

The View From Nowhere—Reading group 8

Previously, Nagel considered whether the objective point of view admits notions of freedom and autonomy (ch. 6) and values (ch. 7). In this chapter, Nagel considers ethics—and specifically, the complex interplay between the subjective and objective standpoints in our ethical considerations.

Chapter 9: Ethics

[T]he central problem of ethics: how the lives, interests, and welfare of others make claims on us and how these claims, of various forms, are to be reconciled with the aim of living our own lives. (Nagel p. 164)

In this chapter, Nagel focuses on the roles of agent-neutral reasons ('Pain is good'; 'Pleasure is bad') and agent-relative reasons in our ethical considerations. Three types of agent-relative reason complicate the picture:

1. "The first type of reason stems from the desires, projects, commitments and personal ties of the individual agent, all of which give him reasons to act in the pursuit of ends that are his own." (p. 165) [Nagel calls this *autonomy*]
2. "The second type of reason stems from the claims of other persons not to be maltreated in certain ways."¹ (p. 165) [Nagel calls this *deontology*]
3. "The third type of reason stems from the special obligations we have toward those to whom we are closely related: parents, children, spouses, siblings, fellow members of society or even a nation." (p. 165) [Nagel calls these *reasons of obligation*.]

(Nagel largely sets (3) aside in the remainder of this chapter.) Nagel maintains that, taken alongside the agent-neutral reasons, these three classes of agent-relative reasons form much of the landscape of contemporary moral theory:

¹Nagel elaborates: "What I have in mind are not neutral reasons for everyone to bring it about that no one is maltreated, but relative reasons for each individual not to maltreat others himself, in his dealings with them (for example violating their rights, breaking his promises to them, etc.)." (p. 165)

Taken together, autonomous, obligatory, neutral, and deontological reasons cover much of the territory of unreflective bourgeois morality. 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). (Nagel p. 166)

Consequentialism and deontology

In contemporary moral theory, there are two main camps:

1. **Consequentialism:** “The ends justify the means.” (Most common version: *utilitarianism*, according to which what is good is what maximises net utility.)
2. **Deontology:** “The ends do not necessarily justify the means.” (Most common version: *Kantian deontology*, according to which what is good is what any rational agent would recognise that she *must* perform.)

As Nagel states on p. 183, consequentialist ethics is agent-neutral; deontological ethics is agent-relative.

Reasons of autonomy

In this section, Nagel considers the role that agent-relative reasons of autonomy (point (1) above) should bear in our moral considerations. In particular, he is concerned with the question of whether the satisfaction of personal objectives (reasons of autonomy) can have impersonal value:

Though some human interests (and not only pleasure and pain) give rise to impersonal values, I now want to argue that not all of them do. If I have a bad headache, anyone has a reason to want it to stop. But if I badly want to climb to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro, not everyone has a reason to want me to succeed.

... Why shouldn't the satisfaction of my desire to climb the mountain have impersonal value comparable to the value it has for me—just like the elimination of my headache?
(Nagel p. 167)

More generally, the question is the following:

[W]hy shouldn't [an] impersonal value attach to someone's having (or doing) something he wants—whatever that desire is? Even if I can't objectively identify with the desire, and therefore can't assign any value to the achievement as such, why can't I judge it to have impersonal value under this more complex description? (Nagel p. 169)

Nagel contends that one's doing what one wants does not have impersonal value:

There is nothing incoherent in wanting to be able to climb Kilimanjaro or play all the Beethoven piano sonatas, while thinking that impersonally it doesn't matter whether one can do this. (Nagel, p. 170)

There is no independent value of preference-satisfaction per se, which preserves its force even from an impersonal standpoint. (Nagel p. 171)

It might be useful to distinguish (a) the question of whether satisfaction of *this* personal desire has agent-neutral value (Nagel contends 'no') from (b) the question of whether satisfaction of personal desires *in general* has agent-neutral value (Nagel still contends 'no').

Personal values and impartiality

In this section, Nagel does four things. **First**, he returns to agent-neutral reasons. He maintains that these transcend the mere avoidance of pain and seeking of pleasure:

[I]f agent-neutral reasons derived only from pleasure and pain, we would have no reason to care about many fundamental aspects of other people's welfare which cannot easily be given a hedonistic interpretation—their freedom, their self-respect, their access to opportunities and resources that enable them to live fulfilling lives.

... From the objective standpoint, the fundamental thing leading to the recognition of agent-neutral reasons is a sense that no one is more important than anyone else. (Nagel p. 171)

Second, he returns to the question of how to weigh objective and subjective factors:

[W]e have to give basic impersonal goods more weight when they come from other people's needs than when they compete with personal reasons within our own lives. (Nagel

pp. 172-173)

(Consider e.g. Scanlon's example of the man starving himself in order to build a statue to his god—it's acceptable for him to neglect his *own* pain, even if it's not okay for him to neglect the pain of others.)

Third, Nagel laments the same kind of dismissal of the subjective (in this case: subjective values) which we have seen many times already (cf. the chapters on the philosophy of mind):

But there is no necessity, I now believe, to abandon all values that do not correspond to anything desirable from an impersonal standpoint, even though this may be possible as a personal choice—a choice of self-transcendence. (Nagel p. 173)

Fourth (and finally), Nagel makes an interesting segway into political philosophy:

If there are, objectively, both relative and neutral reasons, this raises a problem about how life is to be organised so that both can be given their due. One way of dealing with the problem is to put much of the responsibility for securing impersonal values into the hands of an impersonal institution like the state. A well designed set of political and social institutions should function as a moral buffer to protect personal life against the ravenous claims of impersonal good, and vice versa. (Nagel p. 174)

Deontology

In this section, Nagel contrasts reasons of *deontology* with the reasons of autonomy which he has discussed up to this point:

Let me turn now to the obscure topic of deontological constraints. These are agent-relative reasons which depend not on the aims or projects of the agent but on the claims of others. Unlike autonomous reasons, they are not optional. If they exist, they restrict what we may do in service of either relative or neutral goals. (Nagel p. 175)

(Consider e.g. a norm not to break a promise one has made to someone, or a norm not to twist this child's arm, etc.)

Moral progress

On the theme of deontology, Nagel continues:

A fuller deontological theory would have to explain the different types of normative grain against which one acts in breaking promises, lying, discriminating unfairly, and denying immediate emergency aid. (Nagel p. 185)

Nagel also suggests that our deontological intuitions might shift over time:

In ethics, even without the benefit of many clear examples, we should be open to the possibility of progress as we are in other areas, with a consequent effect of reducing confidence in the finality of our current understanding. (Nagel p. 186)

In sum, though: for Nagel, the fundamental challenge of ethics is the following:

We are faced with a choice. For the purposes of ethics, should we identify with the detached, impersonal will that chooses total outcomes, and act on reasons that are determined accordingly? Or is this a denial of what we are really doing and an avoidance of the full range of reasons that apply to creatures like us? (Nagel p. 185)