

A NIGGLE AT NAGEL

By

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1. Introduction

My aims in this paper are less modest than the title suggests. True, the paper is a niggle at Nagel, that is, a nit-picking criticism of one very brief passage in *Possibility of Altruism* (pp. 29-30). But, brief as it is, that passage has had an enormous and, in my view, an undeserved influence. Philosophy, said Wittgenstein, is the struggle of our intellect against the bewitchments of language. More often, so it seems to me, it is the struggle of our intellects against the bewitchments of bad arguments. And a great many eminent philosophers have allowed their intellects to be bewitched by the bad argument in this passage. It is a ring of power whose magic has been used to erect mighty Barad-dûrs of intellectual error. They are very edifying errors on the whole – the Barad-dûrs appear to their proprietors to be Minas-Tiriths of reason and virtue - but the errors are errors nonetheless. My aim in the paper is to destroy the ring and perhaps to bring those Barad-dûrs of error crashing down. Whether I succeed in the second aim depends upon the degree to which those Barad-dûrs are themselves dependent the Ring. But of my success in the first aim I have no doubt. The ring of Nagel's argument can definitely be destroyed. For despite its mesmeric power, it is definitely a dud. The most it can prove is that a certain argument for Humeanism – and a rather silly one at that – is a failure. And it can only prove *that* on condition that our ordinary notions of desire and want are not causal concepts – a condition which in my opinion is not met. Nagel's argument cannot prove the substantive conclusion that Humeanism is false or that a causally active desire for the end Y is not required if the belief that *X is the means to Y* is to motivate the performance of X. And if it cannot establish this substantive conclusion, it cannot provide a foundation for the Barad-dûrs of error.

First the Ring, then the Barad-dûrs, then finally the Cracks of Doom. It is my mission to dissolve the ring of Nagel's argument in the lavas of logical analysis.

2. Nagel's Argument

After making his famous distinction between motivated and unmotivated desires Nagel goes on:

The claim that a desire underlies every act is true only if desires are taken to include motivated as well as unmotivated desires, and it is true only in the sense that *whatever* may be the motivation for someone's intentional pursuit of a goal, it becomes in virtue of his pursuit *ipso facto* appropriate to ascribe to him a desire for that goal. But if the desire is a motivated one, the explanation of it will be the same as the explanation of his pursuit, and it is by no means obvious that a desire must enter in to this further explanation. Although it will no doubt be generally admitted that some desires are motivated, the issue is whether another desire always lies behind the motivated one, or whether sometimes the motivation of the initial desire involves no reference to another, unmotivated desire.

Therefore it may be admitted that trivial that, for example, considerations about my future welfare or about the interests of others cannot motivate me to act without a desire being present at the moment of action. That I have the appropriate desire simply *follows* from the fact that these considerations motivate me: if the likelihood that the an act will promote my future happiness motivates me to perform it now, then it is appropriate to ascribe to me a desire for my own future happiness. But nothing follows about the role of the desire as a condition contributing to the motivational efficacy of those considerations. It is a necessary condition of their efficacy to be sure, but only a logically necessary condition. It is not necessary either as a contributing influence or as a causal condition.

(Nagel, 1970, pp. 29-30.)

For Nagel *motivated* desires are, very roughly, the desires that are generated as the result of means/end calculations. This is rough because an unmotivated desire to have a good time tonight can generate a motivated desire to go to the movies, not because going to the movies is a *means* to having a good time, but because going to the movies is *constitutive* of having a good time. So motivated desires are derived desires that we arrive at by some process of

deliberation, whereas *unmotivated* desires are the starting points in the deliberative process.¹ These are the ‘passions’ to which reason is supposed to be the slave, since, according to the Humeans, the role of reason (our belief-forming faculty) is to show us the way to realize our unmotivated desires. But Nagel wants to argue that although when I do X intentionally, I *want* (or have the desire) to do X, the motivated desire to do X need not be the product of an *unmotivated* desire in any substantial sense. Nagel seems to be conceding two things: a) that intentional action is driven by desire (so that whatever I do intentionally, I want to do) and b) that it is some kind of conceptual truth – even a necessary one – that if I do X because of a belief that doing X is likely to promote Y, then I desire Y. But, having made these concessions, he then pulls the rug from under his Humean opponent. Because thesis

(2) I have a desire to bring about Y,

follows from thesis

(1) I do X because I believe that doing X is likely to bring about Y,

thesis (2) *means no more than* thesis (1). And if thesis (2) *means no more than* thesis (1) – if, that is, it is *conceptually contained* in thesis (1) – then the unmotivated desire to bring about Y that it ascribes to me is, as it were, a logical or conceptual shadow, not a substantial ‘biffy’ something or an independent causal factor in the situation. Of course, I *may* have a genuine or causally active desire to bring about Y – Nagel’s argument does not *exclude* unmotivated desires with genuine biff – but there is no reason to think that such an unmotivated desire underlies *every* action. To be more precise, what Nagel’s argument purports to prove is that although it is *conceptually necessary* that *if* anyone does X in the belief that doing X will bring about Y, *then* they have a desire to bring about Y, this conceptual necessity is quite compatible with the non-existence of a biffy or causally active desire to bring about Y. Thus Nagel is arguing for the following thesis:

¹ This is still a bit problematic as the starting points of one deliberative process may be the end points of another and vice versa. I may want a good time tonight because I think it the best way to escape the feelings of futility and depression that have been dogging me for the last few days as a consequence of reading Nagel-inspired ethical theories. And once I have decided to go to the movies I need to deliberate about which movie to see

(N*) A person can be motivated to perform X by the belief that *X is likely to bring about Y*, without a causally active or biffy desire for Y.

So although people often act on the belief that their actions will bring about some end, we only have reason to believe in desires for those ends if those desires are construed as 'consequential'; that is, logical or conceptual shadows cast by the belief and the fact that the agent has acted on the belief. Indeed, it is pretty clear that Nagel wants to go further. He seems to think that, in many cases, when someone is motivated to do X by the belief that X leads to Y, there is, in fact, *no* causally active desire for Y, and that it is not necessary in any sense that there should *be* such a causally active desire. Thus he would deny that it is *naturally* necessary, in virtue of the human constitution, that if you are motivated to do X by the belief that X leads to Y, then you have a causally active desire for Y. What is a little unclear – it seems to puzzle Dancy for instance – is whether Nagel wants to give *motivated* desires the same treatment that he gives to *unmotivated* desires. For an analogous argument is clearly in the offing. Since thesis

(4) I want or desire to do X,

follows from thesis

(3) I am doing X intentionally,

then thesis (4) *means no more than* thesis (3). And if thesis (4) *means no more than* (3) – if, that is, it is *conceptually contained* in thesis (3) – then the motivated desire to do X that it ascribes to me is, as it were, a logical or conceptual shadow, not a substantial something or an independent causal factor in the situation.

However that may be, it is clearly Nagel's claim that beliefs alone can motivate by producing motivated desires, and therefore, ultimately, action. (It is right to *say* that the agent has – indeed must have – a [relatively] unmotivated desire for the end he is trying to bring about, but this is a concession that concedes nothing of substance, since his argument shows that this desire need be nothing more than a conceptual shadow.) Why does Nagel

think this a happy conclusion? Well, if beliefs could only motivate with the aid of substantial or biffy desires, then a belief by itself would not constitute a motivating reason for anyone to do anything (or perhaps we should say that it would constitute a reason for some people but not for others). The belief that there is ice-cream in fridge would constitute a reason for action for me, but not for you, because I want ice-cream and you don't. And by extension the *fact believed* (or the fact that in some sense one *ought* to believe) would not constitute a reason either, unless it connected with the agent's wants. So the fact that you are in pain (say) would not constitute a reason for me to alleviate your suffering unless I happened to like you or to care about you, which I might very well *not* do without being irrational. For Nagel, the idea that I could be callous without making some kind of *mistake* is intolerable. So in order to make room for the possibility of altruism – or rather to prove that altruism is *rationally required* – he has to suppose that biffy desires are not required to motivate. Which is exactly the conclusion of his argument.

There is another, Kantian, reason why one might object to the Humean thesis that beliefs cannot motivate without the aid of biffy desires. Kant seems to think that it is a criterion of a genuine moral fact that is it necessarily motivating to *any* rational being that becomes aware of it, *whatever* that being's inclinations or desires. But if beliefs cannot motivate without the aid of biffy desires (and if there are no desires that are constitutive of rationality) then there may be no facts that are necessarily motivating to *any* rational being. For given any moral 'fact', we always run the risk of meeting a rational being who regards it with indifference even though he or she is well aware of it, because he, she or it lacks the relevant desires. And if there are no facts that are necessarily motivating to *any* rational being then, by the Kantian criterion, there are no moral facts. (Icy shivers down the spine!) But if beliefs can motivate without the aid of biffy desires then it seems we can forestall this appalling possibility. Our deviant rational being - I tend to think of a rational mantis from Mars with a taste for human brains – would not require biffy desires to be motivated by the moral facts. Belief or awareness would suffice. Thus the mantis's awareness that it is *wrong* for her to eat my brains – however, exactly that belief is to be cashed out – could motivate her to refrain, despite the fact that she considers my brains very tasty, and despite the fact that she has no biffy desire to consider my interests or even to do the right thing. And if, despite all that, she remains unmotivated, then she would not be really rational, since a propensity to be motivated in right way is *constitutive* of [practical] rationality. Whatever the

fate of my brains, the moral facts would be safe – safe, that is, from the threat of non-existence.

Thus there seems to be a lot riding on Nagel's argument. The possibility of a rationally mandatory altruism – and maybe the very existence of moral facts – would appear to be at stake.

3. Barad-dûrs of Error

Nagel's argument was endorsed by Philippa Foot in her paper, which, 'Reasons for Actions and Desires?' (reprinted in Foot, 1978, pp. 148-156):

Yet surely we cannot deny that when a man goes shopping today because otherwise he will be hungry tomorrow he wants, or has a desire to, avoid being hungry? This is true, but an analysis of the use of the expressions such as 'wants' and 'has a desire to' in such contexts shows that these 'desires' cannot be the basis of the reason for acting. Thomas Nagel in an excellent discussion of prudence has explained the matter in the following way: [there follows the crucial passage from Nagel]. What we have here is a use of 'desire' which indicates a motivational direction and nothing more. One may compare it with the use of 'want' in 'I want to ϕ ' where only intentionality is implied. Can *wanting* in this sense create a reason for acting? It seems that it cannot (Foot, 1978, p. 149).

Foot's claim that Nagel's argument is based on 'an analysis of the use of the expressions such as "wants" and "has a desire to" in such contexts' is surely somewhat exaggerated. Whatever his faults, Nagel is not really an analyst of the use of expressions – he has much bigger, metaphysical fish to fry. But Foot, I think, is trying to pay him a rather old-fashioned compliment. Good philosophy consists in analyzing the use of expressions (which is what she was taught when she was young); Nagel has produced some good philosophy; therefore he must have been analyzing the use of certain expressions. The upshot, however, is plain. Since desires are merely 'consequential' and consequently mere shadows, they cannot constitute reasons for action.

Foot continues to think highly of Nagel, down to the present day. In her ‘Locke, Hume and Modern Moral Theory’ (Foot, 2002, pp. 117-145), in which she explicitly attacks the thesis that biffy desires are required to explain action, she praises ‘the pioneering work on the subject of action and desire’ in Thomas Nagel’s *The Possibility of Altruism*, citing in particular chapter V, which is where the crucial paragraph occurs. In *Natural Goodness* she proclaims her admiration once again:

That prudence on its own can motivate seems to me to have been demonstrated by Thomas Nagel many years ago in *The Possibility of Altruism*, chapters V and VI. If philosophers still insist that only the presence of what they call a ‘conative state’ can explain an action, they are, to my mind, ignoring this lesson (Foot, 2001, p. 61n).

This footnote occurs in a passage where she is attacking the thesis that if someone does what they think is right *because* they think it right, then we have to posit a ‘conative state’ of *wanting* to do the right thing in order to adequately explain the action. No doubt they did want to do the right thing, but this is just another way of saying that they did it because they thought it was right. More generally, she is arguing that you can have a practical reason to do something even if you don’t have a biffy desire to do it. Thus is it is no objection to her conception of natural goodness that considerations about what is naturally good may have no bite for the rational gangster. If the gangster is unmoved by considerations about natural goodness, then what this shows is that he isn’t really rational after all, since being rational *entails* being moved (or being moveable) by such considerations. Foot has a lot of praise for Quinn (also an admirer of Nagel) who opened her eyes to the possibility defining her way to victory in this cheap and easy manner. Quinn’s method, to be sure, has many advantages for the moral realist – they are analogous to the advantages of theft over honest toil.

How far the theory of *Natural Goodness* is *reliant* on Nagel’s argument? I am not at all sure. You can certainly be a virtue-theorist and a Humean about motivation, since Hume himself was both a Human about motivation and a virtue theorist – and that without any obvious inconsistency. However, if we don’t cheat by defining [practical] rationality as a propensity to be moved by considerations about morality or natural goodness, if we insist that a belief or a fact does not constitute a reason for someone to act unless it marries up

with causally active desires, and if we insist that an analysis of the right and the good is not adequate unless it provides reasons for action to all or most human beings, then Foot's theory is inadequate. For she fails to supply a motivating reason to be naturally good². And it is not just gangsters she has to worry about either. *I* have no desire to naturally good in her sense (though I do want to do some of the *things* she regards as good or right).

Foot retracted her opinion that moral requirements are hypothetical imperatives in part because of McDowell's criticisms in 'Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?'. McDowell notes her allegiance to Nagel, endorses Nagel's argument, and then goes on to turn it against her (McDowell, 1978, p. 15):

Suppose for instance, that we explain a person's performance of a certain action by crediting him with awareness of some fact that makes it likely (in his view) that acting in that way will be conducive to his interest. Adverting to his view of the facts, may suffice, of its own, to show us the favourable light to which his action appeared to him. No doubt we credit him with an appropriate desire, perhaps for his own future happiness. But the committed to ascribe such a desire is simply consequential on our taking him to act as he does for the reason we cite; the desire does not function as an independent extra component in a full specification of his reason, hither to omitted by an understandable ellipse of the obvious, but strictly necessary in order to show how it is that the reason can motivate him. Properly understood, his belief does that on its own. [See] Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, pp 29-30.

Though couched as an *ad hominem* attack on Foot, this paper is in fact the first step in the construction of McDowell's own moral philosophy³ according to which 'moral requirements are not conditional at all: neither upon desires nor upon the absence of other reasons' (McDowell, 1978, p. 29). How far is his position dependent on Nagel's argument?

² There is also the problem that, despite her big talk about biology, there is nothing particularly natural about Foot's conception of goodness - but let's not go there.

³ I was present as an undergraduate in 1978 when McDowell read the paper to a meeting of the Moral Sciences Club in Cambridge. Though he kept insisting that his argument was *ad hominem*, the aged R.B Braithwaite, who was also present, suggested that this ploy was a little evasive, and that since McDowell obviously had something new to say, he should come right out and say it.

So far as I can see he does not have any other argument for the thesis that beliefs can motivate without the aid of (non-consequential) desires. (Though, of course this deficiency may have been remedied in subsequent writings.) He illustrates the thesis and answers some objections but gives no other reason for supposing it to be true. Does he need this thesis to support his particular brand of virtue ethics according to which moral requirements are not hypothetical imperatives? I think so, yes. The reason that moral requirements are *not* hypothetical imperatives – that they do not depend for their reason-giving force on the desires or propensities of the agent – is that one ‘one cannot share a virtuous person’s view of a situation in which it seems to him that virtue requires some action, but see no reason to act in that way’ (McDowell, 1978, p. 26). But if beliefs cannot motivate without the aid of pre-existing biffy desires, then it *is* indeed possible to share the virtuous person’s view of a situation but see no reason to act as virtue requires, since you may not share the virtuous person’s desires. If this is right, then McDowell’s Barad-dûr of virtue is heavily dependent on the power of Nagel’s argument and would begin to totter if deprived of its support.

The case is clearer with respect to Jonathan Dancy. In *Moral Reasons* Dancy develops an extreme form of the Nagel-McDowell thesis according to which *all* desire ascriptions are ‘consequential’ in McDowell’s sense, and causally active desires in play no part whatsoever in the generation of action (Dancy, 1993, p. 9)⁴. So far as I can see, Dancy accepts *both* of Nagel’s arguments, the one he explicitly advances and the one that appears to be in the offing. That is, he thinks that because thesis (2) *I have a desire to bring about Y*, follows from thesis (1) *I do X because I believe that doing X is likely to bring about Y*, thesis (2) *means no more* than thesis (1). In which case there is no reason to posit an *unmotivated* desire for Y as an independent causal factor in the situation. But Dancy also thinks that because thesis

(4) I want or desire to do X,

⁴ Dancy’s attitude in his subsequent book, *Practical Reality* is rather more equivocal, and I can’t work out whether he wants to endorse Nagel’s argument or not. He seems to be saying that if I do X intentionally then I do have a desire to do X, but that this desire simply consists *in my being motivated to do X*. But *that* desire (or that state) can be wholly explained by my beliefs. If I form the desire to do X on the basis of my belief that doing X will bring about Y, no substantial desire to bring about Y is required. Why not? Presumably because such a desire is merely ‘consequential’ on my being motivated to do X by my belief that it is likely to bring about Y. Which suggests that he endorses Nagel’s argument after all. See Dancy, 2000, pp. 79-84.

follows from thesis

(3) I am doing X intentionally,

thesis (4) *means no more* than thesis 3). In which case there is no need to posit a *motivated* desire to do X as an independent causal factor in the situation either. Fortified by this argument, Dancy dismisses *all* desires *en bloc* contending that they are merely consequential. Thus Dancy's theory is much more extreme (or, as he puts it, 'pure') than the theories of Nagel, Foot and McDowell who are all prepared to admit that at least sometimes genuinely biffy desires do a certain amount of work. Is Dancy dependent on Nagel? Very much so. He says himself that he has 'said little in favour of the pure theory' and that he will 'in fact never offer an explicit argument in favour of that theory nor argue directly against its Humean rival' (Dancy, 1993, p. 20). Instead, he quotes and endorses Nagel's paragraph (Dancy, 1993, p. 8) and then goes on to contend that, given Nagel's argument, his pure theory is better than Nagel's hybrid theory. Thus without Nagel's argument, he has got nothing except the intrinsic plausibility of the pure theory. Which is to say that he has got nothing.

Finally I turn to Cullity and Gaut. In the introduction to their anthology *Ethics and Practical Reason*, they endeavour to depict the state of play with respect to these topics as of 1997. They paraphrase and endorse Nagel's argument, which they clearly regard as a major contribution to the debate. What is the upshot? That 'Nagel shows that the neo-Humean argument fails to establish the conditionality of normative reasons upon the agent's desires' (Cullity and Gaut, 1997, pp. 8-9). Read one way this is half-right, read another it is wholly wrong. For there is, I think, an 'ordinary language' argument for neo-Humeanism that Nagel's argument *does* discredit though only on the (false) condition that desire is not a causal concept. But if they mean to suggest that Nagel shows that normative reasons are *not* conditional on the agents' desires (since beliefs by themselves, or maybe even the facts believed can motivate agents in the absence causally active desires) then they are just mistaken. If this is the consensus among the practical reason crowd, then it is a consensus of error.

4. The Cracks of Doom I: the Substantive Thesis

It is now time to justify my big talk. Is Nagel's argument really as bad as I have suggested? As we have seen, a the key premise of Nagel's argument is the following claim:

(I) Thesis (2) *I have a desire to bring about Y*, follows from thesis (1) *I do X because I believe that doing X is likely to bring about Y*.

Now in one sense (I) is simply false. Thesis (2) does *not* follow *logically* from thesis (1): the one is not a logical consequence of the other. In logic (very roughly) you don't get out what you haven't put in. Yet (2) contains new matter – the concept of desire – and it seems inconceivable that this new relation or affirmation could be a *logical* deduction from another which is entirely different from it. (There is no mention of desire in the premise of this supposed inference.)

Well, *of course* thesis (2) is not a *logical* consequences of (1)! What Nagel and his cohorts *meant* to say is that (2) is an *analytic* consequence of (1): that is that (2) can be logically derived from (1) with the aid of some uncontroversial analytic truth or truths. Before exploring this option I want to discuss *another* reason for thinking that (2) means no more than (1) which lurks at the back of people's minds greasing the wheels of fallacy.

Perhaps (2) means no more than (1) because they both have the same verification condition. What verifies (2), that *I have a desire to bring about Y* is precisely what verifies (1) that *I do X because I believe that doing X is likely to bring about Y*. Since they both have the same verification conditions the two claims are equivalent. And if (2) is equivalent to (1), then (2) means no more than (1) in which case the desire for Y is not a real thing but a conceptual chimera. To say that I desired Y is simply to say that I did X in the belief that it was likely to bring about Y.

Let me stress that nobody states this argument explicitly, certainly not McDowell, who won his spurs refuting the verificationism of Dummett. Yet some expositions of the Nagel's argument have a gamey whiff of verificationism about them, and I can't help thinking that residual verificationist intuitions give the argument more plausibility than it

deserves. So perhaps it is worth explaining just why this verificationist version of Nagel's argument is worthless.

To begin with verificationism is *false*. The meaning of a proposition is *not* its method of verification. Hence two propositions with the same verification conditions need not be equivalent. There are many reasons for thinking that verificationism is false, not least the fact that it is impossible to isolate little nuggets of potential experience to constitute the verification conditions of individual sentences. What counts as confirming an individual sentence depends upon what else is believed. As The Man said, 'our statements about the external world [or, as he might have added, the internal world] face the tribunal of experience not individually, but only as a corporate body' (Quine, 2004, p. 49). Secondly, even if verificationism were true, theses (1) and (2) would not have the same verification conditions. This is partly because (2) is embedded in a big complex theory, belief/desire psychology, which has to be verified or falsified in terms of its overall success in explaining human conduct. But even if we waive that point, it is clear that the verification conditions of (1) and (2) are not the same. Even if we admit that (2), that *I have a desire to bring about Y*, would be verified by whatever verifies (1) that *I do X because I believe that doing X is likely to bring about Y*, (2) could *also* be verified by many other phenomena, for instance the phenomena that verify (2') that *I do Z because I believe that doing Z is likely to bring about Y* or (2'') that *I do W because I believe that doing W is likely to bring about Y*, etc., etc., Thus even if verificationism were true, (2) would not be equivalent to (1) which means that talk of unmotivated desires could not be regarded as a terminological variant of talk of intentional action. The verificationist version of Nagel's argument, in so far as it exists, is utterly hopeless.

So let us get back to the *real* argument. As I understand it, it goes something like this:

Thesis

(1) I do X because I believe that doing X is likely to bring about Y,

plus thesis

(A) It is conceptually necessary that if I do X because I believe that it is likely to bring about Y, then I have a desire to bring about Y,

entail thesis

(2) I have a desire to bring about Y.

THEREFORE

(N) Thesis (2) *means no more than* thesis (1) and there is no need to posit a desire for Y as a causally active ingredient in the situation.

I do *not* accuse Nagel of reasoning like this:

Thesis

(1) I do X because I believe that doing X is likely to bring about Y,

plus thesis

(A) It is conceptually necessary that if I do X because I believe that it is likely to bring about Y, then I have a desire to bring about Y,

entail thesis

(2*) It is conceptually necessary that I have a desire to bring about Y,

THEREFORE

(N[^]) Because (2*) is conceptually necessary, that is analytic, it says nothing substantial about my mind, and there no need to posit a desire for Y as a causally active ingredient in the situation.

This argument derives the necessity of the consequent from the necessity of the consequence: that is from premises of the form *P* and *Necessarily (If P then Q)* it derives the conclusion *Necessarily Q* - a well-known and fallacious form of inference. This error is compounded by making the assumption that, if *Q* is conceptually necessary, it says nothing substantial about the world, an assumption that seems to me distinctly dubious. But though this argument too may be lurking at the back of people's minds facilitating the fallacy, I do not think it is Nagel's official position. He is *not* claiming that thesis (2) says nothing about the world because it is conceptually necessary or analytic: he is claiming that it says *no more* about the world than thesis (1). It is for *that* reason that we don't have to posit a desire as a causally active ingredient in the situation. Thus it is the *first* version of the argument that corresponds to his intentions.

Nagel thinks he can concede that it is a conceptual truth *that if I do X because I believe that it is likely to bring about Y, then I am acting out of a desire for Y*. But (so he

argues) it is precisely because it *follows* that I am acting out of a desire for Y, that the desire for Y cannot be an independent factor in the situation. This shows that he does not really understand the nature of conceptual truths. Consider:

(A) It is conceptually necessary that if I do X because I believe that X is likely to bring about Y, then I have a desire to bring about Y.

This amounts to the following:

(A') Our concepts of belief and desire are such that if I do X out of a belief that X is likely to bring about Y, it does not really count as a *belief* unless I do X because of a desire for Y.

Now suppose that I do X. And suppose too that I do X in the belief that doing X is likely to bring about Y. In what sense does it *follow* that I desire Y?

It follows in this sense. On the assumption that I am doing X out of a genuine or desire-entailing belief that doing X will bring about Y, that is a belief such that *if* I act on it *then* I will have the corresponding desire, then I will have the corresponding desire. But this certainly does not mean that the desire is not, or need not be, an independent causal factor in the situation.

Consider the parallel case. The following is a conceptual claim:

(B) It is conceptually necessary that if John is a son he has (or has had) parents.

This amounts to the following:

(B') Our concepts of 'son' and 'parents' are such that John does not really count as a son unless he has (or has had) parents.

In what sense does it follow from the fact that John is a son that he has parents? It follows in this sense. On the assumption that John is a son, that is the kind of being such that, if he exists, then he has or has had parents, then he has or has had parents. But it certainly does not follow from this that John's parents were causally inactive in the production of John. On the contrary, their causal intervention was essential.

If an item α is of a certain kind W, and if it is a conceptual truth that things of kind W have characteristics K, then α will have characteristics K. But it does not follow from this that the characteristics K are unreal, formal or causally inactive. In *truly* calling α a W, we have *already* and *ex hypothesi* TRULY called it a thing with characteristics K. If we have truly called John a son we have *already* and *ex hypothesi* TRULY called him a person who has (or has had) parents. And if the conceptual truth that Nagel concedes is indeed a conceptual truth, then in claiming truly that I did X out of the belief that X would lead to Y *in this sense*, we have truly claimed that I did it out of a desire for Y. But neither in this case nor in the others does this mean that the desire was causally inactive. On the contrary, if our concept of a desire is a causal concept – and nothing so far has suggested that it is not – then we have claimed, and claimed truly, that a desire for Y was causally responsible for my doing X. Indeed, given the conceptual truth the Nagel concedes, if there is not a genuine desire for Y, then I did not really act out of the belief that X is likely to bring about Y!

It is true in a sense that if (1) *I do X because I believe that doing X is likely to bring about Y*, analytically entails (2) *I have a desire to bring about Y*, then (2) means no more than (1). But this is not because there is less to desiring than meets the eye – which is what Nagel thinks – but because there is more to believing (or rather to acting on a belief). If (A) is really true – and it must be true for (2) to follow analytically from (1) – then I cannot *really* act on the belief that doing X will bring about Y, unless I desire Y. And there is nothing in the argument so far to show that desiring Y is not a very biffy thing indeed.

Is there anything we can do to restore the argument to validity? Yes. We can alter A to

(A'') It is conceptually necessary that if I do X because I believe that X is likely to bring about Y, then I have a merely consequential and non-causal desire to bring about Y.

This gives us the following argument:

Thesis

(1) I do X because I believe that doing X is likely to bring about Y,

plus thesis

(A'') It is conceptually necessary that if I do X because I believe that it is likely to bring about Y, then I have a merely consequential and non-causal desire to bring about Y,

entail thesis

(2'') I have a merely consequential and non-causal desire to bring about Y.

THEREFORE

(N'') thesis (2) *means no more than* thesis (1) and there is no need to posit a desire for Y as a causally active ingredient in the situation.

But this argument suffers from two defects. (A''), so it seems to me, is pretty clearly false, and even it were true, the argument would be redundant. If it really is a conceptual truth that unmotivated desires are consequential and non-causal – which is what, in effect, (A'') claims – then we don't need the elaborate rigmarole of Nagel's argument to prove the point.

Nagel's argument then fails to prove the substantive conclusion

(N*) A person can be motivated to perform X by the belief that X is likely to bring about Y, without a causally active or biffy desire for Y.

Thus in so far as the Barad-dûrs of error depend upon the substantive thesis (N*) they are in big trouble. For Nagel has given us no good reason to believe it.

5. Objection⁵

But maybe I have misrepresented the argument. The point was not to prove that the substantive thesis (N*). The point was rather to *refute* an argument which purports to *disprove* (N*), on the basis of supposed analytic truths. Thus what Nagel was really arguing for was this:

(N#) It is not possible to *disprove* (N*) by appealing to analytic truths.

Or perhaps this:

(N##) It is not an *analytically* or *conceptually* impossible for a person to be motivated to perform X by the belief that X is likely to bring about Y, without a causally active or biffy desire for Y.

But (N##) entails

(N####) It *is* conceptually possible (not excluded by our common concepts of belief and desire) for a person to be motivated to perform X by the belief that X is likely to bring about Y, without a causally active or biffy desire for Y.

Now (N####) is much weaker thesis than (N*). For there are many things that are *conceptually* possible that are otherwise *impossible* (physically, psychologically or historically impossible, for instance). There is nothing about the concept of a pig or the concept of flight that excludes the possibility of flying pigs. Nevertheless, pigs can't fly. 'If I could turn back time,' sings Cher, 'I'd take back those words that hurt you, and you'd stay', implying thereby that there is nothing incoherent, nothing conceptually impossible, about turning back time. Nevertheless, as the lyric makes abundantly clear she just can't 'find a way' to do it, presumably because it is physically, if not metaphysically, impossible. But

⁵ This objection is due to the highly critical philosophers of Reading where I gave an earlier version of this paper in 2006. Papers are unlikely to improve if they are only read to people who can be expected to agree with them and thanks are due to the philosophers of Reading, who fully lived up to my expectations of disagreement. They have done this paper a power of good. I would like particularly to thank Phillip Stratton-Lake and Severin Schroeder.

though (N####) is much weaker thesis than (N*), it may be that the two have been confounded in the minds of Nagel's admirers. And it may be that (N#) was what Nagel was arguing for all along, in which case (N##) and (N####) follow as corollaries. After all, *The Possibility of Altruism* is based on Nagel's B.Phil thesis, which was drafted at Oxford in the heyday of ordinary language philosophy, when conceptual analysis was all the rage. (My late supervisor, H.J.McCloskey, was only able to publish his paper 'The Nature of Moral Obligation' by changing its title to 'The Concept of Moral Obligation', a change he rather objected to since in his view moral obligation had a nature independent of our conceptions.) Now in the Oxford of the 1950s a Humean philosopher might be inclined to dispute (N*) on the basis of conceptual considerations. Hence the first order of business for a defender of (N*) would be to defuse the conceptual arguments against it. And that is all that Nagel is trying to do in this famous passage.

6. Reply.

Maybe so, but that still leaves (N*) unproven. And it seems to me that (N*) is what Nagel and his followers really need. As we have seen, Nagel's title is a bit misleading. He does not merely want to prove that altruism is *possible* – obviously it is, since some of us have altruistic desires. What he wants to prove is that altruism is *rationally required*, and that selfish people are making some sort of a *mistake*. To do this he must prove that other people's suffering constitutes a reason for action for *all* rational human beings whatever their psychological quirks, a reason that they cannot neglect without intellectual error of some kind. Now suppose that (N*) is false. Suppose, that is, that it is *psychologically impossible* for someone to be motivated by the belief that X leads to Y unless there is a pre-existing desire for Y, where a desire is construed as a causally active ingredient in the situation. Suppose too that a fact only constitutes a reason for action for a person P if it is *irrational* for that person to believe the fact whilst remaining unmoved (a thesis to which Nagel would presumably agree). And suppose it is a fact – and a fact that I believe – that I can alleviate your suffering by lending you a helping hand. Unfortunately I have no desire whatsoever to alleviate your suffering, perhaps because I don't like you, or perhaps because I am simply callous. Let us add that, deplorable at it may be, there is nothing particularly irrational about having a callous disposition. Whatever the cause in nature that makes these hard hearts it

does not seem to be a defect in our rational capacities. Then (absent a change of heart) it will be psychologically impossible for me to be moved by the belief that I can alleviate your suffering by lending you a helping hand since I lack the desire to alleviate your suffering. Thus, (for the moment, at any rate) the fact that lending you a helping hand would alleviate your suffering does not constitute a reason for action for me, since in remaining unmoved I am not being irrational but merely hardhearted. (How can I be rationally required to do what it is psychologically impossible for me to do, given that my psychology is not irrational?) Thus if (N*) is false, Nagel cannot show that altruism is a rational requirement binding on all human beings whatever their dispositions and desires. He cannot show that selfish people are making some kind of mistake. For if (N*) is false, the facts which constitute reasons for action for the altruistic, do not qualify as reasons for action for the selfish. But (N*) can be false and (N####) true. Hence establishing (N####) is not enough.

However, I am inclined to think that Nagel 's style of argument cannot establish theses (N#) – (N####) without the aid of a question-begging assumption which is probably false, *even though* theses (N#) – (N####) *are probably true*. And an argument that cannot prove what is probably true is obviously a little lacking.

Why do I think that theses (N#) - (N####) are probably true? Because I reject the principle (A), that Nagel implicitly endorses, that it is conceptually necessary that if I do X because I believe that it is likely to bring about Y, then I have a desire to bring about Y. Desires are complicated things, but I am inclined to analyze them along the following lines. A desire for the state of affairs Y (and all desires are, in my view, really desires for states of affairs), is the ground of a complex disposition, the disposition (*ceteris paribus*) to perform the action X or desire the state of affairs X given the belief that X leads to Y, to perform the action Z or desire the state of affairs Z given the belief that Z leads to Y etc, etc, and to desire that not-R given the belief that the state of affairs R would prevent or inhibit Y, to desire that not-Q given the belief that the state of affairs Q would prevent or inhibit Y, etc etc. Even in the degenerate case where I desire to do something (that is the state of my doing something) that is well within my powers, such as whistling while I work, the desire isn't simply the disposition to whistle while I work. For if I really want to whistle, then I am disposed (*ceteris paribus*) to remove any obstacles that would prevent me whistling, such as chewing gum or a gag. But if this is roughly right, then it is conceptually possible for me to

do X in consequence of the belief that X leads to Y without the aid of such a complex dispositional state. I could do X in the belief that X leads to Y *without* being disposed (*ceteris paribus*) to do W if I came to believe that W led to Y. This would be psychologically weird, and perhaps deeply irrational, but conceptually, at least, it seems perfectly feasible. But if (A) is false, then a *conceptual* argument to the negation of (N*) is not going to get off the ground. And if there is no *conceptual* argument to the effect that (N*) is false, then our concepts do not exclude the possibility that a person might be motivated to perform X by the belief that X is likely to bring about Y, without a causally active or biffy desire for Y. In other words (N##) and (N####) are both true.

7. The Cracks of Doom II: the Conceptual/Logical Thesis

But let us suspend our disbelief in (A) and go back in time to an era when giant herds of conceptual analysts roamed the earth (or at any rate Oxford). How would a Humean conceptual analyst argue against N*)? Perhaps like this:

(A'') It is conceptually necessary that if a person does X because they believe that X is likely to bring about Y, then they have a desire to bring about Y.

THEREFORE

(~N*) It is *not* conceptually possible for a person be motivated to perform X by the belief that X is likely to bring about Y, without a causally active or biffy desire for Y.

(Of course in the 1950s the argument would not have been formulated in such a carefully non-sexist way.) 'No, no!' says Nagel, 'I grant the truth of (A'')'. If someone does X because of a belief that X leads to Y then it follows analytically that the person has a desire for Y. But it does not follow that that desire is biffy. It does not follow that the desire is a condition contributing to the motivational efficacy of the consideration that X leads to Y. It is a necessary condition of its efficacy to be sure, but only a logically necessary condition. It is not necessary either as a contributing influence or as a causal condition.'

Is this a good argument? Consider the following parallel. Suppose that we had a fifties philosopher who was arguing, rather redundantly, that there cannot be sons without the

causal intervention of parents. But like a true fifties philosopher, he stakes his case on a conceptual claim.

(B'') It is conceptually necessary that if a person X is a son, then he has or as had parents.

THEREFORE

(~S*) It is not conceptually possible for a person to be a son without two parents helping to cause his existence via sex (though we don't exclude such offbeat variations of sex as in vitro fertilization).

Next, imagine a parent-Nagel, someone who takes the same line with respect to parents as Nagel does towards desire. 'No, no!' says parent-Nagel. 'I grant the truth of (B'')'. If someone is a son then it follows analytically that the person has, or has had, parents. But it does not follow that the parents were causally biffy. It does not follow that the parents were a causally efficacious condition of the person's being a son. To be sure the prior existence of parents is a necessary condition of the person's being a son, but only a logically necessary condition. Their existence or activity is not necessary either as a contributing influence or as a causal condition.'

Why is parent-Nagel's response ridiculous? Because parenthood is a causal concept. To be a parent it to play a certain kind of causal role with respect to ones sons and daughters. A parent is a kind of cause just as a son is a thing caused in a certain kind of way. Thus if it is conceptually impossible for someone to be a son without having had parents, it is conceptually impossible to be son without the parents having played the relevant causal role.

Now Nagel's response to the Humean conceptual analyst is not as ridiculous as that. For it is not so obvious that 'desire' is a causal concept. But if 'desire' *is* a causal concept then Nagel's response is equally unsuccessful. Remember that we are suspending disbelief in premise (A''). We are granting (for the moment) that it is conceptually necessary that if a person does X because they believe that X is likely to bring about Y then they have a desire to bring about Y. But if this is the case, and if *having a desire to bring about Y* consists, in part, in having a causal disposition to do X if you believe that doing X leads to Y, then, in endorsing (A''), we have endorsed the following thesis:

($\sim N^{**}$) It is conceptually necessary that if a person does X because they believe that X is likely to bring about Y then they have a causal disposition (inter alia) to do X if they believe that doing X leads to Y, that is, *a causally active desire for Y*.

What is the upshot? That Nagel's style of argument (which crucially grants the various variants of principle (A)) can only fault the conceptual argument that *a person cannot be motivated to perform X by the belief that X is likely to bring about Y, without a causally active or biffy desire for Y*, on condition that 'want' and 'desire' are not causal concepts. But this is a large part of what he wanted to prove. Thus Nagel cannot even prove ($N\#$) – that it is not possible to *disprove* (N^*) by appealing to analytic truths – without circularity. And the failure here is all the more abject because the thesis that he cannot prove without begging the question, is, in fact, trivially true.

Things are even worse if 'desire' is in fact a causal concept. For in that case Nagel cannot even establish the truth that (N^*) cannot be disproved on conceptual grounds without the aid of a question-begging assumption that is in fact false.

8: Conclusion

What Nagel's argument requires and what he seems to want to prove is the following thesis:

(N^*) A person can be motivated to perform X by the belief that X is likely to bring about Y, without a causally active or biffy desire for Y

But despite its enormous influence, his argument for this claim is a complete failure. A fallback position is that Nagel might have been arguing for

($N\#$) It is not possible to *disprove* (N^*) by appealing to analytic truths.

But although this claim is true, Nagel's argument only succeeds given the question-begging-assumption that 'desire' is not a causal concept, an assumption that is probably false.

9. Coda: A Spot of Experimental Philosophy

But is it false? When I claimed rather dogmatically that ‘desire’ *is* a causal concept Severin Schroeder demanded, with a touch of asperity, whether I had done any surveys of common usage. Well, I had not then, but I have now. Here is a questionnaire administered to innocent first year students to test their conceptual intuitions about the nature of desire. Remember the point of is not to determine what wants or desires *are* but to determine what they are commonly conceived to be, and specifically whether they are commonly conceived as causes.

Conceptual Intuitions Survey.

This questionnaire is designed to find out about your conceptual intuitions, that is what you are naturally inclined to say about certain imaginary situations, because of your understanding of certain key concepts that we all employ in everyday life. (We are not going to say *which* concepts since that would contaminate your response!) There is no right answer here - we want to know what *you* think. Furthermore, we want to know what you think *without too much thinking*. You may feel that what you are naturally inclined to say is blindingly obvious and that we cannot be wanting you to say such a blindingly obvious thing, thus leading you to think up a more sophisticated answer. Not so! If you think that what you are at first inclined to say is blindingly obvious, then please go ahead and say the blindingly obvious thing. Don’t over-think it! It’s the ‘common-sense’ obvious answer (or what you think is the ‘common sense’ obvious answer) that we want.

Example 1

Alice flips the switch, believing that by flipping the switch she will turn on the light.

Question: Did a desire or want for turned-on light *cause* Alice to flip the switch?

Please circle ‘Yes’, ‘No’ or ‘Not sure’.

Yes

No

Not sure

Example 2.

Stalin tells his henchman Khrushchev to dance the gopak, a very vigorous peasant dance which the rather stout Khrushchev would otherwise much prefer not to perform. Khrushchev dances the gopak, believing that if he does not, Stalin will have him arrested and perhaps shot.

Question: Did a desire or want not to be arrested and shot *cause* Khrushchev to dance the gopak?

Please circle 'Yes', 'No' or 'Not sure'.

Yes

No

Not sure

Example 3.

Simon and Soraya are both traffic cops. Each of them separately stops a speeding car which is driven by an unscrupulous billionaire. The billionaires each offer Simon and Soraya a large bribe to let them off without a ticket. Both Simon and Soraya think it is wrong for police officers to take bribes. But each of them is *absolutely sure* that he or she could get away with it if they took the bribe. And neither of them believes in an all-seeing God. Simon takes the bribe but Soraya does not.

Question: Is this correct – Simon's act of taking the bribe was caused by the fact that his desire for the money was stronger than his desire to do his duty whilst Soraya's refusing to take the bribe was caused by the fact that her desire to do her duty was stronger than her desire to for the money?

Please circle 'Yes', 'No' or 'Not sure'.

Yes

No

Not sure

The survey was administered to 65 students at Oxford Brookes University in England (not Oxford, where the conceptual intuitions of incoming undergraduates would be more likely to be contaminated by contentious theory) and 74 students at Otago University in New Zealand. None of the students were mine nor had I spoken to any of them. In both cases the majority (though not all) would have been native English speakers.

At Oxford Brookes 46% answered 'Yes' to all three questions, 38.5% answered 'Yes' to two questions and 'No' or 'Not Sure' to one, 6.7% answered 'Yes' to one question and 'No' or 'Not Sure' to two and 6.7% answered 'No' or 'Not Sure' to them all.

At Otago 56.7 % answered 'Yes' to all three questions, 35.1% answered 'Yes' to two questions and 'No' or 'Not Sure' to one, 6.7% answered 'Yes' to one question and 'No' or 'Not Sure' to two and 1.3% (one student) answered 'No' or 'Not Sure' to them all.

Thus in both cases the majority of students are inclined to think of desires as causes at least most of the time, though the New Zealanders are rather more causally inclined than the English.

For each question the percentages were as follows:

OTAGO

Example 1. Yes: 89.47%, No: 6.57% Not sure: 3.94 %

Example 2. Yes: 85.52% No: 11.84% Not sure: 2.63 %

Example 3. Yes: 71.05% No: 22.36% Not sure: 6.52 %

OXFORD BROOKES

Example 1. Yes: 71.64% No: 16.41% Not sure: 11.94 %

Example 2. Yes: 85.07% No: 8.95% Not sure: 5.97%

Example 3. Yes: 65.67% No: 17.91% Not sure: 13.43 %

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