

The View From Nowhere—Reading group 10

In ch. 10, Nagel discussed how to balance ‘the moral life’ with ‘the good life’. In this final chapter, he turns his attention to questions regarding birth, death, and the meaning of life.

Chapter 11: Birth, death, and the meaning of life

Birth

When discussing these themes, the same issues regarding the balancing of objective and subjective points of view quickly arise:

From far enough outside my birth seems accidental, my life pointless, and my death insignificant, but from inside my never having been born seems nearly unimaginable, my life monstrously important, and my death catastrophic. (Nagel p. 209)

The meaning of life

And again when it comes to questions regarding the meaning of life:

In seeing ourselves from outside we find it difficult to take our lives seriously. This loss of conviction, and the attempt to regain it, is the problem of the meaning of life. (Nagel p. 214)

On p. 215, Nagel distinguishes between two problems regarding the meaning of life:

1. The subjective meaning of life: one is born into a culture with certain values, which endow one’s life with (subjective) meaning. But one might question those values. (“But all these forms of meaninglessness are compatible with the possibility of meaning, had things gone differently.”)
2. The *philosophical, objective* problem of the meaning of life: how life’s having objective meaning even be *possible*?

How can we resolve the angst which arises when we contemplate the tension between objective meaninglessness and (apparent) subjective meaningfulness? Nagel presents three options:

1. "The first solution to consider is the most Draconian: to deny the claims of the subjective view, withdraw from the specifics of individual human life as much as possible, minimize the area of one's local contact with the world and concentrate on the universal. Contemplation, meditation, withdrawal from the demands of body and society, abandonment of exclusive personal ties and worldly ambition—all this gives the objective standpoint less to be disengaged from, less to regard as vain." (Nagel pp. 218-219)
2. "The second solution is the opposite of the first—a denial of the objective unimportance of our lives, which will justify full engagement from the objective standpoint." (p. 219)
3. "The third candidate solution I want to discuss can be thought of as an argument that the problem is unreal. The objection is that to identify with the objective self and find its detachment disturbing is to forget who you are." (Nagel p. 220)

In other words, the options are to (1) diminish the subjective point of view and the associated conception of meaningfulness; (2) add meaning to the objective point of view; (3) deny that we should take the objective point of view seriously.

Nagel on the first: "I would rather lead an absurd life engaged in the particular than a seamless transcendental life immersed in the universal." (p. 219)

Nagel on the second: "My life is one of countless many, in a civilization that is also not unique, and my natural devotion to it is quite out of proportion to the importance I can reasonably afford it from outside." (p. 220)

Nagel on the third: "The point here is to force withdrawal of the external demand which gives rise to the problem. This is a natural and in some ways appealing response, but as a conclusive argument it will not work. Objectivity is not content to remain a servant of the individual perspective and its values." (Nagel p. 221)

Nagel's ultimate conclusion on these matters is the following:

So the absurd is part of human life. I do not think this can be basically regretted, because it is a consequence of our existence as particular creatures with a capacity for objectivity.

... It is better to be simultaneously engaged and detached, and therefore absurd, for this is the opposite of self-denial and the result of full awareness. (Nagel p. 223)

Death

Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death.

If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present.

Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits.

(Wittgenstein, TLP 6.4311)

Finally, Nagel considers the question of our own deaths. What attitude should we have to these? Nagel begins by discussing Parfit's very interesting views on this topic, which connect with his position on personal identity:

By breaking down the metaphysical boundaries between himself and other persons, and loosening the metaphysical bonds that connect him now with his future self, he [Parfit] claims to have become less depressed about his own death, among other things. His death will be the termination of a certain connected sequence of activities and experiences, but not the annihilation of a unique underlying self. (Nagel p. 224)

Nagel's response is the following:

... I can't accept the metaphysical revision, but I'm not sure that if I did, I'd find the conclusion less depressing. I actually find Parfit's picture of survival depressing—but that of course is by comparison with what I take survival to be. (Nagel p. 224)

Next, Nagel discusses the existential feeling which often accompanies contemplation of death:

What is the specific object of this feeling? In part, it is the idea of the objective world and objective time continuing without me in it. ... But the special feeling I am talking about does not depend only on this, for it would be there even if solipsism were true—even if my death brought with it the end of the only world there was! ... It is the prospect of

nothingness itself, not the prospect that the world will go on after I cease to exist, that has to be understood. (Nagel p. 226)

Nagel thinks that this is to be understood in terms of the annihilation of *possibility*:

This is a very strong form of nothingness, the disappearance of an inner world that had not been thought of as a contingent manifestation at all and whose absence is therefore not the realization of a possibility already contained in the conception of it. ... The subjective view projects into the future its sense of unconditional possibilities, and the world denies them. It isn't just that they won't be actualised—they will vanish. (Nagel p. 228)

Finally, Nagel considers the asymmetry in our attitudes towards the times before our births, versus after our deaths. He writes:

I have said nothing so far about the most perplexing feature of our attitude toward death: the asymmetry between our attitudes to past and future nonexistence. We do not regard the period before we were born in the same way that we regard the prospect of death. Yet most of the things that can be said about the latter are equally true of the former. (Nagel p. 228)

Nagel hypothesises the difference is psychological—cf. our differing attitudes towards past versus future pains.