

Nagel Notes
PHIL312
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Nagel, T. *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Thesis: the whole of reality cannot be captured in a single objective view, but rather may be captured only by a combination of subjective and multiple (two?) objective points of view.

The subjective-objective perspective problem

- The problem, as Nagel understands it, is that while we seem naturally to seek a single, unified account of reality, our understanding of reality tends to fall into two incomplete and incompatible accounts, one stemming from a subjective viewpoint and the other stemming from an objective viewpoint.
- Surprisingly and unfortunately, Nagel fails to provide a clear definition of the subjective. Evidently, he means first of all the account of the world resulting from “the perspective of a particular person inside the world” (3). The “objective” is somewhat more clearly designated as the result of “stepping back” from the subjective point of view, adopting a perspective from which that prior standpoint is now an object. “The old view then comes to be regarded as an appearance, more subjective than the new view, and correctable or confirmable by reference too it. The process can be repeated, yielding a still more objective conception.” (4) So, both the subjective and the objective are relative designations, though the subjective would appear to find its limit and ground in the viewpoint of a “particular person inside the world.”
 - o One item of concern, here, is the notion of a point of view or perspective. What, exactly, is a point of view? What is it to adopt one or to view the world from one? We have some native, common understanding of this idea, since it is basic to our ordinary way of conceiving ourselves in relation to the world. But our pre-philosophical understanding of our subjectivity cannot provide an adequate ground on which to base a philosophical study.
 - o Note then that Nagel appears to be helping himself to the fact of a basic subject-object structure in human experience. It appears, that is, that human experiences is characterizable in terms of the subjective experience of “objects” (objects of experience): certainly the history of Modern philosophy from Descartes through Kant confirms and develops this idea. Given that human experience is so structured, to speak of reality is first of all to speak of reality as viewed subjectively; the question can then arise as to the nature of reality beyond or independent of that viewpoint. This gives us the motion from “subjectivity” to “objectivity”.

- Note, too, the ambiguity in ‘objectivity’ as between, roughly, free from distortion on the one hand and that which may be regarded as an object. Anything that may be observed or regarded from a particular point of view appears to one as an object – literally, and simply, the object of one’s gaze or attention. For the most part, Nagel remains alert to this ambiguity, and the epistemic advantage that he sees in the objective is simply a function of the broader perspective, not of complete freedom from perspective.
- The accounts of the world deriving from objective and subjective points of view are in some sense opposed, on Nagel’s view, because the objective involves a “movement away” from the subjective. Adopting a position from which a prior standpoint may be viewed as object (“objectively”) affords the possibility of evaluating the prior standpoint and reality so-viewed. Apparently, the broader perspective enables one to see more of reality than previously, so that the prior perspective must perforce be regarded as relatively limited. Because of this epistemic disparity, the world as viewed from a subjective point of view comes to be regarded as “mere appearance” while the world depicted in the more objective view is regarded as “reality”.
- However, Nagel contends that the broader perspective inevitably loses elements of a complete account of reality, those elements that are particular to the prior, subjective stance. Here, Nagel seems primarily to mean certain features of concrete human subjective experience – the “subjective features of conscious mental processes” – including “raw feels” and “intentional states.” (15) Raw feels include the smell of scrambled eggs and the perceptual quality of pink; intentional states include thinking of Paris in the spring. These things, whatever exactly they are, are “irreducibly real” but they “disappear” from view as soon as one adopts a more objective point of view.

The physical conception of objectivity

- Nagel distinguishes objectivity *per se* from various forms of objectivity. Objectivity *per se* appears to be an abstraction on its specific forms: “Objectivity of whatever kind is not the test of reality. It is just one way of understanding reality.” (26) The given form of objectivity, evidently, is a product of a certain set of concepts by means of which to characterize a non-subjective (or less-subjective?) reality. Nagel writes of two such forms, the physical and the mental conceptions of objectivity.
- Nagel calls the physical conception of objectivity that view of reality achieved in impersonal, physical terms – i.e., roughly, the world as viewed by modern physics. He identifies three stages in the development of this account. First is the step away from the original subjective experience, and the observation that our sensory perceptions are the result of some physical process, an interaction between our bodies and the rest of the physical world. Second is the supposition (“realization” – 14) that the external world impinging on us is mind-dependent: it has a nature independent of its own which may be unlike that given in secondary qualities. Third comes the effort to characterize the external, physical world in such a way as to capture its independent nature. This is the world conceived in primary terms of “shape, size, weight, and motion” where these “are thought of

- structurally.” (14) Nagel suggests that this account of the world could be understood by beings unlike us (i.e., who don’t experience the same set of secondary qualities), “so long as they too were rational and numerate” (14). [See Berkeley for criticism of this view.]
- Notice that despite his original characterization of the objective in relative terms, Nagel formulates this idea in seemingly non-relative terms. Where ‘rational’ and ‘numerate’ are evidently intended by Nagel as non-perspectival, this view of reality he apparently understands to be entirely non-subjective.
 - Nagel regards this view of reality as incomplete because of its failure to capture the subjective.

The mental conception of objectivity

- While the specific features of human subjectivity are lost on the objective physical account of the world, they suggest a further form of objectivity that may prove useful in our efforts to conceive and understand as much of reality as possible. Thus, Nagel formulates the idea of a “mental conception of objectivity” intended to capture certain general features of subjectivity. This account of the world differs from the physical conception of objectivity in that it employs a different set of concepts – those pertaining to the mental – that reveal a different set of features of reality.
- Nagel’s idea is that we can generalize on our own subjective experiences to form concepts general to the subjective. We might “think of our own minds as mere instances of something more general” (18), where this general class might be “subjects of experience” (20), and where the defining feature of this class would appear to be having a point of view (20). That is, first one conceives a more general form of experience than one’s own, one that can encompass the subjectivity of other humans. Then, one further generalizes this concept to encompass non-humans. Thus equipped with a general notion of subjective, perspectival experience, we can formulate the idea of beings whose particular experiences are different from our own. This idea, might make possible objective reference to all manner of subjective beings, including such things as bats and insects as well as further-flung things (aliens; life on other planets).
- Nagel argues that we needn’t suppose immediately that such a concept would be either empty or ill-defined. While he accepts the general (Wittgensteinian) requirement of both external and internal criteria for the ascription of mental states, he suggests that our having a robust concept of experience enables us to formulate the idea of “experience different from our own,” where, presumably, the general feature of perspective remains but the particular “feel” of the experience is left unspecified.

Nagel’s view of reality

- Nagel’s ultimate goal is to continue moving in the direction of a complete understanding of all reality – this is the charge of philosophy. To the extent that this can be done objectively, he thinks that we should proceed in that direction. But he denies that objectivity, of however many kinds, can offer a complete account. “Even if an objective general conception of mind were developed and

- added to the physical conception of objectivity, it would have to include the qualification that the exact character of each of the experiential and intentional perspectives with which it deals can be understood only from within or by subjective imagination.” (26) Note in any case that where the goal is a complete account of reality, we can still ask what Nagel might mean by ‘reality’: what is reality, *per se*?
- Nagel’s goal with the mental conception of reality is to “think of ourselves from outside” (17) so as to avoid erecting the appearance/reality divide. “[B]y including the existence of appearances in an elaborated reality,” “[n]othing will then be left outside.” (18) We might think that this goal was in fact defeated by Nagel’s further admission that the objectively mental fails to capture the specifics of the given, individual perspective. He seems to think, however, that by acknowledging in general terms the fact of perspective we acknowledge the reality of the perspectival, thus avoiding distinguishing the perspectival from the real. Thus, a basic philosophical problem arises if appearance is different from reality. Nagel appears to suggest that subjectivity may be construed in objective terms, so that it does not appear different from how it (objectively) is. But (1) there remain those specific subjective “feels” out of the objective picture; (2) identifying the general features of the subjective does not necessarily make those features objective (!); and (3) Nagel would here seem to be again privileging the objective over the subjective, where an account of reality is concerned.
 - Reality *per se* Nagel seems to identify as in-itself reality. (See esp. pp. 26-7.) Objective reality is reality as understood in terms of one or another set of non-perspectival concepts (e.g., the physical or the mental). In addition to objective reality, there is subjective reality. Perhaps Nagel thinks that objective and subjective accounts might in principle combine to provide a complete account of reality. Note, in any case, that equating reality *per se* with in-itself reality is simply to take a position on the epistemological matter of reality as independent of our ways of thinking. It doesn’t produce an analysis of the idea of reality.

Questions

1. What is the relationship between subject and object, on Nagel’s account, if any? Is it simply a brute fact that reality is revealed to us in physical and mental terms, or are these two dimensions related?
2. What, if anything, supports the “realization” (in the development of the physical conception of objectivity) that the external world is mind-independent?
3. What, if anything, supports the idea that “rational” and “numerate” are objective rather than subjective forms of understanding?
4. What is a point of view? What is it to adopt a point of view?
5. Does Nagel have good grounds for thinking that an objective account of the mental helps us to avoid distinguishing mental appearance from reality?
6. What might Nagel mean by ‘real’?

For Research:

1. How has Nagel’s notion of a mental conception of objectivity been received?

2. How has Nagel's notion of the irreducibility of the subjective (and, thus, the incompleteness of objectivity as an account of reality) been received?