

The View From Nowhere—Reading group 7

In the previous chapter, Nagel discussed whether the objective standpoint admits room for notions of freedom and autonomy. In this chapter, he turns to the question of whether *values* are possible from an objective standpoint.

Chapter 8: Value

Nagel begins by noting that, at least pre-theoretically, we *think* that values are possible from an objective standpoint: “We try to arrive at normative judgements, with motivational content, from an impersonal standpoint.” (p. 138). However, Nagel stresses that it is important to not think of these objective values in an overly substance-centric manner:

The subject matter of ethics is how to engage in practical reasoning and the justification of action once we expand our consciousness by occupying the objective standpoint—not something else about action which the objective standpoint enables us to understand better. (Nagel p. 139)

Perhaps a richer metaphysic of morals could be devised, but I don’t know what it would be. The picture I associate with normative realism is not that of an extra set of properties of things and events in the world, but of a series of possible steps in the development of human motivation which would improve the way we lead our lives, whether or not we will actually take them. (Nagel p. 139-140)

The question we then try to answer is not “What can we see that the world contains, considered from this impersonal standpoint?” but “What is there reason to do or want, considered from this impersonal standpoint?” (Nagel p. 140)

Nagel now articulates what he takes to be the central task of this chapter:

The problem is to discover the form which reasons for action take, and whether it can be described from no particular point of view. The method is to begin with the reasons that appear to obtain from my own point of view and those of other individuals; and ask what the best perspectiveless account of those reasons is. ... (Nagel p. 141)

That is the hope. But the claim that there are objective values is permanently controversial, because of the ease with which values and reasons seem to disappear when we transcend the subjective standpoint of our own desires. It can seem, when one looks at life from outside, that there is no room for values in the world at all. (Nagel p. 141)

Note that he is alluding to some of the same issues which arose in the previous chapter: how can there be room for values (or autonomy or freedom) from an entirely agent-independent point of view on the world?

Antirealism

In this section, Nagel seeks to rebut three arguments against the existence of objective values. Before doing so, however, he makes the following overarching point:

I think the burden of proof has been often misplaced in this debate, and that a defensible presumption that values need not be illusory is entirely reasonable until it is shown not to be. (Nagel p. 143)

Nagel maintains that, just as there is no way to *prove* the possibility of realism in epistemology, there is no way to *prove* the reality of objective values—but that, by refuting arguments against this position, it is thereby made stronger. (**Question:** Do you agree with this?)

The **first argument** against the reality of object values which Nagel addresses is the following: “if values are real, they must be real objects of some kind”. (Cf. Mackie, *Ethics*.) But since such objects would be metaphysically obscure, they cannot exist. So, objective values cannot exist.

Nagel’s response to this argument is the following:

The view that values are real is not the view that they are real occult entities or properties, but that they are real values: that our claims about value and about what people have reason to do may be true or false independently of our beliefs and inclinations. (Nagel p. 144)

The **second argument** against the reality of object values which Nagel addresses is the following:

The argument is that if claims of value have to be objectively correct, and if they are not reducible to any other kind of objective claim, then we can just see that all positive value claims must be false. Nothing has any objective value, because objectively nothing matters at all. (Nagel p. 146)

In response to this argument, Nagel admits that...

It is true that with nothing to go on but a conception of the world from nowhere, one would have no way of telling whether anything had value. But an objective view has more to go on, for its data include the appearance of value to individuals with particular values, including oneself. (Nagel p. 147)

In other words: we extrapolate the values from our subjective point of view to the objective standpoint. In this way, we are motivated to regard objective values as genuinely existing.

The **third argument** against the reality of object values which Nagel addresses is the following:

[I]f we consider the wide cultural variation in normative beliefs, the importance of social pressure and other psychological influences to their formation, and the difficulty of settling moral disagreements, it becomes highly implausible that they are anything but pure appearances. (Nagel p. 147)

This is the famous charge of *cultural relativism* against the existence of objective values. Nagel's response is the following:

The fact that morality is socially inculcated and that there is radical disagreement about it across cultures, over time, and even within cultures at a time is a poor reason to conclude that values have no objective reality. Even where there is truth, it is not always easy to discover. (Nagel p. 148)

Nagel continues by suggesting that there is more variation in scientific opinions than ethical opinions—so why not take the objective status of the latter (at least) as seriously as the former?

(**Question:** What do you think of this argument?)

Desires and reasons

Nagel now begins the process of trying to ascertain what the objective values and reasons *are*:

The initial data are reasons that appear from one's own point of view in acting. They usually present themselves with some pretensions of objectivity to begin with, just as perceptual appearances do. When two things look the same size to me, they look at least initially as if they are the same size. And when I want to take aspirin because it will cure my headache, I believe at least initially that this is a reason for me to take aspirin.

... although some of the starting points will be abandoned on the way, the pursuit of an objective account has its basis in the claims of ordinary practical reasoning. (Nagel p. 149)

This is the same extrapolation point again.

Types of generality

In this section, Nagel discusses some subtle issues regarding what an objective system of values might look like. His **first point** is that some objective values will be broader in scope than others:

One respect in which reasons may vary is in their breadth. A principle may be general in the sense that it applies to everyone but be quite narrow in content; and it is an open question to what extent narrower principles of practical reason (don't lie; develop your talents) can be subsumed under broader ones (don't hurt others; consider your long-term interests), or even at the limit under a single widest principle from which all the rest derive. Reasons may be universal, in other words, without forming a unified system that provides a method for arriving at determinate conclusions about what one should do. (Nagel, p. 152)

Nagel's **second point** is that one must be careful to distinguish between *agent-neutral* versus *agent-relative* objective reasons:

If a reason can be given a general form which does not include an essential reference to the person who has it, it is an agent-neutral reason. For example, if it is a reason for anyone to do or want something that it would reduce the amount of wretchedness in the world, then that is a neutral reason. If on the other hand the general form of a reason does include an essential reference to the person who has it, it is an agent-relative reason. For example, if it is a reason for anyone to do or want something that it would be in his interest, then that is a relative reason. (Nagel, pp. 152-153)

Don't confuse this with the subjective/objective distinction! As Nagel says, "Both agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons are objective, if they can be understood and affirmed from outside the viewpoint of the individual who has them." (p. 153)

Nagel's **third point** is that there is a subtle interplay between subjective values and the objective:

We want to be able to understand and accept the way we live from outside, but it may not always follow that we should control our lives from inside by the terms of that external understanding. Often the objective viewpoint will not be suitable as a replacement for the subjective, but will coexist with it, setting a standard with which the subjective is constrained not to clash. In deciding what to do, for example, we should not reach a result different from what we could decide objectively that that person should do—but we need not arrive at the result in the same way from the two standpoints. (Nagel, p. 155)

It is also possible that some idiosyncratic individual grounds of action, or the value of strange communities, will prove objectively inaccessible. To take an example in our midst: people who want to be able to run twenty-six miles without stopping are not exactly irrational, but their reasons can be understood only from the perspective of a value system that some find alien to the point of unintelligibility. A correct objective view will have to allow for such pockets of unassimilable subjectivity, which need not clash with objective principles but won't be affirmed by them either. (Nagel p. 156)

Pleasure and pain

In order to bring together many of the themes discussed in the chapter up to this point, in this section Nagel considers the concrete example of pleasure and pain. He defends a *prima facie* reasonable thesis:

I shall defend the unsurprising claim that sensory pleasure is good and pain bad, no matter whose they are. (Nagel p. 156)

Nagel thinks that it's just wildly implausible that there are no objective values in the case of pleasure and pain:

That would mean that I have no reason to take aspirin for a severe headache, however I may in fact be motivated; and that looking at it from the outside, you couldn't even say that someone had a reason not to put his hand on a hot stove, just because of the pain. (Nagel p. 157)

Nagel considers the possibility that the avoidance of pain might not be inherently bad, but just evolutionarily bestowed:

It might be suggested that the aversion to pain is a useful phobia—having nothing to do with the intrinsic undesirability of pain itself—which helps us avoid or escape the injuries that are signalled by pain.

... The is nothing self-contradictory in this proposal, but it seems nevertheless insane. (Nagel p. 157)

Perhaps one way to put Nagel's point here is the following: the fact that a certain set of values (e.g., that one should care for/love one's child) are endowed by evolution *does not make them any less real.*

Finally, Nagel turns now to the question of whether pleasure and pain provide agent-relative or agent-neutral reasons:

Do pleasure and pain have merely agent-relative value or do they provide neutral reasons

as well? If the avoidance of pain has only relative value, then people have reason to avoid their own pain, but not to relieve the pain of others ... (Nagel pp. 158-159)

Nagel motivates that pleasure and pain provide agent-neutral reasons via examples such as the following:

Suppose I have been rescued from a fire and find myself in a hospital burn ward. I want something for the pain, and so does the person in the next bed. He professes to hope we both will be given morphine, but I fail to understand this. I understand why he has reason to want morphine for himself, but what reason does he have to want me to get some? Does my groaning bother him? (Nagel p. 160)

This is supposed to be a plausibility argument that pleasure and pain are associated with *agent-neutral* values.

Overobjectification

Nagel closes this chapter by warning against an oversimplified picture of the realm of objective values:

It will be obvious from the way the argument has gone so far that I don't believe all objective reasons have the same form. The interaction between objectivity and the will yields complex results which cannot necessarily be formed into a unified system. This means that the natural ambition of a comprehensive system of ethics may be unrealizable. (Nagel p. 162)