

Thomas Nagel (1937-)

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Biography

The comprehensiveness of Thomas Nagel's approach to philosophy sets him apart among late-twentieth-century analytic philosophers. Nagel develops a compelling analysis of the fundamental philosophical problems, showing how they result from our capacity to take up increasingly objective viewpoints that detach us from our individual subjective viewpoints as well as from the viewpoints of our community, nation and species. Our essentially dual nature, which allows us to occupy objective as well as subjective viewpoints, poses unsolvable problems for us because subjective and objective viewpoints reveal conflicting facts and values. Our ability to undertake increasingly detached viewpoints from which objective facts come into view indicates that we are contained in a world that transcends our minds; similarly, our ability to examine our values and reasons from a detached or impartial objective viewpoint implies that moral values are real in the sense that they transcend our personal motives and inclinations. Yet Nagel also holds that our capacity for objective thought is limited by the fact that we cannot detach ourselves completely from our own natures in our attempts either to know our world or to act morally. Subjective facts are equally a part of reality and our moral outlook is essentially the outlook of individual agents with personal and communal ties. Consequently, Nagel argues against any form of reductionism which holds that only objective facts and values are real or which attempts to explain subjective facts and values in terms of objective ones.

1. Life

Thomas Nagel was born in 1937 in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, becoming a naturalized US citizen in 1944. He was educated at Cornell University, Oxford University and Harvard University. His career began at the University of California, Berkeley, where he spent three years before moving to Princeton University in 1966 and then to New York University in 1980.

Nagel stands out among his contemporaries for the breadth of his work, which encompasses metaphysics, epistemology and moral philosophy, and for his development of a comprehensive realistic approach. He is also distinguished by the nontechnical nature of his argumentation, which is accessible to non-professionals.

2. Metaphysics

Nagel's realism is complex in that it advances one intuitive idea at the core of the realist outlook, the idea of a world that contains and radically transcends us, at the cost of the intuitive and equally core idea of a single objective reality. For Nagel, the 'pure idea of realism' is the idea 'that there is a world in which we are contained' (1986: 70). He understands the idea of containment in terms of mind-independence. Thus, the world is independent of us not only causally, but also epistemically: the way things are might completely transcend our ability to know them, even to think about them. His development of this idea in terms of the distinction

between subjective and objective standpoints entails that there is no single way that things are in themselves. If, as Nagel holds, reality includes all the myriad subjective viewpoints and the subjective facts they make available, then there is no one way that things are. It is not possible to give a single account from the completely detached or objective view, because such an account would fail to include subjective facts (that are only available from irreducibly distinctive subjective viewpoints).

Hence Nagel's approach is not only anti-verificationist and anti-idealist in its commitment to the intuitive idea of a mind-independent world. His realism is also anti-reductionist, because of its denial of the idea of a single objective reality. As both reductionism and idealism are prevailing tendencies in contemporary philosophy, Nagel's views on many issues challenge the prevailing positions. On the one hand, Nagel objects that many contemporary approaches, such as that of the later Wittgenstein, are essentially idealist in that they involve 'a broadly epistemological test of reality'. On the other hand, as we will see, Nagel opposes a variety of reductionist accounts by arguing that the phenomena at issue are subjective facts or values that cannot be described or explained from a more objective standpoint in terms of objective facts or values. Nagel's anti-reductionist arguments thus depend on whether he is right that the recalcitrant phenomena are essentially subjective (see Realism and antirealism).

3. Theory of knowledge

Nagel's realist construal of the distinction between subjective and objective viewpoints affirms a traditional understanding of the problem posed for theories of knowledge that does not allow for revisionist resolution. The problem, according to Nagel, is that while knowledge needs to be objective and so requires that we undertake increasingly objective standpoints, we can only do so to a limited extent, since any outlook that we can occupy will be to some extent subjectively bounded.

Since we cannot attain the completely detached viewpoint from which we could examine our own attempts at understanding the world, Nagel affirms the possibility of sceptical doubt, opposing the anti-sceptical trend which holds that sceptical worries are unwarranted or even incoherent because they impose a theoretical demand for justification of our system of beliefs as a whole from an unobtainable, completely objective standpoint. Moreover, since Nagel urges that knowledge should be of what is correct, even if it is inaccessible to us, he opposes reductive theories which attempt to meet scepticism by reducing the aim or scope of knowledge to concern the way the world appears from the limited objective viewpoints that we can undertake rather than the way it really is. Though he believes that the possibility of limited objectivity is associated with the possibility of scepticism, Nagel endorses a heroic approach to knowledge, like that of Descartes, which acknowledges that we cannot detach from our perceptual and cognitive faculties completely, but attempts to use a priori argumentation to form a conception of our situation as knowers none the less (see Descartes, R. §3; Scepticism).

4. Theory of mind

Commitment to the irreducibility of subjective facts leads Nagel to argue that the mind-body problem could only be solved, if at all, by a complete and as yet unimaginable revision of our

conception of the basic constituents of the universe. Nagel explains that the relation of the mind and the body seems problematic if, as a result of the success of physical science, one holds a physical conception of objective reality, and espouses a reductionist programme according to which all phenomena must be explainable reductively in terms of physical objective facts. In opposition, he argues that the qualitative nature of conscious experience is a subjective feature of reality available only from a first-person subjective viewpoint. Hence, though the qualitative aspects of conscious experiences are part of reality, they cannot be explained in terms of objective facts in general or physical objective facts in particular.

The precise force of Nagel's denial of the possibility of psychophysical reduction is important. He is not denying that we are physiological organisms or that the central nervous system (in vertebrates) and its physical states is necessary for subjective mental states. He is not denying that conscious organisms are made up of the same ultimate constituents that constitute all the physical phenomena in the universe. Rather, Nagel is proposing that our conception of the ultimate constituents as physical is too narrow for explaining that some combinations of those constituents have conscious experience. He is arguing for a dual-aspect approach, according to which the ultimate constituents are dual in nature – both physical and mental– in the sense that they can be combined to form physical things which have physical properties and conscious organisms which have the subjective properties of conscious experience (see Consciousness §2; Qualia).

5. Moral philosophy

Nagel uses the distinction between subjective and objective viewpoints to articulate a non-metaphysical understanding of moral realism, to explain the bifurcation in moral philosophy between consequentialist and deontological approaches and to argue against consequentialism, even while showing that the tension between more and less impartial moral outlooks often cannot be reconciled (see Consequentialism; Deontological ethics). Nagel's discussion of these issues illuminates the differences between the role of the objective standpoint in moral as opposed to factual or empirical thought.

According to Nagel, 'the view that values are real is not the view that they are real occult entities or properties, but that they are real values: that our claims about value and about what people have reason to do may be true or false independently of our beliefs and inclinations' (1986: 144). To be ethical is to examine one's reasons for acting from more than one's own particular perspective. Hence, unlike factual understanding, moral understanding 'is not a question of bringing the mind into correspondence with an external reality which acts causally on it, but of reordering the mind itself in accordance with the demands of its own external view of itself' (1986: 148). Consequently, while the truth about the empirical world may completely transcend our theoretical reason, the truth about how we should act could not completely transcend our practical reason. Hence, unlike metaphysical versions of moral realism, Nagel's normative realism is not associated with the possibility of moral scepticism according to which the objective viewpoint shows that there are no values, only facts about people's inclinations and motives.

Since consequentialism has been understood as advocating an impartial point of view, that of an impartial spectator, Nagel's discussion of moral theory in terms of the possibility of undertaking an impartial or objective viewpoint is not entirely new. However, Nagel gives a more complete and nuanced treatment of both deontological and consequentialist approaches by distinguishing between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons in terms of two correlative distinctions that are also generated by our dual viewpoints: the distinction between what we do and what happens and 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' (1991: 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 also has an objective self which views the world in detachment 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. So, moral conflict is due to the fact that 'every 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*.

Nagel thus explains that consequentialism gives primacy to the agent-neutral values on the basis of which the objective self chooses between world-states. In contrast, deontological theories give primacy to certain agent-relative reasons which restrict agents from acting in certain ways. His own position is both complex and modest. It does not allow for a general championing of one kind of reason over another. Against consequentialism, Nagel argues that not all values are agent-neutral. But he also voices some uncertainty about whether there really are agent-relative reasons. However, while he does not argue for their existence directly, he explains them, especially the most problematic deontological ones, in lucid and compelling terms. The modesty of Nagel's position lies in his conviction that we are far from a developed moral outlook. In contrast to his view that subjective and objective facts are irreconcilable, Nagel believes that it is possible, in principle, to develop our agent-relative values to be more consonant with agent-neutral values. However, as we will see in Nagel's discussion of political theory, he finds little hope that the actual conditions of human life will allow us to school our moral outlook (see Moral realism).

6. Political philosophy

While 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 themselves, since each one of us occupies both a particular individual viewpoint and the detached standpoint of the collectivity. So the problem of designing morally justified social institutions that would reconcile the conflicts between the individual and society is the problem of designing social institutions that would allow each of us to reconcile those two standpoints within ourselves.

Nagel argues that a justified political system would be a unanimously supported, strongly egalitarian one, because in taking on a more objective standpoint, we see that everyone is equal

not only in the sense that no person's life matters any more than any other'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. The conflict between this impersonal, strongly egalitarian dictate and our personal motivation to lead our own lives could be resolved by general principles that can be universalized in a Kantian manner: principles that each of us can will to be universal laws. That is, we need to find our way to wanting 'to live by principles that anyone can accept' (1991: 48).

Nagel holds that we need political institutions to help integrate and develop our dual motivations. He suggests that the 'general form' of a solution is 'a moral division of labour between individuals and institutions'. According to such a division, the social institutions in which we participate would allow us to act on our impartial, egalitarian motives. This would allow us to act on our personal motives outside of our social roles. However, Nagel argues pessimistically against the possibility of developing such institutions given the initial duality of motives. In sum, since he is drawn to a strongly egalitarian social ideal, to whose recognition the duality of standpoints is necessary, but to whose realization the duality of standpoints seems to present great obstacles, Nagel does not see how to embody that ideal in a morally and psychologically viable system (see Equality).

List of works

Nagel, T. (1970) *The Possibility of Altruism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

(Incorporates material from Nagel's B.Phil. and Ph.D. theses. Focuses on the motivational basis for morality, arguing that altruism is a basic rational requirement on moral action. This first work gives a stronger role to the objective standpoint and its deliverances than does Nagel's subsequent work in moral philosophy.)

Nagel, T. (1979) *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(Essays on a wide variety of topics that were published between 1969 and 1979, including the highly influential 'Moral Luck' and 'What is it like to be a bat?'. Several essays deal with issues of public policy and are motivated by events and policies associated with the Vietnam War.)

Nagel, T., Cohen, M. and Scanlon T. (1980) *Marx, Justice and History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

(Essays by a variety of authors in Philosophy and Public Affairs from 1972 to 1979 that bring together contemporary analytic moral philosophy and Marxist social theory.)

Nagel, T. (1986) *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(Presents Nagel's systematic and comprehensive treatment of the fundamental philosophical issues in terms of the essential duality between objective and subjective points of view and the distinctive facts and values that they make available.)

Nagel, T. (1987) *What Does It All Mean?*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(A concise and 'direct' or nonhistorical introduction to nine basic philosophical problems.)

Nagel, T. (1991) *Equality and Partiality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(Incorporates Nagel's 1990 John Locke Lectures. A detailed development of Nagel's proposal that the central problem of political theory— that of reconciling the conflicts between the individual and society – is posed by the division between these standpoints within each individual and needs to be addressed accordingly.)

Nagel, T. (1995) *Other Minds: Critical Essays, 1969–1994*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(These essays focus on the views of particular philosophers in the philosophy of mind and in ethics and political theory. In the philosophy of mind, Nagel addresses the views of Freud, Wittgenstein, Chomsky, Fodor and Dennett among others. In ethics and political theory, Nagel treats the views of philosophers such as Rawls, Nozick, MacIntyre and Williams as well as Schelling and Kolakowski. The book opens with a fascinating intellectual autobiography entitled 'Introduction: The Philosophical Culture'.)

References and further reading

Darwall, S. (1987) 'The View From Nowhere', *Ethics* 98: 137–157.

(Focuses on Nagel's normative realism, §5 of this entry. Criticizes the account of agent-relative reasons while arguing that Nagel's views on autonomy provide the resources for a successful account.)

McGinn, C. (1987) 'The View From Nowhere', *Mind* 96: 263–272.

(Focuses primarily on Nagel's discussion of the mind–body problem, §4 of this entry.)

Peacocke, C. (1989) 'No Resting Place: A Critical Notice of The View From Nowhere by Thomas Nagel', *Philosophical Review* 98: 65–82.

(Focuses on Nagel's account of conscious states and his normative realism, §§4 and 5 of this entry.)

Raz, J. (1990) 'Facing Diversity: The Case of Epistemic Abstinence', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 19: 3–46.

(Criticizes John Rawls' as well as Nagel's attempt to accommodate the diversity of views in pluralistic societies with the notion that justified political arrangements and actions require individual consent, §6 of this entry.)