

12 Modern Philosophers

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Imprint Wiley Blackwell, 2009

ISBN 9781405152617, 9781444305685

Permalink <https://books.scholarsportal.info/uri/ebooks/ebooks2/wiley/2011-12-13/4/9781444305685>

Pages 134 to 152

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NAGEL

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We are contained in the world, yet there is no single world. Thomas Nagel (1937–) offers a synoptic understanding of the age-old philosophical problems concerning our nature and our relationship to the world that traces them to this seemingly paradoxical situation. He champions our core intuition, the realist intuition that we are contained in the world, but shows how it entails, perhaps surprisingly, that there is no single world because of the multiplicity of subjective viewpoints that are part of what is real. The reality of such perspectives, together with our capacity to detach from our subjectivity for more objective or impersonal outlooks, not only sets us on the path of knowledge and opens us to the possibility of moral value, but also sets up irreconcilable tensions in both domains. This situation often leads us to give a distorting primacy to the deliverances of one type of viewpoint at the expense of the other.

Nagel's achievement lies in lucid argumentation that explains how this fundamental structure of subjective and objective viewpoints and facts, and the largely irreconcilable tensions that it creates, yields most of the perennial philosophical problems, indeed most of the problems that we confront as ordinary human beings striving to act in a world that we wish to understand. His contribution lies no less in his ability to argue that this inherently

contradictory predicament is something that we must face without oversimplifying, without prioritizing either perspective at the cost of the other. And his focus is never only theoretical; his works address the ways in which we must face this predicament no less in order to live and to act in the world than to theorize.

Most of this work has been written while Nagel has been professor of philosophy and law at New York University, where he has taught since 1980. His professional work began at the University of California, Berkeley in 1963, and gathered momentum at Princeton University, where he taught from 1966 to 1980. Nagel wrote his doctoral dissertation under the supervision of John Rawls, receiving his PhD from Harvard University in 1963. The breadth of Nagel's work might be due in part to the range of his philosophical training, beginning in the 1950s at Cornell where the work of the later Wittgenstein was a heated concern, continuing at Oxford where he received a British perspective with his BPhil in 1960, and then coming together at Harvard through contact with some of the defining figures of mid-century analytic philosophy such as Quine, Goodman, and, of course, Rawls.

There is no question that Nagel stands out among his contemporaries along several dimensions. In the first place, his work is distinguished thematically by its opposition to the cultural and philosophical trends gaining momentum through the latter half of the twentieth century. His framework helps us understand the somewhat paradoxical tenor of late twentieth-century thought which errs with respect to both subjective and objective perspectives. Nagel casts the prevailing mood as one of idealism and subjectivism, which is manifest in the relativist tenor of the times and the reductive aims of most theories. This makes sense, since Nagel can show that even though reductive theories might privilege certain forms of scientific explanation, such theories are forms of idealism because they adopt an "epistemological criterion of reality – that only what can be understood in a certain way exists" (VN 15). Nagel offers staunchly anti-reductionist and anti-relativist alternatives across metaphysics, theory of mind and of knowledge. In ethics, he opposes the growing trend towards relativism, which holds that we are capable of only parochial outlooks in place of genuinely moral reasoning. But he also argues against moral theories that privilege the objective outlook to the extent of either denying values altogether or recognizing only highly impartial "agent-neutral" ones. Nagel himself describes his classic *The View From Nowhere* as "in some respects a deliberately reactionary work" and identifies his anti-relativist views of language and logic in *The Last Word* as "heretical."

The systematicity of Nagel's work is also distinctive. His philosophy offers a unified way to understand issues spanning from metaphysics through value

theory; or more specifically, from metaphysical problems centering around our nature – problems of consciousness, personal identity and freedom – through theory of knowledge, to the key challenges confronting moral theory in both ethics and political theory. This is significant in an era of specialization, when few theorists offer synoptic outlooks.

Yet Nagel's views are also almost startling in the modesty of their counsel, which urges that in many domains we lack appropriate conceptual resources that would allow us to reconcile the fundamental tensions that result from our containment in a world consisting of subjective and objective facts, personal and impersonal values. This means that we must recognize that in some domains integration of subjective and objective viewpoints and resolution of their problematic clashes is not to be had.

Finally, Nagel stands out by the thoroughly non-technical nature of his argumentation and the pellucid quality of his writing. Though his arguments show mastery of arguments of contemporaries such as Saul Kripke or Donald Davidson that are grounded in modern symbolic logic and philosophy of language, his own treatment of their arguments involves no explicit technicality, while remaining responsible to their achievements and engaging with them. Perhaps this remarkable gift for philosophical writing explains in part the last feature which separates Nagel from most of his contemporaries, namely his engagement with contemporary societal issues and problems, beginning in the 1960s with issues raised by the Vietnam war, through to such problems as poverty and charity, privacy, assisted suicide and currently directed towards identity politics and evolutionary theory, among others. In both professional articles and countless book reviews for the public press – not to mention a non-technical yet conceptually innovative book reversing usual attitudes about taxation – Nagel has continuously addressed the difficult issues confronting his society. His work strives to contribute to public debate despite a cultural climate that seems to place no value on the concerns or methods of analytic philosophy.

Nagel is identified with the realist position of *The View from Nowhere* and the strong egalitarianism developed throughout his writings from *The Possibility of Altruism*, through *The View from Nowhere to Equality and Partiality*. Since the systematic range of his work precludes examining its entire scope, I will focus on his defining book, *The View from Nowhere*, along with two later texts, *Equality and Partiality* and *The Last Word*, in order to trace his reasoning across four pivotal junctures, considered in the same order as his classic argument in *The View from Nowhere*: mind and knowledge, value and ethics-politics.

1 Mind and Knowledge

The single problem with which Nagel is concerned in all its aspects arises from the fact of subjectivity. This is the incontrovertible fact that some creatures are not only sentient, but are also sufficiently complex to recognize their subjectivity. In other words, some sentient creatures – such as ourselves – can recognize that they perceive and think about the world from a perspective that is marked by their make-up as individual members of a species. From this follows another, perhaps not so evident, fact that Nagel brings out. Just as to recognize any thing or event is to recognize an instance of a kind, to recognize one's own subjectivity or the subjectivity of one's species is to recognize subjectivity as an instance of a type or kind. But to grasp that one's subjectivity belongs as an instance to a kind is to confront the possibility of other species of subjectivity, and this recognition is one and the same as the "objective impulse," the realization that it is possible to gain an understanding that is not limited – or is less limited – by the nature of one's own type of subjectivity (VN 18). Recognizing one's own subjectivity is *one and the same* as recognizing the possibility of detaching from it – from one's particularity as well as from one's type – in order to comprehend and transcend it in increasingly detached conceptions of the world.

But the distinctive nature of subjective outlooks must not be mistaken as a matter of privacy. Subjective perspectives are not private. Rather, the subjectivity of some aspects of our mental lives is a matter of their particularity. Nagel follows Wittgenstein in arguing for the intersubjective nature of concepts of experiences, thoughts, etc. which are public, though their public or intersubjective nature differs from that of concepts that apply to the physical world. This is important because the intersubjective nature of these concepts yields the seriousness of the problems we confront: "the subjective idea of experience, of action, and of the self are in some sense public or common property. That is why the problems of mind and body, free will, and personal identity are not just problems about one's own case" (SO 207).

Nagel traces these problems to our capacity to recognize our subjectivity, urging that increasingly controversial implications follow from this fact. First, he argues that the sheer generality of the concept of experience – the fact that there is such a concept at all – entails that the concept extends to cases where there are external signs of an experiential mental life even though that mental life seems so unlike our own that we cannot imaginatively extrapolate from our own first person grasp of what our experience is like. Nagel makes

this fact vivid by asking us to imagine “What is it like to be a bat?” in a paper of that same title that immediately became a classic in theory of mind.¹ The paper, as well as the opening of *The View from Nowhere*, argues that we can meaningfully apply the concept of experience beyond conditions that make it applicable in our own case.

Even more contentious is the further step Nagel takes in this line of argument. Once we acknowledge the sort of case that bats exemplify, he argues that we also need to countenance cases where there might be a mental life without any external signs that we could identify. This key move attempts to establish that we have concepts some of whose conditions of application we cannot conceive, but which are bona fide concepts nonetheless. The controversial issue is whether “on the basis of examples of reality with which (one) is acquainted” one might have “a general concept which applies beyond everything with which (one) and (one’s) like could conceivably be acquainted?” (VN 96). Nagel argues that the fact that our concepts have complements extends to examples such as “‘all the things we can’t describe’, ‘all the things we can’t conceive of’, and finally, ‘all the things humans are constitutionally incapable of ever conceiving’” (VN 98).

This is the pivotal moment in Nagel’s approach. It is a contention that goes against the still current tendency to argue from limitations on meaningful application of our concepts to what can be conceived, what can be known, and ultimately to what there is. And it yields the basic structure that Nagel believes configures our relationship – as agents, thinkers, theorists – to the world.

That structure is realism rather than idealism. Realism and idealism are theories about the nature of reality and our place in reality. To argue that we have general concepts of experience, mind, and reality that extend or transcend the conditions in which we might apply them – the set of implications we just traversed – is to argue for realism. More specifically, Nagel suggests that recognizing our subjectivity as an instance of a general phenomenon shows that our relationship to the world is one of sheer containment, where we are parts of the world that do not stand to it in any more specific relation. The idea of containment is the core or “pure idea of realism” (VN 70):

Creatures who recognize both their limited nature and their containment in the world must recognize both that reality may extend beyond our conceptual reach and that there may be concepts that we could not understand. The condition is met by a general concept of reality under which one’s actual conception, as well as the possible extensions of that conception, falls as an instance. This concept

seems to me adequately explained through the idea of a hierarchical set of conceptions, extending from those much more limited than one's own but contained in it to those larger than one's own but containing it – of which some are reachable by discoveries one might make but others, larger still, are not. (VN 98)

But this realism includes the paradoxical twist that there is no one way that things are, no single reality that could be encompassed by an objective viewpoint detached from the particulars of subjective viewpoints, because the multiplicity of subjective viewpoints and the facts evident from those viewpoints are all part of reality. This is the cost of the realism Nagel offers. It is the hallmark of his approach since it undercuts the ambitions of objective and reductive theories to offer complete explanations of what is real. Precisely because increasingly objective explanations that detach from our specific ways of experiencing the world leave behind those experiences and the “appearances” evident to those experiences, such explanations – despite their explanatory successes – cannot claim to be exhaustive. We must not forget the distinction, Nagel counsels, between objectivity, which is a mode of explanation, and reality. “[T]he fundamental impulse behind the objective impulse is that the world is not our world. This idea can be betrayed if we turn objective comprehensibility into a new standard of reality” (VN 18).

In theory of mind, physicalism is the objectifying mode of explanation against whose seduction we must guard. Physicalism holds that all reality is physical and hence requires explanations that show how our thoughts and experiences are physical despite their qualitative, subjective, and conscious nature. Physicalism requires some form of reduction – “behaviorist, causal or functionalist” – that shows that the identity conditions of mental states are and can be specified in terms that can ultimately be identified with physical conditions. Physicalism in theory of mind is an example of the sort of over-extension or betrayal of the objective impulse against which Nagel warns:

Physicalism, though unacceptable, has behind it the broader impulse to which it gives distorted and ultimately self-defeating expression. That is the impulse to find a way of thinking about the world as it is, so that everything in it, not just atoms and planets, can be regarded as real in the same way: not just an aspect of the world as it appears to us, but something that is *really there*. (VN 16)

But if physicalism distorts the fundamental need to show that subjective viewpoints are part of reality, how might the need be met? If we reject any form of psycho-physical reduction (any explanatory mapping of psychological facts to physical ones) what alternative is there? This is one of the key

junctures where Nagel's approach takes a distinctively modest turn. He argues that we do not yet have the conceptual resources to grasp how reality could be fundamentally dual in nature – both mental and physical. Our physical and metaphysical understanding at present is not even in the right ballpark for understanding the nature of minds. What we need would be a dual aspect theory that explains how the fundamental constituents of reality have both physical and mental (or proto-mental) properties so that combinations of them can yield systems that have physical or mental properties, or both. But this is a gesture to an area of conceptual space that we have no idea how to fill, given our current physical understanding of the universe.

Yet it is also physics that should alert us to the need for openness to radical conceptual change. Just as electricity and magnetism required the development of new conceptual tools that changed our understanding of the universe from the mechanical framework of Newton, so we need new concepts to account for subjectivity. But this requires that we undertake the first step, which seems antithetical at present, namely to recognize that minds cannot be explained in any terms compatible with extant physical theory – just as explaining electricity and magnetism required recognizing the need for new distinctive conceptual resources before it was possible to frame a new unifying physical theory:

The strange truth seems to be that certain complex, biologically generated physical systems, of which each of us is an example, have rich nonphysical properties. An integrated theory of reality must account for this, and I believe that if and when it arrives, probably not for centuries, it will alter our conception of the universe as radically as anything has to date. (*VN* 51)

What does this realist framework indicate concerning our capacity for knowledge in general, rather than, as in the particular case just considered, our ability to explain minds? Nagel divides theories of knowledge into three categories: skeptical, reductive, and heroic (or quixotic, depending on one's realist or idealist outlook). One of the defining tendencies in twentieth-century analytic philosophy is to deflate skeptical challenges by showing that they transgress conditions for the use, meaning, or reference of our concepts. Such conditions can be conceived in a variety of ways – as verification conditions, conditions of use, conditions of interpretability, or causal conditions of reference. But the upshot is argued to be the same, namely to deny that we can articulate the skeptical possibility that the world might be unimaginably different from how we take it to be. Such linguistically based objections keep company with more epistemically grounded considerations against the

possibility of wholesale justification that would require a standpoint independent of, or external to, any we can actually occupy – a standpoint from which we could question the validity of all of our conceptual resource while needing to use those resources to articulate the requirement. In direct opposition, Nagel argues that skeptical challenges can be meaningfully posed and inevitably attend our “natural” realist outlook. His view that we have general concepts of mind and reality that extend beyond their causal conditions or conditions in which we apply such concepts contradicts theories that tie our use of concepts to the conditions in which we might verify them or apply them interpretively. So where does the burden of proof lie in this stark opposition of views? Nagel strives to turn the force of anti-skeptical arguments against themselves. Rather than showing that skeptical possibilities cannot be meaningfully articulated, the inability of recent theories of language to explain how we can frame skeptical possibilities displays their failure to be adequate to all of our capacities, conceptual and linguistic. Indeed, Nagel charges that recent anti-skeptical arguments vitiate the views of language on which they depend.

The upshot is that we can (and should) strive for knowledge without restricting what we believe there is to what we can conceive. We can expand our objective understanding – with the proviso that we avoid false objectification and reduction where objective and reductive explanation is not appropriate. Attempts to increase our understanding need to proceed under the recognition that such attempts may be more or less limited, just as the skeptical outlook warns. Objective knowledge and skepticism come together as “products of one capacity,” the capacity that lies in the objective impulse, the “pure idea of realism” to detach from our own viewpoints to form conceptions of the world in which we are contained (*VN* 71).

Yet, despite the persuasive clarity with which Nagel draws out these implications of recognizing the sheer fact of complex sentience, one might feel discomfort with his suggestion that the “pure idea of realism” is one of containment. Yes, one might agree that much contemporary philosophy turns on misguided objectification, accepting epistemic criteria for what is real in just the ways that Nagel diagnoses: mistaking one mode of understanding what is real with reality itself. But is there no alternative between accepting what we can conceive as what there is, and Nagel’s view that recognizing our subjectivity and hence our containment in a reality consisting of both subjective and objective facts “implies nothing specific about the relation between the appearances and reality, except that we and our inner lives are part of reality” (*VN* 70)? What is in question is Nagel’s reliance on imagery of containment. The alternative would be to argue that we are integral parts of reality, so

that understanding that relationship would be more informative about both ourselves and the world. The question is whether it might be possible to argue for such a view *without* employing an epistemically obtained criterion of what is real and our relation to it.

This pressure point in Nagel's framework might explain his abiding fascination with the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. *The View from Nowhere* singles out Wittgenstein as "one of the most important sources of contemporary idealism" (VN 105) Yet Nagel also has a growing sense that the idealism increasingly attributed to Wittgenstein since the 1980s, the view that meaning is grounded in nothing more than our forms of life, "yields such a radical and obviously false view of truth in various domains that I think it can't be correct as an interpretation, even though I don't have an alternative" (OT 45: introduction to reprinting of "Wittgenstein: The Egocentric Predicament"). Nagel's conflicted attitude to Wittgenstein is telling, especially in light of the fact that at roughly the same time, contemporary philosophers such as Cora Diamond, John McDowell, and Hilary Putnam were arguing that, far from idealism, Wittgenstein's later work offered "realism with a human face." This view would be an example of an alternative realism that tries to show how our conceptual and rational capacities – characterized by a normative dimension and a reach that transcend their actual application – depend on and emerge from contingent practices. If tenable, it would figure between the forms of idealism prevailing in the twentieth century and the stark realism of "sheer containment" Nagel advocates.

Indeed, Nagel devotes a recent book to this issue, focusing on the justification and explanation of our rational and conceptual capacities. *The Last Word* asks just what is the last word or ground of our ability to conceptualize and reason across diverse domains from mathematics to morals. He considers Cora Diamond's work, while arguing against Saul Kripke's influential anti-realist understanding of Wittgenstein's considerations of rule-following, which set the tone of most debate since its publication in 1982. Nagel agrees with the realist interpretation that Wittgenstein's aim is to resist explaining our concepts and thoughts from the outside – in any way that presents non-normative facts as constitutive for capacities that are normative, involving a right and a wrong way of being carried out such as an incorrect application of a concept. But he does not go so far as to find an alternative realism in Wittgenstein's work. It is telling that Nagel is uncomfortable with Wittgenstein's argumentation because it encourages the relativist misreading that all there is to meaning and rationality is to be found in our local practices – even though it is true and important that those practices can only be examined and justified from within rather than from without.

Perhaps there is no deeper understanding of the reach of meaning than that involved in our ordinary understanding of the expressions themselves. But then that understanding is not adequately represented by the sort of facial description of our practices that Wittgenstein recommends as an instrument of demystification. I would prefer to say that the infinite reach of mathematical language can be understood only from inside it, by engaging in that form of life. That means that we cannot understand even the form of life by describing its practices from outside. The order of explanation is the reverse of that in the common (mis)interpretation of Wittgenstein: The rule-following practices of our linguistic community can be understood only through the substantive content of our thoughts – for example, the arithmetical ones. Otherwise they are impotent rituals. We cannot make sense of them viewing them as items of natural history. (*LW* 52–3)

This nuanced interpretation of Wittgenstein illustrates the development in Nagel's own thinking. It shows his growing emphasis that the need to avoid reductive explanation requires understanding and argumentation “from within” our contingent practices – while maintaining his strong metaphysical realism. Nevertheless, Nagel's own framework raises the question whether his metaphysical realism is too stark, by offering a non-metaphysical normative realism concerning value that might stand as a model for metaphysical realism as well.

2 Value and Ethics-Politics

Nagel argues for a normative realism by emphasizing the difference between realism about values and realism about facts. This is a distinction he maintains as the critical underpinning of his moral theory from *The View from Nowhere* through to *The Last Word*:

Normative realism is the view that propositions about what gives us reasons for action can be true and false independently of how things appear to us, and that we can hope to discover the truth by transcending appearances and subjecting them to critical assessment. What we aim to discover by this method is not a new aspect of the external world, called value, but rather just the truth about what we and others should do and want. . . .

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. We begin with a partial and inaccurate view, but by stepping outside of ourselves and constructing and comparing

alternatives we can reach a new motivational condition at a higher level of objectivity. (*VN* 139–40)

Before examining Nagel's normative realism in its own right, it is important to consider the contrast it poses to his metaphysical realism about facts. His transition from metaphysical realism to normative non-metaphysical realism about value is a key junction that gives his synoptic framework its distinctive shape. Distinguishing normative realism from metaphysical realism, as Nagel does, raises the question whether realism about facts should be structurally similar to normative realism about value, rather than the alternative that Nagel rejects, that realism about value should be analogous to metaphysical realism about facts. Why isn't realism unified by the method and defining possibility that he reserves for normative realism: the possibility of steps in the development of concepts and of beliefs, not only of motivations, which would improve our capacities to understand the world as well as to lead our lives, whether or not we will actually take them – since given their possibility, they are “there” to be taken, whether we do so or not. (This is arguably the sort of alternative realism in question above.)

To raise this challenge is to question the way Nagel connects the objective impulse with two distinct types of realism: a “stark” realism about facts and a “weaker” or non-metaphysical normative realism; but not to question his fundamental point, that our capacity for forming a more detached objective view underlies both our capacities to understand the world and to be ethical. Indeed, the fundamental bifurcation of viewpoints is responsible for the fact that we are ethical beings at all – since it is the objective impulse that makes us consider what matters to us not only from the viewpoint of our own desires and motivations, but also from a viewpoint that includes ourselves as one among many agents who need to act in the world, a perspective from which one can't claim that what is important to oneself matters more than what is important to others. While the objective impulse opens us up to value, it also makes it difficult to act from the reasons that become available. Ethics begins from taking a more detached or impersonal viewpoint and attempting to solve the conflicts that arise not simply between the values and reasons that are evident at an impartial viewpoint and the desires and motives that are distinct to our own particular outlook, but among the variety of impersonal values that become evident as one adopts an impartial outlook. Theoretically, Nagel argues that a strongly egalitarian resolution that is Kantian in form could in principle ease at least some key tensions. But his modesty is chilling, since he also highlights many obstacles, some seemingly insuperable, standing in the way. It is in drawing out the implications of our

bifurcated viewpoint for moral and political theory that Nagel is at his most empathetic and eloquent.

In the first place, moral theory needs to avoid the erroneous tendencies towards over-objectification and reduction that accompany the objective outlook. Objectification, reduction, and skepticism configure the theoretical options, but they do so differently from the way they structure the domain of metaphysical and epistemic theories. Unlike realism about facts, which is accompanied by skeptical doubt concerning our capacity to grasp such facts, normative realism is opposed by skepticism, which insists that there are no genuine values. One key difference between values and facts is that the objective viewpoint threatens to make values disappear, so that all that seems to remain from an objective viewpoint are subjective facts about the desires and inclinations of individual agents. This is the broadly Humean predicament in moral theory. Nagel's diagnosis should be predictable: a Humean outlook over-objectifies by taking a certain mode of knowledge – for example, causal knowledge, as in a naturalistic psychology – to be criterial of what there is. The way to avoid over-objectification and reduction is distinct to the moral domain because of the non-metaphysical nature of reasons and values. Because Nagel argues that, unlike subjective and objective facts, motivations arising from our particular viewpoints and values available from impartial viewpoints are not “parts” of reality, he can also hold that they are not irreducibly distinct. Rather, the issue is to find the appropriate form that impersonal reasons might take, so that we can embrace and act on them. But even if we admit that values are real – without being “parts” or extra-ingredients of reality – and that they have their own objectivity – an objectivity of form – the tendency to over-objectification recurs, now as the belief that we need to find “the most objective possible account of all reasons for action: the account which engages us from a maximally neutral standpoint.” This tendency is expressed in consequentialism. Nagel discusses both consequentialist and deontological ethics, to argue against the former and to explain the puzzling nature of the latter – an explanation that has proved to be most important for ongoing debate. Both discussions feed into his larger purpose, which is to explore the important differences among reasons that can be given a general form – reasons that stay in view or come into view at an impersonal perspective – so that we can reconcile tensions and develop our motivations.

Perhaps the most important respect in which reasons that can take a general form differ turns on whether that general form does or does not include an essential reference to the agent. Such reasons are agent-relative and agent-neutral respectively, and one might speak of the corresponding values as personal and impersonal. Nagel develops this distinction in terms of

two correlative distinctions that are also generated by our dual viewpoints: the distinction between what we *do* and what *happens* and that between choosing *actions* as opposed to choosing *states of the world*. Reasons that are *relative* to the agent are “specified by universal principles which nevertheless refer ineliminably to features or circumstances of the agent for whom they are reasons.” Reasons that are *neutral* with respect to the agent “depend on what everyone ought to value, independently of its relation to himself” (EP 40). As agents, we act on *agent-relative* reasons because even though actions affect what happens in the world, in the first instance one’s choice is necessarily between one’s own actions. However, each of us is also an objective self that views the world detached from one’s particular perspective. Consequently, the objective self chooses between different possible states of the world and its choice is based on *agent-neutral* reasons. This yields a way of explaining moral conflict, as due to the fact that “(e)very choice is two choices,” every choice is at once a choice between actions and between states of the world. Moral conflict arises when the agent’s choice concerning what to *do* conflicts with the objective self’s choice concerning what should *happen*. This framework allows Nagel to explain that consequentialism gives primacy to the agent-neutral values on the basis of which the objective self chooses between world-states; while, in contrast, deontological theories give primacy to certain agent-relative reasons that restrict agents from acting in certain ways.

We are faced with a choice. For the purposes of ethics should we identify with the detached, impersonal will that chooses total outcomes, and act on reasons that are determined accordingly? Or is this a denial of what we are really doing and an avoidance of the full range of reasons that apply to creatures like us? This is a true philosophical dilemma; it arises out of our nature, which includes different point of view on the world. . . . I believe the human duality of perspectives is too deep for us reasonably to hope to overcome it. (VN 185)

But the dilemma does not block us from making at least some headway, setting aside some positions along the way. In this vein, Nagel argues forcefully against consequentialism on the ground that it is a form of over-objectification. Not all values are impersonal – though some are – and there is no “completely general impersonal value of the satisfaction of desires and preferences.” Objectivity in ethics does not require us to “eliminate perspective from the domain of real value to the greatest possible extent” (VN 173). He also explains deontological restrictions in terms of the fact that our actions are directed towards aims, so that it makes sense that in general, any particular agent is prohibited from directing their actions towards bad or evil aims, regardless of the impersonally viewable outcomes of those actions. But he

also cautions that our understanding of specific deontological restrictions is still in progress, and that there may be conflicts with the impersonal viewpoint that might require us to alter some of the restrictions on human action we currently consider fixed.

His view of ethics parallels his view of metaphysics:

It is clear that we are at a primitive stage of moral development. Even the most civilized human beings have only a haphazard understanding of how to live, how to treat others, how to organize societies. The idea that the basic principles of morality are *known*, and that the problems all come in their interpretation and application, is one of the most fantastic conceits to which our conceited species has been drawn. (VN 187)

This brings us to the inseparability of ethics from politics, and to Nagel's arguments for a Kantian and egalitarian resolution to the conflicts arising from our dual perspectives. These are the focus of his *Equality and Partiality*. Although political theory is typically understood as dealing with the relationship of the individual and society, Nagel holds that it deals with the relation of each individual to him- or herself since each one of us occupies both a particular individual viewpoint and the detached standpoint of the collectivity. The conflict between "the standpoint of the collectivity and the standpoint of the individual" has to be resolved by each individual, who needs to reconcile for herself the competing claims of the collectivity that she can appreciate from the impartial viewpoint, and the values that arise from her own unique character and commitments. That is why any social arrangement must in the first instance enable each one to settle these fundamental conflicts within ourselves, if that social arrangement is to allow us to live together harmoniously.

Nagel's fundamental point, that reconciling the values of the collectivity and the individual is a problem of uniting the two standpoints that each of us occupies, leads him to argue that the resolution would have a Kantian form. As he makes clear, subjective motivations and the fact that our objective impulse reveals both agent-relative and agent-neutral values, require us to go beyond the question "What can we all agree would be best, impersonally conceived?" to ask "What, if anything, can we all agree that we should do, given that our motives are not merely impersonal?" (EP 15). But the latter is already the form that Kant suggests our moral reasoning needs to take. Nagel's framework allows us to appreciate that the Kantian form of moral reasoning is akin to a perspective, one that develops the impartial viewpoint that is inherent to us in a way that does not discount the importance of personal values and commitments. Such reasoning is important because it "attempts to

see things simultaneously from each individual's point of view and to arrive at a form of motivation which they can all share, instead of simply replacing the individual perspectives by an impersonal one reached by stepping outside them all – as happens in the attitude of pure impartial benevolence" (*EP* 15–16). That is why the Kantian outlook offers at least the possibility of reconciliation, insofar as it requires "what I can affirm that anyone ought to do in my place, and what therefore everyone ought to agree that it is right for me to do as things are" (*EP* 17).

But what such reconciliations would find more substantively is a matter of dispute even among contemporary Kantians, and Nagel does not offer any easy answers. Instead, as we might expect, he is cautious about what, if anything, we might argue more specifically:

[T]here are, I suspect, no general principles governing both agent-relative, personal reasons, and their combination, which are acceptable from all points of view in light of their consequences under all realistically possible conditions. Under some conditions – including those of the actual world – any standards of individual conduct which try to accommodate both sorts of reasons will be either too demanding in terms of the first or not demanding enough in terms of the second. (*EP* 49)

He is pessimistic about the possibility that given our starting point at this time – the "sickening" disparities among us – we might devise political institutions that would allow us to develop motivations and values or "a form of rationality that leads to collective harmony." But this underscores the importance of public institutions and forms of life. Nagel's point throughout is that it is not a question of taking our inclinations, motives, and reasoning as they stand and finding a moral resolution to conflicting impersonal and personal values. Rather, what is at issue is to find a way to "re-order our minds" so that each of us can find a way to balance our inherent impartial standpoint with our personal values. It is institutions and practices that enable – or impede – such development. The Kantian form of our moral reasoning suggests that social arrangements or political institutions are legitimate only if they are unanimously supported by individuals – though not by individuals as they actually are, but as they would be insofar as they found themselves within institutions that allow them to transform some of their values and motives.

Unanimity is a strong condition on political legitimacy indeed. But Nagel charges that what is utopian is to insist on transforming our motivations in one direction only – the impersonal – since this would require us to forsake or transcend our personal motives. It is not utopian to transform our societies for a result – such as abolition of slavery, of a caste system, or of the

subjugations of women – “which generates its own support by calling forth new possibilities of mutual respect and recognition of moral equality through adherence to cooperative institutions” (*EP* 26, 27).

Nagel gives qualified support to the well-explored liberal proposal that political institutions can allow us to transform our own motivations through a “division of moral labor.” His framework gives us a deeper understanding of the idea that resolution lies in finding “the design of institutions which penetrate and in part reconstruct their individual members, by producing differentiation within the self between public and private roles” (*EP* 53). According to such a division, the social institutions in which we participate would allow us to act on our impartial, egalitarian motives, thereby freeing us to act on our personal motives outside our social roles. However, this is only the form of a solution, outlining the conditions that would make actual proposal minimally adequate. As such it is important. But Nagel also cautions that it is not specific, and that it might not be sufficiently transformative. What is important, he urges, is that a solution of this type would not simply separate our existing personal and impersonal motives into distinct spheres of action, but would need to transform and develop those motives through their separation. Even so, he worries that solutions of this kind might not be sufficiently transformative.

Liberal societies are one way, though presumably not the only way, to strive for such division of labor. But because of the wide disparities among the conditions of our lives – some of which are due to other aspects of liberal societies – the conflicts between our values remain severe. As Nagel puts it, even where we have institutions that enable us as individuals to externalize, to act on our impartial values, if the conditions are very inequitable – as they are – we will inevitably continue, despite best intentions, to find ourselves in conflicts that “approach the case of the last life-jacket as opposed to the last éclair” (*EP* 61).

That is why we need more transformative institutions and practices that individuals “could come to find natural” that allow us not merely to act on our impersonal reasons as occupants of various social roles – such as citizen, voter, taxpayer at one level, and as teacher, doctor, judge, etc. at another – but that “take us further toward an accommodation of the two standpoints.” Such institutions and practices would give us “Rousseau’s image of the social contract returning to each of us a reconstructed self” at a fine grain of resolution (*EP* 60–2). But of such institutions and practices, Nagel can offer no sketch.

Yet of one thing he is quite sure. Everyone is equal not only in the sense that no one’s life matters any more than anyone else’s, but in the sense that

it is more important to improve the lives of the worse off than to add to the advantages of the better off. This egalitarian view is both strong – in substance – and general in scope, since it applies across the spectrum of human lives in economically stratified societies rather than only to those at the very lowest level of need. Nagel argues controversially that impartiality is in itself egalitarian. This means that egalitarian solutions to problems of inequality are not simply ones we might find – from an impartial viewpoint – as a consequence of additional facts that structure circumstances. One example of such an extrinsic fact that recommends an egalitarian outlook is diminishing marginal utility, which dictates that, “transferable resources will usually benefit a person with less more than they will benefit a person with significantly more” (*EP* 65).

Instead, Nagel tries to find ways to show that the concern for others inherent in the impartial outlook involves priority to those who are worse off. First, because what is at issue concerns the “prospective quality” of entire individual lives and prospects at birth are so different in unequal societies such as ours, it seems “intuitively right” to ameliorate those less well off, since such amelioration will have great impact even in the case of people who are not utterly abject. Second, the “best theoretical interpretation” of impartiality concerns all individuals, not only the most needy. Concern for everyone is concern for all individuals. But particular concern that considers each individual cannot simply be conglomerated or aggregated. This suggests that questions of equality need to be addressed by means of “non-aggregative, pairwise comparison.” Such pairwise comparisons extend the range of egalitarian measures from the most abject to all those who stand in some significant way worse off than others. This method would indicate ameliorating many standing in the lower position in such pairwise contrasts, and not only those occupying the very lowest level in a descending series of contrasts.

This is a direct consequence of . . . the proper form of imaginative identification with the points of view of others, when we recognize their importance from the impersonal standpoint. Instead of combining all their experiences into an undifferentiated whole, or choosing as if we had an equal chance of being any of them, we must try to think about it as if we were each of them separately – as if each of their lives were our only life. Even though this is a tall order and does not describe a logical possibility, I believe it means something imaginatively and morally: It belongs to the same moral outlook that requires unanimity as a condition of legitimacy. (*EP* 68)

Many problems – arising from issues of responsibility, consistency, and motivation – attend any attempt to put such egalitarian principles into

political practice. *Equality and Partiality* addresses these problems in detail always directed to our bifurcated individual perspectives. That detail goes well beyond our scope here. But it should be clear that Nagel's moral and political outlook goes against current objectifying tendencies that typically stretch at most to an egalitarianism limited to those in greatest need rather than towards a more encompassing egalitarianism that considers the full spectrum of human lives in their full complexity. His approach also evidently opposes the broader relativist cultural climate, which undercuts the idea that we are capable of moral *reasoning*. Nagel's extended counter-argument to this ethos is in *The Last Word*. His defense of moral reasoning parallels his arguments about language, logic, and mathematics, considered above. Moral reasons are not even comprehensible as such, except from a moral standpoint. And it is only from a perspective that is internal to moral reasoning that we can challenge outlooks that claim to be moral – in order to defend, develop, or perhaps find no recourse but to abandon them.

In sum, Nagel's work takes the egalitarian substance of Rawls's theory of social justice and strives to give it a broader ethical significance. But he cannot share Rawls's "psychological expectations," and characteristically qualifies his proposal with doubts that we could arrive at "Kantian unanimity" on this issue. This qualification is not a small side-note since it opposes his arguments that such unanimity is required for political legitimacy. "We can get closer [to Kantian unanimity about egalitarianism] through political institutions, but a gap remains which can be closed only by a human transformation that seems, at the moment, utopian, or by institutional invention beyond anything that is at present imaginable" (*EP* 63).

3 Conclusion

The influence of Nagel's cautionary metaphysical and normative realism is hard to gauge. The importance of his sustained attack against reductive thinking in all its forms cannot be overstated. Yet it is not at all clear that those arguments are heeded rather than discounted in the rush to form theoretical accounts of mind, language, and knowledge. For this reason, Nagel's work seems to stand alone in these areas, almost in a category of its own, as a constraint that many theorists would rather not address. In contrast, his views are integral to ongoing debate in moral and political theory where they simply cannot be overlooked. His essays, often for the public press, continue to offer deeply reasoned yet accessible contributions on difficult issues – such

as the changing nature of *privacy* in the United States with its far-reaching political consequences.

Without a doubt, Thomas Nagel's work stands as a unique contribution to twentieth-century philosophy in its acute sensitivity to the complexity of what it is like to be human –philosophy that uniquely balances and unifies the human side of this complexity with its theoretical dimensions and repercussions.

Note

- 1 “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” repr. in *Mortal Questions*.

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