

The View From Nowhere—Reading group 1

This book is about a single problem: how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included. ... It is the most fundamental issue about morality, knowledge, freedom, the self, and the relation of the mind to the physical world. (Nagel, p. 1)

- If we have a purely objective picture of the world (perhaps as given to us by our best theories of science), then there seems to be no place left for e.g. consciousness, or free will (and, indeed, many 'objectivist' philosophers deny the existence of such things).
- If we have a purely subjective picture of the world, then we would seem to be led to unpalatable philosophical positions, such as *idealism*, or *solipsism*.
- Nagel would like to walk the tightrope between the objective and subjective pictures of the world.

Before pursuing these matters, Nagel gives the following nice characterisation of philosophy in general:

There is a persistent temptation to turn philosophy into something less difficult and more shallow than it is. It is an extremely difficult subject, and no exception to the general rule that creative efforts are rarely successful. I do not feel equal to the problems treated in this book. They seem to me to require an order of intelligence wholly different from mine. Others who have tried to address central questions of philosophy will recognise the feeling. (Nagel p. 12)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Nagel targets several extant philosophical positions as inadequate to solve the problems with which he is concerned. In particular, he mentions:

1. *Kantianism* (p. 4): There is an objective ('noumenal') world, but we can never have access to it. (See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.)

2. Wittgensteinian purity (p. 4): Certain philosophical puzzles rest on linguistic mistakes. (See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*.)
3. Logical positivism (p. 9): Attempts to talk about the 'objective structure of the world' in a way divorced from our empirical experience lead to our speaking nonsense. (See e.g. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*. Note that there are strong overlaps between the logical positivist views and those of Wittgenstein.)

Note that Nagel doesn't really explain *why* he doesn't think these approaches will work—I leave it to you to fill in the gaps!

Nagel against the 'scientific drive'

Nagel rejects that the model of science is applicable to every discipline:

Too much time is wasted because of the assumption that methods already in existence will solve problems for which they were not designed; too many hypotheses and systems of thought in philosophy and elsewhere are based on the bizarre view that we, at this point in history, are in possession of the basic forms of understanding needed to comprehend absolutely anything. (Nagel, pp. 9-10)

He claims this leads to problems both in e.g. the philosophy of mind...

This form of objective blindness is most conspicuous in the philosophy of mind, where one or another external theory of the mental, from physicalism to functionalism, is widely held. (Nagel, p. 7)

...and in e.g. ethics:

There is a problem of excess objectivity also in ethics. Objectivity is the driving force of ethics as it is of science: it enables us to develop new motives when we occupy a standpoint detached from that of our purely personal desires and interests ... But escaping from oneself is as delicate a matter with respect to motives as it is with respect to belief. But going too far one may arrive at skepticism or nihilism ... (Nagel, p. 8)

Chapter 2: Mind

To the extent that the world is objectively comprehensible—comprehensible from a standpoint independent of the constitution of this or that sentient being—how do sentient beings fit into it? (Nagel, p. 13)

Nagel identifies three questions regarding the mind:

1. Does the mind itself have an objective character?
2. What is its relation to those physical aspects of reality whose objective status is less doubtful? (This is the so-called *mind-body problem*.)
3. How can it be the case that one of the people in the world is *me*?

Chapter 2 of *The View From Nowhere* focuses on this first question.

The objective character of the mind

The world described by [the] objective [scientific] conception is not just centerless; it is also in a sense featureless. While the things in it have properties, none of those properties are perceptual aspects. ... But this leaves us with no account of the perceptions and specific viewpoints which were left behind as irrelevant to physics but which seem to exist nonetheless. (Nagel, pp. 14-15)

Nagel thinks that the mental (objective) has to be included in our ontology of the world irreducibly—i.e., over and above the physical:

But it is hopeless to try to analyze mental phenomena so that they are revealed as part of the “external” world. The subjective features of conscious mental processes—as opposed to their physical causes and effects—cannot be captured by the purified form of thought suitable for dealing with the physical world that underlies the appearances. (Nagel, p. 15)

The reductionist program that dominates current work in the philosophy of mind is completely misguided, because it is based on the groundless assumption that a particular conception of objective reality is exhaustive of what there is. (Nagel, p. 16)

Interestingly, some of the world's greatest scientists agree. Here's Edward Witten—the pre-eminent string theorist:¹

I think consciousness will remain a mystery. Yes, that's what I tend to believe. I tend to think that the workings of the conscious brain will be elucidated to a large extent. Biologists and perhaps physicists will understand much better how the brain works. But why something that we call consciousness goes with those workings, I think that will remain mysterious. I have a much easier time imagining how we understand the Big Bang than I have imagining how we can understand consciousness... (Witten)

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)

Other minds

Nagel identifies two *prima facie* problems regarding other minds:

1. Why attribute mental states to others? That is, why think that other people are not *philosophical zombies*?
2. How is it *possible* to attribute mental states to others, if our only experience of the mental is through ourselves?

His concern in §3 of ch. 2 of *The View From Nowhere* is the second:

Each of us is the subject of various experiences, and to understand that there are other people in the world as well, one must be able to conceive of experiences of which one is not the subject: experiences that are not present to oneself. To do this it is necessary to have a

¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfwsvSjXkJU>.

general conception of subjects of experience and to place oneself under it as an instance. It cannot be done by extending the idea of what is immediately felt into other people's bodies, for as Wittgenstein observed, that will only give you an idea of having feelings in their bodies, not of their having feelings. (Nagel, p. 20)

Nagel gives the following hint at a solution to this problem:

When we conceive of the minds of others, we cannot abandon the essential factor of a point of view: instead we must generalize it and think of ourselves as one point of view among others. The first stage of objectification of the mental is for each of us to be able to grasp the idea of all human perspectives, including his own, without depriving them of their character as perspectives. (Nagel, p. 20)

Consciousness in general

Wittgenstein might question whether Nagel's suggestion is meaningful, due to his "general condition of publicity that must be met by all concepts":

In a well-known passage (§350) Wittgenstein says I can't extend the application of mental concepts from my own case merely by saying others have the same as I have so often had. "It is as if I were to say: 'You surely know what "It's 5 o'clock here" means; so you also know what "It's 5 o'clock on the sun" means. It means simply that it is just the same time there as it is here when it is 5 o'clock.' " (Nagel, p. 23)

Nagel's response to this possible concern runs as follows:

Does the general concept of experience really lose all content if an attempt is made to use it to think about cases in which we cannot now and perhaps even never could apply it more specifically? I think not. Not all such cases are like that of the time of day on the sun. That example is much more radical, for it introduces a direct contradiction with the conditions that determine the time of day—namely, position on the surface of the earth relative to the sun. But the generalisation of the concept of experience beyond our capacity to apply it doesn't contradict the condition of application that it tries to transcend ... (Nagel, p. 23)

The incompleteness of objective reality

In this closing section on ch. 2, Nagel re-emphasises, that, on his 'objective' understanding on the mental, we will not have access to all facts in the world:

We will not know exactly how scrambled eggs taste to a cockroach even if we develop a detailed objective phenomenology of the cockroach sense of taste. (Nagel, p. 25)

In this regard, he's making a similar point to that of his very famous paper, "What is it like to be a bat?" (*The Philosophical Review*, 1974).

Nagel concludes the chapter as follows:

The way the world is includes appearances, and there is no single point of view from which they can all be fully grasped. (Nagel, p. 26)