

The View From Nowhere

By Thomas Nagel

A commentary

Chapter 5 - Knowledge

1. Skepticism

“The objective self is responsible for both the expansion of our understanding and for doubts about it that cannot be finally laid to rest.”

What is the objective self? Consider first that we see the world from a point of view, namely, the point of view of our own conscious selves. As babies, we only have a view of the world from this viewpoint. But as we grow older, we also have what Nagel calls the “view from nowhere”. This is an idea of the world as objectively existing, independently of both our viewpoint or any other particular viewpoint. We consider ourselves to be a part of this world. Therefore we have a view of ourselves from the inside as perceivers of the world, but also of ourselves as members of the objective world. It is the second view which Nagel calls the objective self.

Nagel sees a problem in the enterprise of accumulating objective knowledge. Objective knowledge requires a neutral perspective, we cannot occupy this neutral perspective, so therefore, objective knowledge is unattainable. The result – skepticism. “Objectivity and skepticism are closely related”.

What we try to do is give an account of the world that “includes an explanation of why it initially appears to us as it does”. The problem here is that, while doing this, we always have to keep our subjective perspective, so there is always room for doubt that we are not getting the proper picture. “The most objective view we can achieve will have to rest on an unexamined subjective base.”

However, skepticism isn't the only response to this. One alternative is a reductive response. “On a reductive view our beliefs are not about the world as it is in itself ... they are about the world as it appears to us.” As what we commonly understand by objective knowledge is not possible, it is accepted that reality beyond our experience is either not possible or meaningless and so knowledge is understood as being confined to what is possible for us to experience. In this way, it is as

though our subjective restraints also provide the limits for objective knowledge. Nagel talks more about this view in the next section.

The other response is the heroic one. This attempts to somehow bridge the gap between ourselves and objective knowledge. Descartes tried to do it by proving the existence of an undecieving God and thereby showing that the world must be more or less as we perceive it. Heroic theories are prone to heroic failure!

Nagel also makes a distinction between realist and non-realist positions. The skeptical and heroic views are realist because both hold that there is a really existent outside world which we either can (heroic) or cannot (skeptical) comprehend. The reductive view on the other hand, sees this all as a red herring. It can only make sense to talk of how we see the world. The idea of an objectively existing world just doesn't make any sense. However, Nagel believes that only realist response to the problem are credible, and wants to pursue a heroic one.

Nagel claims that the problem of knowledge is not about what knowledge means, but is rather a problem of understanding our relation to the world.

2. Antiskepticism

Nagel now turns to attack some recent, popular reductive approaches to the problem. These theories are based about language and reference and are based on a theory in the philosophy of language which claims that what we refer to by a word is what actually bears the "appropriate relation" to the word. For example, when people talked of water, what they referred to was H₂O, even though for centuries nobody knew what H₂O was. This shows that the "intension" of a word – its definitional meaning – doesn't tell us all about the "extension of a word – what it actually refers to.

Now, skepticism says I could be a brain in a vat. So when I think I see a tree, I could be not seeing a tree at all, because there could not be a tree there, only a neural stimulus. But, if a word refers to whatever actually bears the appropriate relation to it, then what I refer to when I use the word "tree" would just be a neural stimulus. So when I think I see a tree, I would be seeing a tree after all, for a neural stimulus would be what a tree was. This is what Nagel means when he says "the original skeptical supposition is shown to be impossible by the fact that if it were

true, it would be false.” The skeptical assumption that I might not be seeing a tree leads to the conclusion that I am seeing one after all!

Nagel rejects this argument. Firstly, he challenges the assumption that words can only meaningfully be used according to their referent. For starters, not all words refer at all. The statement “there are no ghosts” is meaningful even though it claims there are referents to the term “ghost”. It is meaningful because it is possible to have an idea of what the right referent for the term “ghost” would be, if they existed. When the skeptic says that there may be no trees, he doesn’t mean, pointing at a tree, “none of *those* may exist”, but rather that there may be no physical, mind-independent objects with the properties of trees in existence. As this seems perfectly meaningful, it appears that this particular reductive theory fails to demonstrate that we cannot have meaningful skeptical thoughts.

Secondly, there is an argument that if the argument is right, it should make us more skeptical, because it would mean that “a brain in a vat can’t think truly that it is a brain in a vat, even though others can think about this.” This is because the reductive argument says that the skeptical thought that *we* are brains in vats is meaningless, even though the statement, “*that* is a brain in a vat” would not be. Now that’s got to be a skeptical conclusion!

Nagel concludes that any attempt to attack skepticism by claiming skepticism doesn’t make sense is doomed, because quite clearly it does, and if what he has said about the relationship between objectivity and skepticism is true, then the possibility of skepticism is in fact inextricably linked with that of objectivity.

3. *Self-transcendence*

Having ditched the reductionist solution to the problem of knowledge, Nagel now considers what a heroic theory should be like. It should provide what Nagel calls a “self-transcendent” conception, which is just a flowery way of saying it should provide a world-view which goes above and beyond our subjective view of the world. It should tell us

(1) what the world is like, (2) what we are like, (3) why the world appears to beings like us in certain respects as it is and in certain respects as it isn’t; (4) how beings like us can arrive at such a conception.

The first three parts all match typical requirements of any advance in understanding, namely, (a) an account of what the thing to be explained is (1+2) and (b) an explanation of why it is how it appears and why this is sometimes different to how it is (3). Nagel gives two examples to show we have already achieved a degree of self-transcendence. The primary and secondary qualities distinction (the distinction between properties of our perceptions of a thing and properties of the thing itself) is one example of a philosophical step towards greater self-transcendence. This gives (a) an account of what qualities are and (b) an explanation of why some properties do reveal true properties of the object and why some don't, because they depend on our senses. Another example, which is harder to grasp, is Einstein's special theory of relativity, which did away with the idea of absolute space and time and replaced it with the idea that an object's spacio-temporal location can only be given relative to another object. Here there is (a) an explanation of the nature of space and time and (b) an account of why space and time appear as absolute to us (because we don't travel far or fast enough to notice the relativity).

Nagel says "only objectivity can give meaning to the idea of intellectual progress." All his examples are examples of progress because they give us a more objective view. But what about the fourth condition Nagel required, an explanation of "how beings like us can arrive at such a conception"? Only if we answered this question would we be entirely self-transcendent, because all the while we don't know *how* we can know we haven't entirely escaped the limits of our own subjectivity. To hold out such a hope is truly to desire a heroic theory. But is this a reasonable hope? Nagel himself has talked about the many corpses which have marked previous attempts at a heroic theory, and at other times he seems quite happy to accept that we may never escape subjectivity entirely. What is more, is it really possible to "know how we can know", as Nagel's fourth condition requires? There is a sniff of an infinite regress here. If we believe it necessary to ask how we can know, couldn't we also ask how we can know we know how we can know, and so on? Such a regress is not an inevitable result of asking second-order questions, but if we want to escape subjectivity 100%, it may be unavoidable.

4. Evolutionary Epistemology

Here's one solution Nagel doesn't accept. The explanation of how we can know is that we have evolved the capacity to know. Nagel is quite rude about this solution. He claims it is just a case of misusing a successful theory by trying to apply it to problems it is not suited to solve. Nagel's rejection of it is quite neat. he says, "It [the theory of evolution] explains the selection among those organic possibilities that have been generated, but does not explain the possibilities themselves." In other words, evolution can only tell us why the capacity for objective knowledge has survival value, but not why such a capacity is possible in the first place, and this is what Nagel wants to know. Such an answer must be "timeless" rather than "diachronic" (i.e. over time). Evolution explains the diachronic progression among possibilities, not the possibilities themselves.

Nagel can be criticised here on two counts. First up, is he being unfair on evolution? After all, it does explain to a certain extent how possibilities arise: through mutations. Furthermore, some mutations get out of control, and develop to an unnecessary degree. Hence the peacock, once its genes 'discovered' looking pretty helped it find a mate, evolved ever more elaborate feathers, far beyond what was necessary. Similarly, it is claimed that human intelligence, once selected as a mutation worth having, simply kept increasing beyond its survival value, to enable us to also consider philosophical questions. What precisely is missing from this account?

Nagel's response to this question brings up the second difficulty. He claims evolution doesn't explain the choices available to natural selection in a timeless way. Well, what does he want, blood? Would it be fair to ask of an evolutionist, "Well, I see why eyesight was selected, but how is eyesight possible?" This would seem like an odd question. Anything that does not imply a logical contradiction is logically possible and if it also doesn't breach the laws of physics, it is physically possible. So there is only a puzzle of how something is possible if it seems to be either logically or physically impossible. As the capacity for objective knowledge seems possible in both senses, surely the fullest explanation of its existence we can give is one that shows how it could have been introduced to the physical world, and evolution seems to explain this better than Nagel gives it credit for. Once again,

Nagel criticises us for accepting the best explanation available, saying it's not good enough whilst admitting he doesn't know the right answer yet.

5. Rationalism

In the previous section we saw Nagel the Rationalist at work: The philosopher always looking for a solution that belongs to something like Plato's world of forms – the level of existence where everything is *a priori* and provable. Unfortunately, most people now agree that the rationalist dream is not only impossible, but wrong-headed. In this section Nagel makes his rationalism explicit.

Nagel sets forth his various beliefs about the nature of knowledge and concludes this makes him a rationalist. These are:

- (1) The objective realm we discover as our reasoning advances is already there.
- (2) We do not have innate knowledge of the truth about the world.
- (3) We have the capacity, not based on experience, to generate hypotheses about what in general the world might possibly be like and reject those which don't add up. So there must be some property of the natural order that makes it possible for thought to yield knowledge
- (4) The conditions of objectivity (see §3 of this chapter) entail that the basis of most real knowledge must be *a priori*.
- (5) Induction makes sense only with a rationalist basis, as experience doesn't provide the justification for an inductive inference.

Of all this, we can ask two questions: Does this make Nagel a rationalist, and is his list correct? As to the first question, perhaps it doesn't matter. But it is interesting to note that many share a lot of these beliefs without being called rationalists. Even Hume, arch empiricist, agreed that the capacity to reason inductively was just "there" in nature, and not discovered by reason. And Russell agreed with most of the above, saying that both rationalists and empiricists were right in some respects and wrong in others.

As to the second question, (1) and (2) are pretty uncontroversial. (3) and (5) kind of go together, and seem to have a lot of truth in them. If they add up to the idea that the capacity for thought isn't learned, then that has to be a tautology. A capacity is just a potential, and clearly a potential cannot be learned, only the fulfilling of it requires experience. But what Nagel is getting at is that not only the capacity, but some rules of thought are not learned. As Fodor put it, "the language of thought" is not learned. We may agree with this, but insist a rationalist must go further and say that these rules alone enable us to know things about the world, but Nagel has only shown it enables us to know possibilities about the world. As to the fourth fact, this goes back to the previous two sections. If we accept evolutionary epistemology and believe that we are misplaced to ask how we can know anything, then there seems no need for an *a priori* account of the conditions of objective knowledge. You could claim that we have discovered what objectivity is through experience, not *a priori*.

This section is tricky, as it raises questions about difficult and complex areas of philosophy. We should see it as Nagel setting out his stall, rather than as a developed argument. Its strength is that it makes us think about how remarkable our capacity for objective knowledge is, given that experience doesn't teach us how to have it. But then, the homing instinct of the pigeon and the dance of the bee are also remarkable and not learned, but that doesn't make us seek a rationalist explanation of these abilities.

6. Double Vision

Finally, a summing up of this long and at times difficult chapter. Nagel has set out his goal of increased objectivity in knowledge and has also noted three ways in which we are limited: by our being finite; by the probability that we are currently very wrong due to our objective selves being young in cosmological terms; and maybe by our intrinsic limitations – the universe may well extend beyond our possible understanding, which Nagel considers in the next chapter.

Despite these limitations, we can still progress along the path of objectivity, so long as we don't succumb to three big dangers. Danger one: excessive impersonality. Just because I can view myself objectively and impersonally, as part of the general order of nature, that doesn't mean I should suppress the essential

subjective, personal features of my existence. (We may ask if there is any real danger of this happening.) Danger two: false objectification. Just because objectivity works in some areas, it doesn't mean we should pursue it willy-nilly. If I try to view something essentially subjective (e.g. qualia) objectively, or apply the wrong sort of objectivity (e.g. physical objectivity to the mental), It would be false objectification. Danger three: insoluble subjective-objective conflict. This is where we form an objective conception and find it can't be fitted in with our subjective one. What to do? Well, sometimes there is no conflict, because the objective and subjective view just reveal two ways of seeing the same thing. Such is the case with colour (subjective) and light waves (objective). But sometimes it is not just two ways of seeing the same thing, but two incompatible views of the same thing. Questions of free will and personal identity fit this pattern, because the objective view conflicts, rather than simply doesn't match, our subjective view. In such cases, we have to either oscillate between the two views or have a kind of double vision. Nagel is hazy on what double vision is, so maybe it would be better called "blurred vision". It means holding onto the two conflicting views at the same time, denying the reality of neither. If such a fate is unavoidable, then so be it, but many would argue that in fact this is a kind of skepticism or relativism— an acceptance that there is no one truth – or simply wilful muddled thinking. How can we deliberately seek to believe two contradictory things in the name of philosophy? Is Nagel just giving up? This seems odd for someone who is so often at pains to say how the lack of a solution at present should not lead to us accept there is no solution. Maybe double vision is just a form of philosophical bafflement later generations will be cured of.