statements and their truth

values) is fundamentally incomplete, because it cannot tell us which time is the present. Similarly, the fact that it is possible to give impersonal truth-conditions for first-person statements does not enable one to make those statements without using the first person. The crucial question is whether the elimination of this particular first-person thought in favor of its impersonal truth-conditions leaves a significant gap in our conception of the world. I think it does. (Nagel, p. 59)

The centerless view

In order to address (1), Nagel claims that we must first address (2). He adds more detail to this puzzle as follows:

[W]e could say it is puzzling because my being TN (or whoever I in fact am) seems accidental, and my identity can't be accidental. So far as what I am essentially is concerned, it seems as if I just happen to be the publicly identifiable person TN—as if what I really am, this conscious subject, might just as well view the world from the perspective of a different person. (Nagel, p. 60)

Nagel argues that the puzzle of (2) arises from “placing ourselves outside of the world”. But:

The fact that I seem able in imagination to detach this perspectiveless or objective self from TN does not show that it is a distinct thing, or that nothing else about TN belongs to me essentially. It does not show, as may at first appear, that the connection between me and TN is accidental. It does show, however, that something essential about me has nothing to do with my perspective and position in the world. That is what I want to examine. (Nagel, pp. 61-62)

According to Nagel, we have to recognise that the objective self—and our object conception of the world *tout court*—is in a sense *posterior* to a certain point of view:

As things are, the objective self is only part of the point of view of an ordinary person, and its objectivity is developed to different degrees in different persons and at different stages of life and civilization. (Nagel, p. 63)

He continues:

The objective self that I find viewing the world through TN is not unique: each of you has one. Or perhaps I should say each of you is one, for the objective self is not a distinct entity. Each of us, then, in addition to being an ordinary person, is a particular objective self, the subject of a perspectiveless conception of reality. (Nagel, pp. 63-64)

The thought is that this bridges the gap between the objective self and the perspective of a particular person, and thereby resolves (2). Since “this impersonal conception of the world, though it accords no special position to TN, is attached to and developed from the perspective of TN” (p. 64), this also helps to address (1)—i.e., the question of how I (the objective self) can be TN in particular.