

# THE OBJECTIVE AND THE SUBJECTIVE



NAGEL'S TWO POINTS OF VIEW  
(OR TWO POLARITIES)

# A FIRST PASS

- ❖ A general problem: there is a tendency to admit something as real only if it is countenanced as existing objectively.
- ❖ The subjective resists objective specification. So, one must evidently either . . .
  - ❖ admit that any objective description of reality is incomplete, or
  - ❖ eliminate the (seemingly) subjective as unreal.

# ORIENTING ILLUSTRATIONS

- ❖ *The Meaning of Life*
- ❖ *Free Will*
- ❖ *Personal Identity*
- ❖ *Mind-Body Problem*
- ❖ *Consequentialist-Deontic Conflicts*

# THE MEANING OF LIFE

- ❖ The external view, on the other hand, comprehends within its scope of observation all the aims and commitments by reference to which internal significance is measured. It presents itself as the right way for the individual to look at the world and his place in it: the big picture. He develops this kind of detachment naturally, to counter the egocentric distortion of a purely internal view, and to correct the parochialism engendered by the contingencies of his over specific nature and circumstances. But it is not merely corrective. It claims a position of dominance, as the only complete conception of how things really are. —Nagel (1979, 197)

# FREE WILL

- ❖ When the act is viewed under the aspect of determination by antecedents, its status as an event becomes prominent. But as appears upon further investigation, no account of it as an event is satisfactory from the internal viewpoint of the agent doing it. —Nagel (1979, 199)

# PERSONAL IDENTITY

- ❖ When someone poses inwardly the question whether a past or future experience was or will be his, he has the sensation of picking out something whose identity over time is well defined, just by concentrating on his present experience and specifying the temporal extension of its subject. The concept of the self is a psychological one, and it is characteristic of such concepts to give rise to the philosophical idea that their subjective essence, expressed most clearly in first-person applications, is detachable from more objective accompaniments and even to a considerable extent from necessary connexion with other psychological phenomena. . . The self that appears to the subject seems to disappear under external analysis. —Nagel (1979, 200-201)

# MIND-BODY PROBLEM

- ❖ So long as mental states are looked at objectively, in their causal relations to stimuli and behavior, no special issues arise which do not arise about the physical analysis of other natural phenomena. Even problems of intentionality may seem to be soluble if one puts aside their subjective aspect, for then one may be able to describe certain kinds of computers as intentional systems. What seems impossible is to include in a physical conception of the world the facts about what mental states are like for the creature having them. The creature and his states seem to belong to a world that can be viewed impersonally and externally. Yet subjective aspects of the mental can be apprehended only from the point of view of the creature itself (perhaps taken up by someone else), whereas what is physical is simply there, and can be externally apprehended from more than one point of view. Is there any way of including mental phenomena in the world as well, as part of what is simply *there*? —Nagel (1979, 201)

# CONSEQUENTIALIST-DEONTIC CONFLICTS

- ❖ On the one hand there is the position that one's decisions should be tested ultimately from an external point of view, to which one appears as just one person among others. The question then becomes, 'What would be best? Which of the acts within my power would do the most good, considering matters from out here, impersonally?'
- ❖ On the other hand there is the position that since an agent lives his life from where he is, even if he manages to achieve an impersonal view of his situation, whatever insights result from this detachment need to be made part of a personal view before they can influence decision and action. The pursuit of what seems impersonally best may be an important aspect of individual life, but its place in that life must be determined from a personal standpoint, because life is always the life of a particular person, and cannot be lived *sub specie aeternitatis*. —Nagel (1979, 205)

# A PROVISO OF SORTS

- ◆ We do not really have opposing *points of view*:
  - ◆ There is no view from nowhere.
  - ◆ The objective description is not a point of view, but precisely the lack of a point of view.
    - ◆ It is, rather, a lack of situation, a lack of an ego-field, a characterisation bereft of any point of view.
      - ◆ We have, then, not opposing points of view, but a polarity between perspective and (putative) lack thereof.

# SOME COMMON THEMES (?)

- ❖ Each polarity presents as a jockeying for preeminence: one side claims authority, authenticity, domination over the other.
- ❖ Some polarities are present via surrogates:
  - ❖ In the personal-identity debate, the subjective plays out in terms of suitable relations between mental episodes or events; the submerged question concerns whether the problem which disappears from the objective stance persists: viz. what is the *subject* of these episodes?
  - ❖ In the mind-body problems, the *physical* presents itself as the objective, masquerading as the real.
- ❖ This again, then, plays out in terms of superiority, of the proper claimant of *the real*.

# SOME CLAIMS

- ❖ The polarities are irreconcilable: neither subordinates to the other
- ❖ No degree of inter-subjectivity transitions to objectivity; no degree of inter-subjectivity even approximates objectivity. It is simply more subjectivity piled on top of subjectivity.
- ❖ The problem arises because ‘the same individual is the occupant of both viewpoints.’ (208)
- ❖ The pursuit of objectivity implicates the individual in a two-fold transcendence of the self (from self as individual and from self as sort).
- ❖ Trouble occurs when ‘the objective view encounters something, revealed subjectively, that it cannot accommodate.’ (210)

# THREE WAYS FORWARD

- ◆ Reduction

- ◆ No obvious successes here.

- ◆ Elimination

- ◆ Some obvious failures here.

- ◆ Annexation

- ◆ Probably a mirage.

OR. . .

- ❖ The only alternative to these unsatisfactory moves is to resist the voracity of the objective appetite, and stop assuming that understanding of the world and our position in it can always be advanced by detaching from that position and subsuming whatever appears from there under a single more comprehensive conception. Perhaps the best or truest view is not obtained by transcending oneself as far as possible. Perhaps reality should not be identified with objective reality. —Nagel (1979, 212)

# NOW, WHAT IS ANTI-REALISM?

- ❖ Or, more precisely, what is the denial of objective truth?
- ❖ *Not* a modest form of anti-dogmatism:
  - ❖ An affirmation of objective truth is, if anything, the more modest posture.
- ❖ *Not* an acknowledgement that some words/concepts/objects are vague:
  - ❖ On any account, the realist can affirm the existence of vagueness.

# A PERITROPE?

- ❖ AR = Objective truth and falsity do not exist.
- ❖ A table-turning argument from Van Inwagen?
  1. If AR, then AR itself is either objectively true or not objectively true.
  2. If AR is objectively true, then there are objective truths and AR is false.
  3. If AR is not objectively true, then if it is to be accepted, this can only because it is experience-cohering.
  4. If it is experience cohering, then it coheres either with *our* experience or *your* (*scil.* individual) experience.
  5. It does not cohere with *our* experience.
  6. Hence, if it is experience-cohering, then it coheres with *your* experience.
  7. If AR holds only that it coheres with *your* experience, then: (a) it is absurdly solipsistic and (b) it is in fact incapable of being articulated so as to frame a disagreement.
  8. If (7a) and (7b), then AR is effectively self-refuting or otherwise self-undermining.
  9. So, AR is either false or effectively self-refuting or self-undermining.

# THE DISTINCTION MADE PRECISE

- ❖ A property  $\Phi$  is subjective =<sub>df</sub>  $\Phi$  is constitutively depends on the psychological attitudes or responses an observer has to some phenomenon.
- ❖ A property  $\Phi$  is objective =<sub>df</sub>  $\Phi$  is not subjective.

# CONSTITUTIVE DEPENDENCE

- ❖ This cries out for clarification:
  - ❖ To begin, non-causally
    - ❖ or, if you prefer, non-efficient causally
  - ❖ One step further:  $\phi$  partially constitutes  $\psi$  only if an essence-specifying account of being- $\psi$  makes ineliminable reference to being- $\phi$ .

# A FIRST APPROXIMATION

- ❖  $\phi$  is subjective feature of  $x =_{df}$  (i)  $\phi x$ ; (ii) there exists some  $\psi$  which partially constitutes  $\phi$ , where  $\psi$  partly constitutes  $\phi$  only if an essence-specifying account of  $\phi$  makes ineliminable reference to  $\psi$ ; and (iii)  $\psi$  is an affective/intentional/responsive property (AIR).
- ❖  $\phi$  is an objective feature of  $x =_{df}$  (i)  $\phi x$ ; and (ii)  $\phi$  is not an subjective feature of  $x$ .

# A FIRST CLAIM

- ❖ So understood, the denial of objectivity is perfectly understandable, perfectly coherent, and not at all self-undermining. . .
- ❖ . . .so long as it is understood in a domain-specific manner and is not intended as a perfectly general thesis.