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Seminar on Metaphilosophy
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Wednesday, Sept. 26, 2007

The View From Nowhere: Thomas Nagel's Metaphilosophy

1. Nagel's Metaphilosophy

Nagel's metaphilosophy stems from the general conception that there are two inherent viewpoints someone can view the world from: the subjective and objective viewpoints. The subjective viewpoint is that which is obvious from our immediate perspective, and comprises the entirety of our pre-reflective perspective. As Nagel points out, it is often illuminated by stepping further and further outside of yourself in to the objective perspective. The farther you get away from the subjective, the more context and insight you gain on the world and your relative position in it. Most of the time these two viewpoints complement each other and provide us with our general view of the way things are. In this case, one viewpoint will usually dominate, proving to be more satisfactory than another, while providing an adequate explanation for the other viewpoint. It may also simply show that the other viewpoint is trite or wrong, and thus should not be considered.

For instance, I might say, had I jumped forward from medieval times and had never seen a TV before, that it appeared that there was a very tiny man behind a very tiny desk trapped behind the glass presenting to me the evening news. This would be my subjective conception of it, formed only from my observations without any outside reflection on it. Stepping outside of that, reflecting on what is happening, and researching a bit in to modern technology, I would come to find out about video cameras and how television shows were broadcast. This would be my objective conception of it. I could also say, objectively, that, while at first appearance it did understandably seem to be a tiny man and desk trapped behind glass, I am now sure that it is not. In this way the objective viewpoint obviously trumps the subjective viewpoint, while still explaining how the subjective viewpoint would be arrived at.

To Nagel, philosophical problems arise when both the subjective and objective viewpoints provide equally reasonable explanations for why things are the way they are, but, at the same time, they contradict in some fundamental way. In this case neither viewpoint explains the other, nor can one be dismissed as trite or rubbish and the other accepted. The way to solve such problems, according to Nagel, is to find a way to either show that 1) one viewpoint allows for the other, but provides a better explanation, or 2) that one viewpoint can be dismissed and the other left as an explanation.

2. Nagel's View on the Problem of Freedom

The View: Setting aside the problem of agency, there is an irreconcilable conflict between the pre-reflective subjective point of view(freedom/autonomy) and what analysis of the problem of free will from the objective point of view (free will is an illusion) tells us, with neither viewpoint able to "trump" the other as correct.

There are two aspects to the problem of free will according to Nagel. One is the problem of autonomy, the other of responsibility. The following two sections will detail these problems as he presents them.

Note: An important thing to consider about the problem of free will in general, before delving in to it, is that to Nagel the objective point of view is seeing actions as "events in the natural order (determined or not)". For Nagel, determinism is one possible objective viewpoint, not the sum total of objective reflection on the problem of freedom. We should not confine ourselves to only a deterministic objective perspective when considering this problem, as the problem will manifest whether determinism is true or not.

A. Autonomy

To paraphrase Nagel's intuitive view of the subjective perspective of freedom:

At the moment of choice, a set of possibilities, defined by external and internal conditions set by the world and not under my control, are laid out in front of me. When, by acting, I make one of these possibilities real, and once I've adequately defined the background which defines the

possibilities, the explanation of why this event happened is given by the intentional explanation of my action. This intentional explanation can only be understood from my point of view. "My reason for doing it is the whole reason it happened, and no further explanation is either necessary or possible."

From the objective point of view, we, Nagel argues, are still looking at ourselves as a part of the world as large. We see our actions as another link in the proverbial chain of the state of nature. Most importantly we see others aside from ourselves as acting entirely under the influence of the world, with no ability to act based upon something inside themselves. They are locked, in a sense, in to their place in the world. When we attempt to explain why a certain event happened, the objective perspective, Nagel argues, leaves open only a causal explanation as something we will accept as the reasoning behind an event.

There is a distinct conflict here. On the one hand our pre-reflective subjective viewpoint suggests free will, but our objective viewpoint eliminates all hope of it.

Nagel continues this point by noting that this intuitive view point of subjectivity seems to conflict even with itself. A truly free action, he says, should not be caused by anything, but should be explained only intentionally. However, if we point out purely internal reasons for pursuing one course of action instead of another, we are left unsatisfied as to why we chose a particular course of action. To borrow Nagel's example directly, it cannot tell us why someone would choose a job, given all the internal reasons for taking it, versus not taking a job for all the internal reasons for not taking it. Given two intelligible and possible courses of action, this does not tell us why one was chosen and not the other.

To be able to choose, we must be able to act completely autonomously, to have complete control of our actions without outside influence, to be free. Perhaps an escape from this would be to be able to act from outside. To step further and further in to the objective, until we forgo the subjective, and can manipulate ourselves in the same way the world seems to manipulate us. This seems blatantly self-contradictory, as Nagel points out. To be able to act, we must first be something. To be outside of our subjective perspective (our self) we must incorporate elements of the objective

world. As we do this, we become grounded in the world and its history, which influences our actions and makes us no longer free.

Splitting the distance by combining internal reasons with external reasoning, while not explicitly ruled out by Nagel, is pointed out to be a dangerous path. Where does one stop looking externally for reasoning, before sacrificing the internal reasons for the sake of causality? It seems, as Nagel points out, we who are subjective and free must act from inside the world, but we who are objective see that we cannot act at all.

B. Responsibility

Nagel begins his look at this problem by looking in to what a judgment is, utilizing the terms judge and defendant to describe the parties involved. According to Nagel, when we, as a judge, look to hold a defendant responsible for his action, holding him responsible "is a vicarious occupation of his point of view, and analysis of his action from within it." We are though, ultimately, making the assessment from our own point of view, which is why we tend to judge more harshly those vices which tempt us most, and praise those virtues which we find most difficult.

He also notes that this explains why what we judge others for varies. To judge an animal would require us to understand their actions or point of view. Since we cannot do this in any deep sense, we cannot permit ourselves pass judgment. The same is true with a child or a grown man with a lack of intelligence. We cannot hold a child accountable to the same standards as adults, as we cannot step fully in to their point of view. We cannot call an unintelligent man's action stupid if he lacks the ability to draw the correct conclusion from the evidence given to him. Given his limited point of view, his choice may have been the best available.

He also goes on to point out that two things may undermine this sense of a judgment. One being that the options the judge perceives as being available may have not been available, or obvious, to the defendant. He may have been acting under duress, he may not have been aware of the full consequences of his actions, or he may have simply been unaware of an alternative. The second is that it may be impossible for the judge to project in to the defendant's point of view because he

differs from the defendant in crucial ways. The defendant may have been stoned out of his mind, or under hypnosis, or, as Nagel adds, under the control of some mad scientist manipulating his brain. If the judge cannot enter the defendant's point of view, he cannot know what possibilities were or were not available to him, or judge him appropriately.

Nagel notes that the loss of all responsibility follows directly from this second case. The judge removes himself further and further from the subjective viewpoint until he sees the defendant as merely a part of the world, and the alternatives to the choice made as simply other ways the world might, but could not have, have gone. The choice from this perspective seems clear, and more importantly, beyond the defendant's control.

Nagel points out that from this perspective we could excuse the actions of any murderer, even, I think he would argue, Stalin or Hitler. They would bear no responsibility for their heinous crimes from this perspective. However, when considering either for more than an instant, this objective point of view disappears almost immediately as we recall what each of those men did, and assign blame anyway.

This, Nagel says, is much the same as the autonomy mentioned above in that our subjective notion appears to be an illusion, but an illusion that, even when recognized as such, floods back to appear to be the case. "I can no more help holding myself and others responsible in ordinary life than I can help feeling my actions originate within me. But this is just another way in which, from some distance outside, I seem to myself to be trapped."

3. Nagel's Proposed Reconciliation of the Viewpoints Concerning Free Will

A. The Essentially Incomplete Objective View (The Blind Spot)

Nagel puts forward a possible, not solution to the problem of free will, but what he calls a "reconciliation" of the subjective and objective viewpoints that provides us with some sense of freedom. The idea is that we cannot act outside of ourselves, so we should find a way to reconnect the objective viewpoint with our actions as much as possible, such that we can act and view ourselves from an objective standpoint. Nagel proposes the "essentially incomplete objective view", or

"incomplete view" for short. The idea is that within us is a blind spot, which "hides something we cannot take into account in acting, because it is what acts." Additionally, this blind spot exists in our objective view, so that from the outside we must recognize it as part of the basis of our actions.

What Nagel proposes is making our objective viewpoint a "subordinate to our agency", such that our actions are based within it. Without being able to reach a purely objective viewpoint, he says the best way to approach this is to start from the most objective viewpoint we can reach, the incomplete view, and try to construct this in such a way that, when viewed from an even more subjective standpoint, it will still seem to be true. If no matter how objective we get, we can avoid the detachment of our objective viewpoint from our agency, we can be assured that, while we may be influenced in some ways we cannot perceive, something will "remain beyond the possibility of explicit acceptance or rejection". On the incomplete view, Nagel argues, we can never get outside ourselves, even though we know there is an outside.

B. Objective Engagement

Following from the qualification of the incomplete view, Nagel explores possible strategies for increasing objective engagement, or, as he puts it, at least the decreasing of objective disengagement, of actions. At first he presents the most ambitious strategy he can think of, which would be to "seek positive grounds for choice" at every level of objectivity, no matter how far removed from the subjective perspective. He equates this to the epistemological strategy of grounding beliefs in *a priori* statements. This, he concludes, seems a bit much, as absolute objective grounds are hard enough to find in theoretical reason, much less in practice.

In reaction to this he proposes a strategy where we do not seek objective affirmation so much as objective tolerance. That is, in essence, that our reasons will not be rejected, but simply tolerated, at more removed levels of objectivity. This he concludes is best suited to situation where the highest degree of self-command is not desired. In other words, it is suited for things where immediate inclinations will suffice for making decision. His main example is that of choosing between a chicken salad or salami sandwich. It seems suitable reasoning in this case to yield to the greatest appetite, and

looking at it from an objective viewpoint neither adds nor detracts anything from it. If your aspiration is to act on your current inclination, what does any more objective reasoning matter so long as your desires are fulfilled?

This, he puts forward, can be applied to higher levels than mere impulse. The objective viewpoint would only come to matter if at some point the reasoning for the point were to be rejected. However, if the reasoning has little objective pretense and suffices as subjective grounds for action, it only matters that at more and more removed levels of objectivity these reasons are endorsed, or at the very least tolerated. He puts forth that this toleration may manifest in objective detachment from the reasoning, but never objective separation from it.

What of these higher levels though? Nagel puts forth that it is a very common aspect of humanity that we can move to "a higher vantage point and a higher order of desires." One such noted example is that of practical rationality. Now we must not merely tolerate desires, but endorse some, revise or suppress others, or remove some completely. When we move outside of base desires, or more importantly encounter a conflict among them, Nagel puts forth that a common extension is to move to prudential reasoning. We step outside of the present and look at what our future interests may be. Yet, prudence itself may come in to conflict, requiring still higher levels of abstraction in our reasoning.

The important thing to show here is that, unlike our choosing between sandwiches, choosing between prudence and impulse, as Nagel points out, is choosing between levels of desires. Impulse is our base, with prudence being a slightly objectified desire, an analysis just outside our subjective point of view. The prudential viewpoint will be more selective in the desires it endorses, suppressing the passing whims and endorsing those which have most benefit over time. However, simply because the prudential viewpoint may not endorse a base desire that is not timeless does not mean we must ignore it. Their participation is objectively tolerable, even if they must compete with prudential reasons with which they do not relate. The objective viewpoint must also tolerate the success of these

viewpoints, even if they are not fully endorsed. Without this, as Nagel puts it, we do not have freedom but merely a weakness of will.

The step in to prudential reasoning shows an important fact. The objective perspective cannot completely overtake the subjective and replace it. It must instead assess, endorse, reject, or tolerate immediate impulses so that it can form values which can be analyzed by more and more objective viewpoints, not just preference which would be dismissed at a higher objective level.

4. Conclusion

Nagel's commentary on the problem certainly serves as an interesting explanation of it. In one sense it completely abandons the pretense of solving the problem, as Nagel does not think there is a solution, at least that he is aware of. On the other hand, in the introduction to [The View From Nowhere](#), Nagel points out that sometimes the clear statement of the problem provides more insight than any proposed solution. It is in this I think that Nagel's metaphilosophy illuminates the problem of freedom. While he does not provide a solution, he offers a very clear explanation of why, according to his view, the problem exists. By showing the contradiction between the common subjective and objective viewpoints of the problem, he shows exactly where, within the interplay of those views, the portions that cause us so much issue and deliberation are. If we can ever rectify the conflict between these two views in some satisfactory way, we can resolve the problem.

As a secondary illumination, Nagel's proposed reconciliation, while not an outright solution, does provide us with a mechanism for approaching a solution to a degree in which we retain some sense of subjective freedom without abandoning the objective view. While this subjective freedom may not be the autonomy Nagel says we seem to desire, it is certainly satisfactory from a common sense approach to what freedom is. It is more of a political freedom than anything else, but it still allows our internal desires, dreams, and aspirations to play some role in what actions we take, which is satisfactory enough for most people.

5. Comments and Criticisms

I think my biggest criticism in reading this is his complete and total basis in the subject/object dichotomy without offering any commentary on those who do not hold to this particular brand of

thinking. The most intriguing perspective on this that I can think of is the Metaphysics of Quality as explored in Robert M. Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. I cannot possibly present this view in full in the confines of this paper, nor would I want to try, as following the development of this view, as explored in Zen and the Art..., is the best way to gain an understanding of it. The argument, in essence though, is that "Quality", while indefinable, empirically precedes all intellectual constructions. Pirsig shows that quality is the "knife-edge", or more modern "bleeding-edge" of experience. Everything, according to this view, is a product and result of Quality (It sounds a great deal like what I know of Schopenhauer's will, but with some differences, and decidedly less pessimistic). At one rather prominent point in the book, a fellow professor asks Phaedrus (a stand in for Pirsig's earlier years, before his breakdown) whether Quality is objective or subjective. Phaedrus thinks about this for a while, musing over whether, since Quality has already been said to be undefined (how can something that precedes intellectual constructions have a definition after all), to constrain it to objectivity or subjectivity would be to define it, and to reject it from that perspective. He decides not to do this, and instead considers both perspectives, ultimately rejecting both as suitable answers. He comes to the conclusion that it is neither objective nor subjective, and for that reason it is indefinable. Not the other way around. This he presents to his fellow professors.

While this explanation in no way comes close to expressing any of the ideas in Zen and the Art..., or conveying the impact of what is actually expressed, it begins to show how the rejection of the need to define everything as either subjective or objective can come in to play (though this explanation does this poorly as well). To ignore the possibility of other alternatives and cling to the subject/object dichotomy seems to me rather reductionist. Nagel seems to be ignoring something of fundamental importance, which is something he says that he doesn't like about skepticism when he sets it aside in his introduction to The View from Nowhere.

Obviously everything Nagel has to say is incredibly important if the subject/object dichotomy is as persistent as he makes it out to be, and is interesting even if not so. I think, though, that without addressing this possible flaw, I find myself wondering if something isn't missing. Maybe Nagel needs to

find harmony not only between the subjective viewpoint and the objective viewpoint, but with what exists outside of that dichotomy as well. If Quality does empirically precede intellectual constructions, then it also precedes philosophical problems, and furthermore philosophical problems would be a result of Quality. Given this, any Metaphilosophy not discussing Quality would be missing a very fundamental consideration of the nature of things (should Quality be true, and, again, I'm not making the argument that it is, merely suggesting it as something to explore). Simply addressing why the subjective/objective dichotomy is preferable to alternative viewpoint on the matter would eliminate the need to discuss this specifically. It is at the very least something I shall be looking in to.

6. Sources

Note: The sources for this work are very plain. There are no citations as it can be generally surmised where from the following sources ideas may come from. Additionally, this was written for a class where only The View From Nowhere was in consideration at the time. For the sake of proper academic attribution before placing this outside the bounds of the classroom, I have added this section with the brief list of sources from which the ideas were taken.

1. Nagel, Thomas. The View From Nowhere. Oxford University Press, USA (February 9, 1989).
2. Pirsig, Robert M. Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values. HarperTorch (April 25, 2006).