

Has Nagel uncovered a form of idealism?

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Abstract. In the sixth chapter of *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel attempts to identify a form of idealism. The position that he focuses on is that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us. Nagel claims that this position is held by a number of contemporary philosophers. Even if this is so, I justify the view that it is not a form of idealism.

Note on the text: An earlier version of this paper was accepted for *Sorities* 22, but the editor informs me that this issue will not be coming out.

1. In the sixth chapter of *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel claims that there is a form of idealism which is held by many contemporary philosophers (1986: 90). This is a remarkable claim because Nagel addresses a community of philosophers that is composed, for the most part, of thinkers who regard themselves as rejecting idealism. Of course, a philosopher might regard him or herself in this way yet recommend a position which amounts to a form of idealism. This is what Nagel charges many philosophers at the time he was writing with doing. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate whether the position that Nagel judges to be a form of idealism is actually idealist at all. This issue is not just significant for determining who is and who is not an idealist. It is also significant for determining what is required to steer clear of idealism, as many philosophers would like to do. Some philosophers are convinced that Nagel has uncovered a form of idealism (McGinn 1987: 268; Avramides 2006: 237). In this paper, I argue that he has not. When the position that Nagel focuses on is properly clarified, we can see that it is not a form of idealism.

2. Nagel provides a number of articulations of the supposed idealism he has in mind. Here is one, which comes after he has briefly introduced and argued against certain other forms of idealism:

But the form of idealism with which I am concerned isn't based on this mistake: it is not the view that what there is must be actually conceived or even currently conceivable. Rather it is the position that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us, or possibly something for which we could have evidence.

(1986: 93)

In this quotation and elsewhere, Nagel writes of us in order to explain the position that concerns him. A question that his use of 'us' raises is who is to be counted as one of us and who is not. Nagel also writes of what is possibly conceivable by us. But what does it mean for something to be merely possibly conceivable by a person as opposed to actually conceived or currently conceivable by them? In this section, I shall consider these questions, so that a better understanding of the position that Nagel focuses on can be achieved.

Let us begin with the notion of us. Nagel does not define this notion, despite suggesting that a grasp of the criteria for counting someone as us is crucial for understanding the idealism he has in mind (1986: 90-91). However, he does clearly indicate that certain kinds of people are not to be counted as us. Apart from seeking to uncover a form of idealism, Nagel also seeks to justify rejecting it. The details of his argument will not be presented here, since my concern in this paper is with whether Nagel succeeds in presenting us with a variety of idealism. But certain contrasts that he makes during the course of this argument are valuable for grasping whom Nagel thinks of as us. People with the permanent mental age of nine years old are not us, for Nagel. His

argument involves contrasting us with such people (1986: 95). According to Nagel, we can conceive things that they cannot conceive. Nagel also contrasts us with people he imagines whose mental faculties are superior to his to the extent that the gulf between them and him is comparable to that between him and people with a permanent mental age of nine (1986: 95). According to him, they might be able to conceive of things that we cannot conceive. From these two contrasts, one might form the impression that a person only counts as one of us, for Nagel, if they have mental faculties that are not greatly superior or inferior to his own. This understanding is vague but I shall work with it in this paper. I do not see how to extract a more exact understanding from Nagel's writings. In any case, the points I shall make do not depend on exactly where the boundaries of us lie.

Let us turn now to the notion of being possibly conceivable. The distinction between being actually conceived by a particular person and being currently conceivable by that person is straightforward. Someone might not actually conceive that a fox is nearby. If they do not think that it is, then they do not actually conceive that it is. Nevertheless, they might have the ability to conceive that a fox is nearby. If they have the ability to conceive of this, then this is something that is currently conceivable to them. What though does it mean for something to be possibly conceivable by a particular person? There are certain things that a person might not at present have the ability to conceive yet might in the future be able to conceive. For example, a person who has never seen or heard of foxes before might not have the ability to conceive of foxes. It might be beyond their imagination to form a conception of this. If they are one day shown a fox and are taught to think of this creature as a fox, they might then acquire this ability. It is part of our commonsense outlook that in the future a particular person can acquire the ability to conceive certain things which they cannot currently conceive. Such things are not currently

conceivable by the person but they are possibly conceivable by the person. In addition to such things, the category of what is possibly conceivable by the person also includes all of the things that they can currently conceive. It does not include any more than this.

In the quotation above, Nagel attempts to formulate the view that concerns him by writing not just of what must be possibly conceivable by us but also of what we could possibly have evidence for. However, prior to this point in the text, he discusses the view at length without doing this and it is not clear why he mentions possible evidence at all. I do not think he means to add anything significant. The position that Nagel focuses on is that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us. For understanding this position, it is important that the following point be kept in mind. If something can only be conceived by a being with mental faculties that are greatly superior to our own, then it is not possibly conceivable by us. Perhaps a person who is currently one of us can undergo the kind of improvement that enables them to conceive of such a thing. But then they would not be one of us, on Nagel's understanding of us. The position that Nagel identifies as a form of idealism involves denying that there could be superior beings who are able to conceive things that beings with our mental faculties could never conceive.

3. In this paper, idealism is understood as a view of the world according to which nothing is mind-independent. This appears to be Nagel's understanding of idealism. Consider how he opens the sixth chapter of *The View from Nowhere*:

I have at various points expressed commitment to a form of realism, and must now say more about it. In simple terms it is the view that the world is independent of our minds, but the problem is to explain this claim in a nontrivial way which cannot be easily admitted by everyone, and thereby to show how it conflicts with

a form of idealism that is held by many philosophers. (1986: 90)

Nagel opposes realism to idealism. If realism, in simple terms, is the view that the world is independent of our minds, then idealism would seem to be the view that the world is dependent on our minds. But this is not quite correct. As Nagel uses the term ‘us’, there could be beings with minds that are not part of us. Consequently, if we define idealism as the view that the world is dependent on our minds, then someone could claim that the world is independent of our minds but dependent on some other minds and yet they would not be an idealist. However, Nagel surely means to count such a person as an idealist. Hence I have explained idealism as the view that nothing is mind-independent.

Before going on to consider whether Nagel has uncovered a form of idealism, it is important to comment on the notion of being mind-independent. An article by Sam Page observes that the term ‘mind-independent’ is used in different senses. He distinguishes four senses. The sense of this term which he regards as appropriate for defining idealism is the ontological sense (2006: 322-323). This is the sense which I shall work with. Something is mind-independent in the ontological sense if, and only if, it can continue to exist even if all beings with minds ceased to exist. The contrast between realism and idealism that emerges from working with this sense of mind-independence is as follows: realism maintains that all beings with minds could cease to exist and yet there could be a world; idealism does not make room for this possibility. What I shall try to show is that the position Nagel takes to be idealist is in fact consistent with realism, when defined as the view that there could be a world even if all minds cease to exist. (I suspect that greater reflection on what idealism is will lead to the conclusion that one cannot qualify as an idealist purely by denying that there could be a mindless world. There are other things one has to commit to. This will not affect the argument below.)

It may seem that the task of clarifying the position Nagel takes to be idealist was finished in the previous section. However, there are at least two ways of interpreting the claim that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us. The claim expresses a commitment to idealism on only one of these interpretations. On this interpretation, to claim that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us is to presuppose that there is always an 'us'. Something is only possibly conceivable by us if we can currently conceive of it or if we might in the future conceive of it. But how can something meet one of these conditions if there is no us? For if you say, 'We can currently conceive of something,' then you are presupposing that there is a we, and also if you say, 'We might one day conceive of something.' The position that Nagel focuses on is patently idealist on this interpretation. No room is made for the possibility that all beings with minds could cease to exist and yet there could be a world.

On the other interpretation, to claim that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us does not presuppose that there is always an 'us'. A person who makes the assertion allows that there could be periods of time when nobody who counts as one of us exists. There would still be things during these periods of time. But they would always be the sorts of things that are possibly conceivable by us when we do exist. For instance, we exist right now and can conceive of mountains, rivers, grass, foxes and many other things. We might cease to exist yet these things might exist. What can never exist after us, or before us, are things that we cannot possibly conceive. On this interpretation of the claim that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us, it does not look idealist at all. It makes room for the possibility that we could cease to exist yet there could still be a world. Furthermore, there seems to be no inconsistency in holding the claim and saying that minds other than our own could also cease to exist while the world remains.

I think that Nagel ought to support the second of these interpretations. When he tells us that he will focus on a form of idealism which is held by a number of contemporary philosophers, he has in mind philosophers who are classified as analytic philosophers. The two examples he gives of contemporary idealists are Donald Davidson (1986: 94) and P. F. Strawson (1986: 99). Now there is room for debate over what makes a philosopher an analytic philosopher and whether these two philosophers are in fact analytic philosophers, as they are commonly thought to be. Without going into these matters, we can say that Nagel has chosen examples of philosophers whose writings emerge from a philosophical culture that is not hospitable to idealism. Within this culture, idealism is generally not viewed as an attractive metaphysical stance. Rather it is viewed as a stance to be avoided. There might still be forms of idealism which are popular within this culture, but presumably they would have to be positions which one might fail to realize are idealist. However, on the first interpretation of the claim that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us, this claim is patently idealist. Nagel surely cannot be supposing that a number of contemporary philosophers accept the claim on this interpretation. I think that Nagel ought to say that these philosophers are accepting the claim on the second interpretation. But on this interpretation, it is not a form of idealism.

Nagel already seems to be working with the second interpretation when he writes about Strawson, because he characterizes Strawson's position as 'quite generous, admitting a great deal into the universe of possibilities' (1986: 99). It would be bewildering for Nagel to work with a different interpretation for Davidson, since it is the same claim that is being attributed to both philosophers.

Davidson does not actually say that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us. Nagel attributes this claim to Davidson because Davidson asserts that the correct understanding

of our concept of truth entails that every truth can be expressed in our language (Davidson 1984: 194; Nagel 1986: 94). On the basis of this assertion, there is no reason to interpret Davidson as denying that there once was a period of time when no beings with minds existed. We can focus on this view of the past, because the idealist conception of the world as mind-dependent should be understood as denying this view of the past as much as excluding the future possibility. With regards to the past view, Davidson might think as follows. Reality had certain features in the period without minds and, for each feature, it is a truth that reality had this feature. All of these truths can be expressed in our language. In the absence of considerations to the contrary, one should interpret Davidson as allowing for this possibility. Hence if one is using Davidson's assertion as the evidence for attributing to him the claim that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us, as Nagel is, one should adopt the second interpretation of this claim. (Note: there is a background question of whether Davidson's assertion even constitutes good evidence for the attribution. See Edward 2009: 27-28)

We have considered this claim on the second interpretation without considering arguments for it. One might wonder, though, whether it would only be argued for in a way that commits one to idealism. But if one begins with the idealist premise that the world is mind-dependent, it does not follow that there is a necessary connection between existing and being possibly conceivable by us, nor is it *prima facie* plausible that there is such a connection. We can show this by employing much the same argumentative strategy that Nagel uses to support the view that there might be things that we cannot possibly conceive. He observes that there are features of reality which we can conceive yet which some beings with minds cannot conceive, such as people with the permanent mental age of nine years old (1986: 95). Our mental superiority allows us to conceive of these things. Analogously, it seems that there might be other

features of reality which can only be conceived by beings with superior mental capacities to ours (1986: 95). The same point can be made, more specifically, about features of the mind. A philosopher of mind might successfully identify a feature of certain mental phenomena. If a particular mental phenomenon has this feature, then it has a mind-dependent instance of the feature, because that instance cannot exist without the mental phenomenon and the mental phenomenon would cease to exist if minds ceased to exist. It may be that this feature cannot be conceived by people with the permanent mental age of nine and yet there are instances of this feature as part of their mental phenomena as well. Analogously, there might be mind-dependent features of our mental phenomena which we too cannot conceive, or, more precisely, which we cannot conceive while our capacities are such that we belong to the group that Nagel calls 'us'. Prior to any argument which reveals otherwise, we should be open to this possibility. We have no reason to think that mind-dependent features, or even features that are dependent specifically on our minds, are necessarily within our conceptual grasp. Thus the premise that the world is mind-dependent does not lead on to the claim that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us, either logically or by virtue of plausibility. Why then should one think that this claim would only be argued for in a way that commits one to idealism? It is not clear that there is a good answer to this question.

Nagel himself does not expect the mind-dependence of the world to figure as a premise in the argument for this claim. He expects that the claim will be argued for through a conceptual analysis which purports to show that it is meaningless to deny this claim. He states that this is how a successful argument must proceed:

An argument for this general form of idealism must show that the notion of what *cannot* be thought about by us or those like us makes no sense. (1986: 93, his

emphasis)

Nagel seems to be operating on the following general assumption: a belief in a necessary connection can only be properly justified by a conceptual analysis which reveals that there is no such thing as a meaningful statement that denies the connection. On this assumption, belief in a necessary connection between existing and being possibly conceivable by us can only be properly justified by a conceptual analysis which reveals that it makes no sense to say that something can exist without being possibly conceivable by us. Following the statement quoted above, Nagel ascribes an argument to his opponents which aims to meet this requirement. The argument asserts that if something exists, the applicability of the concept of existence to this thing implies that all of its features can be identified using concepts that are within our grasp (1986: 94). From this supposed conceptual truth, it is judged to be unintelligible that something could exist which is not possibly conceivable by us. In this argument there is no trace of the premise that the world is mind-dependent.

Nagel begins the sixth chapter of *The View from Nowhere* by telling us that a realist holds that the world is independent of our minds. But, as the quotation at the beginning of this section indicates, he wishes to develop a more precise explanation of what it is to be a realist. His proposal is that to be a realist one must accept that there could be things which we cannot possibly conceive. But Nagel does not explain how his proposal relates to the simple account of realism that he begins with. In particular, he does not answer the following question: why should we think that by claiming that what there is must be conceivable by us, we are denying that the world is mind-independent? In this paper, I have shown that there is a way of interpreting this claim so that it does not involve such a denial. I have also recommended that Nagel endorse this interpretation. Finally, I have contested the idea that this claim, on the recommended

interpretation, would only be argued for on the basis of the premise that the world is mind-dependent. My conclusion therefore is that Nagel has not uncovered a form of idealism, has not established that a number of philosophers at the time when he wrote were idealists and has not established that the position he takes to be a form of idealism must be rejected if one is to be a realist.

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