Further reading

The works by Williams that are most closely related to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* are those to which I referred in the Introduction. Also relevant are: the last six essays in Williams (1973b); all but the last two essays in Williams (1981a); all the essays in Williams (1995a), especially those in Part I and Part III; Williams (1996; 2005); and all the essays in Part II of Williams (2006).

There are many reviews of the book. The two most outstanding of these are Blackburn’s contribution to Blackburn & Williams (1986), to which Williams replies in his contribution to the same; and McDowell (1986).

An excellent collection of essays on Williams’s moral philosophy, largely inspired by *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, is Altham & Harrison (eds) (1995). Within this collection, special mention should be made of: Hookway (1995) and Jardine (1995), both of which are concerned with the distinctions that Williams draws between science and ethics; McDowell (1995), which is concerned with the project of founding ethics on pure reason; Nussbaum (1993), which is concerned with Aristotle’s foundational project; Taylor (1995), which is concerned with Williams’s treatment of “morality”; and Altham (1995), which is concerned with the claim that reflection can destroy knowledge. There are replies to all of these in Williams (1995b).

Another excellent collection that is largely inspired by *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is Harcourt (2000a). Harcourt (2000b), which is Harcourt’s own introduction to this collection, and Fricker (2000), which further explores Williams’s notion of confidence, are particularly recommended. The collection (Harcourt 2000a) also contains a fine piece by Williams (2000).

For a critical discussion of Williams’s conception of science, see “Bernard Williams and the Absolute Conception of the World”, in Putnam (1992: ch. 5). For further discussion of the idea that reflection can destroy knowledge, see Moore (2003), in which I develop the argument sketched in the Conclusion, and Quinn (1993).

Persons are subjects of thought and action; they live in a world that science has so successfully managed to understand. As subjects, persons have a very particular perspective on the world and their actions in it: call it the subjective perspective. Persons are also capable of transcending this subjective perspective and of thinking about the world and their behaviour in a detached manner. They are capable of viewing the world not just from here, and from the point of view of humanity, but also of viewing it from nowhere in particular. The View From Nowhere is a philosophical exploration of these perspectives: the subjective and the objective. It is Nagel’s firm belief that both perspectives are real and that the truth about our world can only be gained through an understanding of how these two perspectives coexist in all that we think and do. He writes that if we could say how these standpoints or perspectives are related “it would amount to a world view” (p. 8).

Thus Nagel sets his reader up to think about some of the most abiding and difficult problems in philosophy: metaphysical problems about how to think about the mind in relation to the body; epistemological problems concerning a subject’s knowledge of the world around her; ethical and political problems concerning how subjects are to conduct themselves in a world inhabited by other subjects; and, finally, some of the oldest of philosophical problems – how I am to think about my birth, my death and the meaning of my life.
Nagel approaches these problems firmly resolved not to give preference to either perspective. What he seeks is a reconciliation, and he wants this reconciliation to be recognizable by each reader of his book. In this sense Nagel aims to be, if not guided by, at least true to, the way things are for each of us. He wants to understand how the objective and subjective vie with one another and to explain how this results in a unified worldview. As Nagel's interest is in reconciliation, he shuns both reduction and elimination: two very powerful drives both in contemporary philosophy and in science. A unified worldview will not be the result of ignoring, downplaying or belittling either the viewpoint of science or that of the individual. Instead, Nagel aims to "juxtapose" these viewpoints "at full strength" (p. 4).

The tension created by the tug of these two perspectives is not limited to philosophy. It pervades human life. In these pages we find discussion of some of the very thoughts and considerations on life that lead many into philosophy in the first place. As Nagel points out in his discussion of freedom, the problem he is addressing is not simply about what we should say — at the level of philosophy or even common sense; he is aiming to address an issue that confronts each of us in our lives. In this particular case, it is the question of how we are to view our freedom in the light of the discovery of a determined world order. Here the objective point of view threatens us as human beings, as persons, at our very core; reflection on determinism can leave us feeling impotent and helpless. Thus, philosophical treatment of such an issue deals, as Nagel says, "with such disturbances of the spirit, and not just their verbal expression" (p. 112). This is not philosophy as a sterile activity.

Not only does Nagel practise philosophy in a way that makes clear its connection with problems that confront us in our lives, but he writes in such a way as to engage the reader as a sort of philosophical fellow traveller. He tries to get the reader intellectually to feel the contours of a problem and then explains how one might grope one's way towards a solution. He is careful to locate his own, preferred, solution to a problem in the context of other proposed solutions. Nagel is particularly aware of the danger of obscurity when writing about these issues. In an effort to avoid this, he writes with an admirable clarity and simplicity. He eschews as much as he is able the technical jargon of professional philosophers. In this respect he stands out among philosophers practising today. And he stands out as well for his intellectual honesty. It is not often that one finds a philosopher admitting in his or her writing that they do not know what to say about an issue. But Nagel's writing is peppered with such phrases as "I don't know how to establish this", or "it seems to me that nothing approaching the truth has been written on this subject". And he is honest about the role that, at the end of the day (or argument), gut intuition plays in philosophy. Nagel's intellectual humility is not to be confused with intellectual weakness. Humility is an admission that one may not have all the answers and that the problem is truly difficult. Nagel's work stands, for the student, as one of the best examples of philosophical practice.

Nagel's work is embedded within a philosophical tradition that stretches back to the ancient Greeks. Although his work has overtones that will appeal to the student of phenomenology, it is firmly established within the analytic school of philosophy. One can in places detect the strong influence of other analytic philosophers whose work has dominated philosophy in the twentieth (and twenty-first) centuries, philosophers such as Saul Kripke, Bernard Williams and Derek Parfit. There is a strong emphasis in the book away from a trend within philosophy that gets labelled idealism. What bothers Nagel about idealism is what he takes to be its anthropocentrism. For Nagel, man is not the measure of all things — not even of all things important. Man must realize his place in the universe and adopt a suitable humility with respect to it. What guides Nagel's work is a certain sort of robust realism. Nagel takes his work to be at odds with that of philosophers such as Kant, Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson. In espousing his brand of humility, Nagel is asking philosophers to question certain doctrines that he believes have become deeply entrenched within philosophy. Whichever side is right, what is important is the debate that Nagel's work strives — so successfully — to keep alive.

Issues in the philosophy of mind

Nagel begins the book by raising three specific questions to do with the mind: (i) does the mind have an objective character; (ii) what is the relationship of mind to body; and (iii) how can it be that one of the people in the world is me?

The last of these questions is somewhat idiosyncratic. It is not clear that it links up directly to what might be called a traditional philosophical concern. Nevertheless, it is a question that fits naturally with the way Nagel is proposing to set things up, as we shall see in a moment. The second of these questions is the most traditional, at least in the history of modern philosophy. That question has its roots in the work of Descartes, and remains one of the most pressing questions in philosophy today. The first of Nagel's questions is very much peculiar to Nagel. It can be seen to grow out of concerns that occupied him in his most famous single article: "What is it Like to be a Bat?" (1979b). What Nagel offers by way of an answer to this question gives him a framework that he uses to structure the discussions of subsequent chapters. Because of the centrality and importance of the answer Nagel gives to the first question, we do well to do our best to understand his answer here in some detail.
If we begin by considering the mind in relationship to the world, we immediately notice that we can identify two very different starting-points. We can begin by taking the mind and its ideas as given, and try to understand how the mind can be in contact with the world. Or we can take the objective world as given and ask how we can accommodate mind within it. Descartes may be held responsible for initiating a tradition in philosophy that adopts the first starting-point. The problems that then arise include some of the most well known in philosophy: scepticism, idealism and solipsism. Nagel rejects this Cartesian starting-point. For Nagel we must begin with objective reality. Notice that Nagel writes of “objective reality”. This is not the same as “physical reality”. As Nagel sets things up, there is objective reality and there is a physical conception of this objective reality. This point is crucial. By separating out objectivity from its physical conception Nagel leaves room for what he calls “mental objectivity”. According to Nagel, there can be different conceptions of objectivity.

Let us begin with the physical conception of objectivity. Nagel sees this conception as developing through a series of stages: first we take our perceptions to be caused by bodies that are part of the physical world; next, we recognize that the same physical objects can cause different perceptions in different subjects of perception and can exist without causing any perception; finally, we try to form a conception of the true nature of these bodies in independence of its appearance to us. This physical conception of objectivity has certain important features: it is centreless, and it is featureless (p. 14). It contains “no points of view and nothing that can appear only to a particular point of view” (p. 15).

Although Nagel does not elaborate, the physical conception of objectivity he outlines is a conception that he takes to follow the development of science (physics, to be more exact).

One question we can raise for this conception of objectivity is whether it is complete (does it account for all that there is?). By definition, the objective conception leaves out specific viewpoints and perceptions. Nagel insists that, as perceptions and viewpoints must be taken to exist, we should conclude that the physical conception of objectivity is incomplete. In saying this Nagel is bucking the trend of reductionism in the philosophy of mind. Nagel rejects this trend in all its guises: behaviourism, functionalism and the identity theory. He also rejects the idea that we can understand the mind on the model of machines or computers. All these proposed ways of accounting for the mind fail for the same reason, according to Nagel: they proceed from an assumption that one particular conception of objective reality is exhaustive of what there is (p. 16). The physical conception of reality leaves something out: it leaves out the mind, the phenomenon of consciousness. We cannot reduce this phenomenon, nor can we eliminate it. Nagel believes that we must incorporate it into our account of what there really is.
Another outstanding problem is that if we examine our mental concepts we find that they do not entail anything physical. Without a solution to these problems the prospects do not look good for a dual-aspect theory of mind.

Nagel has something to say about the second problem, which he suggests may help us with the first. Nagel’s proposal here draws heavily on the work of Kripke (1980). Kripke’s work in the philosophy of language has to do with our understanding of proper names. Contrary to Bertrand Russell’s famous theory of descriptions, Kripke has argued that proper names should not be thought of as disguised definite descriptions. Rather, proper names should be thought to refer directly to individuals in the world via a (complex) causal link. Kripke has also suggested that this idea be extended to natural-kind terms such as “gold” and “cat.” What Nagel takes it we learn from this approach to natural kinds is that the real nature of such things as gold and cats is not fully captured by the subjective conditions for the term’s application (p. 39). Thus, while I might think of gold as a yellow malleable substance, these descriptions do not – either individually or collectively – serve to pick out gold. That some stuff is gold is determined by its (empirically discovered) atomic number. Thus, some stuff may be yellow and malleable but not have atomic number 69; it is not gold, but fool’s gold. Nagel takes Kripke’s idea and extends it yet further, to pain and other mental kinds. The thought is this: like gold, pain (for example) has an empirically discoverable essential nature; and just as the empirical nature of gold is not obvious from the way we talk about gold, so the empirical nature of pain is not obvious from analysis of our concept of pain. But there is a difference here: while gold has a single essential nature, Nagel suggests that pain has two natures, both essential. According to Nagel, Descartes’s mistake was to think that the nature of mind is given entirely by reflection on our mental concepts. Descartes quite rightly observed that our mental concepts do not entail anything physical, but he was too quick to conclude that mind, therefore, is distinct from body. Nagel suggests that we can avoid Descartes’s conclusion if we allow that our mental concepts may have, along with their essential subjective nature, an essential physical nature. This second essential nature is not revealed when we reflect on our mental concepts. What we have to accept is that our mental concepts are open, or contain a gap. If we accept this, we can then allow that what completes the concept (or fills the gap) is something physically objective. This is Nagel’s dual-aspect theory. But Nagel does not fully address the question of whether this solution really can help us with the problem to which he offered it as an indirect solution: the incompatibility of mental and physical properties. What Nagel is asking us to accept is that our mental concepts have an essentially subjective nature that they cannot lose and that is available to introspection and that they have an essentially physical nature that they cannot lose and is discovered empirically. The problem is that these two natures pull in such different directions that it is hard to see how we can really hold on to both.

Although Nagel does not say enough to overcome all worries, he does make some suggestions about how mental and physical properties are related. It seems unlikely that the relationship here is accidental; indeed, Nagel suggests that these properties may be necessarily related. But he avoids the charge that this just takes us back to the very reduction he earlier rejected by suggesting that both properties may be manifestations of something more fundamental. Just as we must descend to the level of molecular description to understand the connection between increase in temperature and pressure of gas at a constant volume, so we may need to think of our understanding of mental and physical properties as requiring a similar sort of move. He even considers the possibility that we might be intellectually incapable of comprehending such a general understanding of things, a view taken up subsequently and developed by Colin McGinn (1989). The existence of such a (deeper) level leads Nagel to consider the very possibility of panpsychism: everything, when reduced to its simpler parts, has proto-mental properties (Nagel 1979c). There is no doubt that his musings have led him into thinking some bizarre things. In this important, yet enormously difficult, area Nagel is urging us to think the unthinkable. He believes this is going to be necessary, especially once we abandon the pipe dream of a complete physical conception of objectivity. Taking seriously the inescapable but very real properties of mind requires that we think radically about how we can achieve our goal of understanding all that is possible to understand.

I turn finally, and all too briefly, to the third question raised by Nagel under the heading of issues in the philosophy of mind: how can it be the case that one of the people in the world is me? I said earlier that this is not a traditional philosophical concern; indeed some have found it difficult to understand just what Nagel is asking here. Nagel’s question may become clearer once we work through his proposed answer to it. Nagel splits his question into two (I shall ask them from my – AA’s – point of view): (i) How can it be true of a particular person, AA, who is just one of many persons in an objectively centreless world, that she is me?; and (ii) how can I be merely a particular person, AA? This second question is designed to capture the curious business of feeling that it is a mere accident that I see the world through AA’s eyes, and as a woman who is 5’5” tall. If Nagel had begun from the first-person perspective he would have had the problem of fitting others into the picture. As he chooses to begin with mental and physical objectivity, Nagel’s problem is fitting the individual into the picture. Nagel begins with a view from nowhere in particular, but he also allows that mine is a view from here. The view from here can seem a curiosity
in light of the view from nowhere. It is this curiosity that Nagel is trying to get at with his two questions here.

Let us start by thinking about the question “How can AA be me?”. And let us begin where Nagel begins, with a general, centreless, conception of the world as if from nowhere, and note that “in those oceans of time [AA] is just one person among countless others” (p. 61). How do I get from this detached and rather grand perspective to something so concrete and specific and small? Nagel contemplates this and concludes that, although my perspective and position in the world are essential to me, something else is also essential to me, something that has nothing to do with my perspective and position in the world (p. 62).

What follows from this is that, although I receive my experiences from a very particular point of view, I am capable of treating what I receive in this way as on an equal footing with what I learn about more indirectly (ibid.). We are now in a position also to look at Nagel’s other question, “How can I be AA?”. “I” refers to me qua subject of the impersonal conception of the world that contains AA. Nagel writes:

The reference is still essentially indexical, and cannot be eliminated in favor of an objective description, but the thought [I am AA] avoids triviality because it depends on the fact that this impersonal conception of the world, although it accords no special position to [AA], is attached to and developed from the perspective of [AA]. (p. 64)

This, according to Nagel, explains the sense of strangeness I have when I consider that I am this very particular individual. The strangeness results from the fact that I am “both the logical focus of an objective conception of the world and a particular being in that world who occupies no central position whatever” (ibid.).

By the end of Chapter 4, Nagel has set the stage for the work in the rest of the book. Nagel takes our subjectivity for granted. He merely asserts that it exists and cannot be ignored, eliminated or reduced. What interests Nagel is that we have different essential natures, and what he wants is to see how we might reconcile these. I would suggest that it is Nagel’s idea of mental objectivity, and correically his notion of an objective self, that introduces a new and interesting dimension to many old debates in philosophy. In the rest of the book Nagel explores these different natures as they manifest themselves in various domains and looks at how they lead to many fundamental philosophical problems and dilemmas.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Nagel considers questions central to both epistemology and metaphysics. He begins by raising questions concerning the relationship between objectivity and knowledge. He then moves on to look at the issue of realism, and to contrast this realism with the idealism he rejects.

Although Nagel begins with epistemology, his views here are informed by his metaphysics. Metaphysical issues about realism go hand in glove with epistemological issues concerning scepticism. Nagel takes a firm line on both: a realism that holds the world to be independent of my – or any subject’s – perception of it goes along with a scepticism that cannot be denied or refuted. As Nagel says, “The extension of power [he means here, knowledge] and the growth of insecurity [he means here, scepticism] go hand in hand” (p. 67). Like Descartes, Nagel takes scepticism seriously; unlike Descartes, Nagel does not believe philosophers can reply to, or dismiss, scepticism. Nagel labels Descartes’s attempt to defeat the sceptic “heroic”. Heroic theories attempt to close a gap that exists between our ordinary and scientific beliefs about the world and the appearance of that world to us. Nagel accepts this gap and insists that it cannot be closed. Nagel acknowledges a very strong tradition in philosophy that tries to show that scepticism is mistaken or misguided in some way. He dismisses it swiftly. His dismissal is founded on the following simple thought: scepticism is self-evidently possible and intelligible. It is important to remember that not all philosophers – whether idealist or realist – would find this simple thought as compelling as Nagel does.

Nagel differs from Descartes in another important respect: Descartes believes, while Nagel does not, that objective knowledge proceeds via a series of steps each of which can be deemed certain. This lack of certainty is, for Nagel, part and parcel of a recognition of the gap. Nagel also distances himself from the traditional view of the central problem of epistemology: the “impersonal problem” of saying what conditions we need to add to belief to achieve knowledge. In Nagel’s view the central epistemological problem is the “first-person problem” of what to believe and how to justify one’s beliefs (p. 69).

The pursuit of knowledge is the pursuit of objective knowledge. This gives us insight into the title Nagel chose for his book: we aim to achieve a view of the world that is not a view from here and now (this is my first-person, feature-full, centred view on the world), but is a view from nowhere in particular. This larger and more comprehensive view is intended to take in all our particular points of view. This means that our pursuit of understanding is also a pursuit of self-understanding. The knowledge we seek is both of the world and of our place in it. The comprehensiveness of what we seek leads us to develop what
Nagel calls "double vision": we need both to understand ourselves as part of the natural, fully objective, order and to understand ourselves as individuals whose lives can often seem at odds with that natural order. The impetus to this understanding is, says Nagel "a mystery" (p. 78). In order to understand the basis of this knowledge, Nagel suggests that we consider rationalism. By rationalism he does not mean innate knowledge of truths about the world, but, rather, a capacity, not based on experience, to generate hypotheses about what in general the world may be like (p. 83). In other words, Nagel suggests that the basis of our knowledge may be a priori.

As we have seen, what Nagel has to say about knowledge is premised on his commitment to realism. Nagel characterizes his realism thus: "the world may be inconceivable to our minds" (p. 91). What Nagel aims to oppose with his realism is an idealism that holds that the world could not be inconceivable to our minds. Variations on the theme of idealism are found in the writings of Berkeley, Kant, P. F. Strawson, Davidson and Wittgenstein. Nagel offers swift refutations of the position of each of these great thinkers in turn. Although Nagel nowhere mentions his name, I find Nagel's position on realism remarkably close to that of John Locke. The following is a quotation from Locke's *An Essay on Human Understanding*, and it has many an echo in Nagel's work:

> What other simple Ideas 'tis possible the Creatures in other parts of the Universe may have ... 'tis not for us to determine. But to say, or think there are no such, because we conceive nothing of them, is no better an argument, than if a blind Man should be positive in it, that there was no such thing as Sight and Colour ... Only this, I think, I may confidently say of [our ignorance], that the intellectual and sensible World, are in this perfectly alike; That part, which we see of either of them, holds no proportion with what we see not. And whatsoever we can reach with our Eyes, or our Thoughts of either of them, is but a point, almost nothing, in comparison with the rest. (Locke [1689] 1975: 553–4)*

In accordance with his rationalism, Nagel suggests that we possess a completely general conception of reality, the precise details of which may be (and very likely are) beyond our comprehension. Again in a manner reminiscent of Locke, Nagel writes that we may have an inadequate conception of the existence of much about which we may never form a more adequate conception (p. 93). Nagel is here attempting to fend off one of the hardest questions facing his form of realism. It is not possible to adjudicate this debate here, but we may get a taste for the debate if we consider very briefly the views of one of Nagel's opponents, Donald Davidson. Davidson has suggested that we "see the world through language"; furthermore, Davidson holds that all language is in principle translatable into the one we speak. If Davidson is right, then the world as we think of it apart from ourselves and the world as we think of it are in some rather complex way interdependent. Nagel wants to deny any hint of interdependence. According to Nagel, we are mere blips on the radar of the universe, and the universe is vast in ways that are very likely beyond our ken. There is no doubt that there is much at stake here; there is also no doubt where Nagel wants to position himself in the ongoing debate. In his own words Nagel's position amounts to "a strong form of anti-humanism: the world is not our world, even potentially" (p. 108). Nagel claims that his position is in keeping with a kind of humility and modesty (again compare the views of Locke); although the philosopher who would reject Nagelian realism may also stake out a claim to humility and modesty.

**Action and ethics**

In Chapters 7–9, Nagel turns to examine issues in and around ethics. He begins with a central problem that confronts us when we consider the issue of objectivity in connection with action: the problem of freedom. The problem arises both in connection with oneself and in connection with others. In connection with oneself it takes this form: when we look at the world objectively -- and consider all our actions as causally determined -- it is difficult to see how our actions can be free (the classic problem of free will). In connection with others we have the classic problem of free will, but we have an additional problem. If the actions of others are not free, it is difficult to justify our reactive attitudes towards them (to feel angered, for example, by what they did to us) and it looks hard to justify our tendency to hold them responsible for their actions. The problem that objectivity poses for action strikes at the very heart of our sense of ourselves as persons acting together in the world.

Consider the following. Your best friend telephones to say that your boyfriend was seen kissing someone else. Feelings of betrayal, anger and upset will no doubt well up in you. You may have thoughts along the following lines. Your boyfriend had a choice, and he chose to act in a way that was unfaithful. At the very moment that he was tempted to kiss someone else, he could have refrained, he could have remained loyal to you; but he did not, and this is why you are upset with him. You blame him for what he did. You consider that you yourself had the opportunity to kiss someone else just last Saturday night, but you chose not to. You exercised self-control, even though you now think you may have chosen
differently if you had known what you now know. But now consider the situation from a more objective point of view. The causal pressures leading up to your boyfriend's action were overwhelming and may be thought to determine his kiss; he was not—and could not be—in control. You do not get upset with an aspirin for dissolving in water. You do not get angry with the clouds that threaten your picnic (at least you recognize that this is irrational). And even your decision not to kiss last Saturday can be viewed as the result of various factors in your background and even the character you inherited from your parents.

P. F. Strawson (1974) famously argued that our feeling of freedom and our reactive attitudes towards others are in some way immune to beliefs concerning the causation and determinism of our actions. We may allow that a particular action could be given a purely causal explanation, and we may hold our feelings in abeyance if we learn, for example, that someone had a particularly tragic upbringing; but what is possible for an act here and there is not possible for our actions as a whole. Nagel disagrees with Strawson. Just as Nagel thinks it is possible—and natural—to be a wholesale sceptic concerning our beliefs about the world, so he thinks that it is possible to generalize the thought that our actions are caused and determined. It is possible to think not just that certain of our acts are determined, but that all of them are. This just is, according to Nagel, the philosophical challenge to our freedom. Just as Nagel holds that scepticism is the corollary of realism, so he holds that a challenge to our freedom is the corollary of an objective stance vis-à-vis our actions. In both arenas we find a clash between the objective and the subjective point of view. Strawson finds wholesale scepticism implausible and a purely objective stance on our actions impossible; Nagel finds both a very real part of the way things are.

Nagel does not think we have to accept that we are mere helpless observers when confronted with the objective stance. He thinks it should be possible to make the objective standpoint the basis for action, to act while acknowledging a more objective perspective. Nagel labels this the "strategy of objective tolerance" (p. 130). Objective tolerance is supposed to help with the feeling of helplessness that washes over us when we contemplate ourselves objectively. Helplessness results only if we expect objective affirmation of our actions. But Nagel thinks that objective affirmation is too ambitious; tolerance is all we can manage. Objective tolerance helps us to recognize the possibility of greater objectivity while at the same time allowing us to acknowledge that complete objectivity eludes us; it eludes us because of our subjective nature. At any given time we must act in the light of the most objective view of which we are capable. However, no objective view can, for us, be complete, and the objective view in light of which we act must not be rejected simply because of its incompleteness. Nagel calls this subjective nature a "blind spot" (p. 127); we, as subjects, remain, as it were, behind the lens that surveys the world objectively. And this blind spot affords a space for our autonomy. I can, according to Nagel, be content to make my choices in accordance with my inclinations and view of the world, while at the same time acknowledging the possibility of a more objective perspective on my action. The thought seems to be that, even as I contemplate this objective possibility, I can acknowledge that I am still behind the lens. The blind spot is, in effect, our salvation.

Objective tolerance may work when we consider the possibility of looking at our actions sub specie aeternitatis, but there are other objectivizing moves for which toleration will not work. What is needed for these is something along the lines of what Nagel calls "objective integration" (p. 132), an important method of which is practical rationality. What Nagel has in mind here is the move, within subjectivity, from basic everyday desires to a higher vantage point with respect to them. From this higher vantage point some of these desires are endorsed, some suppressed and yet others rejected. And there is not one such vantage point, but several. Practical rationality is exercised at several levels. As we move to integrate desires, we encounter prudence. Prudential rationality is exercised from an objective standpoint detached from the present. It is not enmeshed in the present, but can adjudicate between desires past, present and future. Because prudence allows us to gain a perspective on our present desires, Nagel sees it as a moment in the pursuit of our freedom; it is the first stage in the development of an objective will. Nagel suggests that it is the essential activity of such an objective will to recognize values, as opposed to mere preferences (p. 134).

Prudence is one point along the path of objectivity; recognizing oneself as one individual among others is another. Just as the standpoint of prudence is active (prudential motives are produced by this objective standpoint), so the standpoint that involves myself as one among others is also active. Furthermore, just as prudence yields value that is personal, so this impersonal perspective yields value that is impersonal. This impersonal perspective involves objectivity, but not an objectivity that takes us outside the sphere of subjectivity; this perspective is robustly interpersonal. From this impersonal perspective—from this place outside our own subjectivity—we enter the world of ethics and politics. Following Kant, Nagel views ethics as increasing the "range of what it is about ourselves that we can will"; this range includes not just our actions but the motives and character traits from which these actions arise (p. 135). As Nagel puts it in one place, what we hope for is to "find ourselves faced with the choices we want to be faced with, in a world that we can want to live in" (p. 136). It is in this way that ethics takes us into politics.

Nagel holds that objectivity is the central problem of ethics (p. 138). And he reminds us constantly of the parallel between belief and value; while in
theoretical reasoning we aim to step back from our own individual perspectives, so in practical reasoning we aim to step back from our personal values. We must remember that objectivity in value is still personal – it is interpersonal; objectivity in belief aims to transcend the personal. This point can be obscured by Nagel’s generous use of the term “objective”. With our beliefs we aim to transcend any perspective; with value we aim to transcend our individual wants and preferences. Accordingly, the question with which ethics begins, is not “What should I do?”, but “What should this person do?” (p. 141).

One problem for Nagel’s view is that the move to a more objective stance with respect to value may lead to the conclusion that value is an illusion created by our subjective perspective. Nagel identifies this worry as lying behind Humean subjectivism. Nagel hopes to resist Humean subjectivism and the conclusion that “objective value” is an oxymoron. Nagel here stakes out his argumentative strategy: realism with respect to value (like realism with respect to the world around us) operates as a “defeasible presumption” (p. 143). He writes: “in general, there is no way to prove the possibility of realism; one can only refute impossibility arguments, and the more one does this the more confidence one may have in the realist alternative” (p. 144). Nagel then proceeds to consider and attempts to refute Hume’s arguments against realism about value, after which he returns to defend his commitment to objective value.

Hume famously claimed that it was not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of one’s little finger; Nagel begs to differ. It is Nagel’s view that such a preference is objectively wrong, and not to appreciate this is to be in the grip of an overly narrow conception of reasoning (p. 155). On Hume’s view, reason is the handmaiden of desire; a person has reason to do what will satisfy her desires at the time of acting. Nagel takes the province of reason to be wider than this. Sometimes, claims Nagel, a desire appears only because I recognize that there is a reason to do or to want something (p. 151). For example, my desire to prevent the destruction of the world may appear as the result of my recognition of the objective value of preserving the world over a scratch to my little finger. But this may be to move too quickly. To help us to see that the anti-Humean position must be right, and to make a case for objective value, Nagel starts by considering the simple case of pain and pleasure. What Nagel wants is to convince us that pain is a bad and pleasure is a good – no matter who suffers them. He begins by asking us to acknowledge that having a severe headache gives me a reason to take an aspirin, or that I will experience pain is a reason not to put my hand in the fire. (It is not just the case that I have the rather useful inclination to take an aspirin or not to put my hand in the fire.) If what Nagel says makes sense, then the idea of an objective practical reason makes sense. If Nagel is right, we can say that pain itself is something

I have reason to avoid. But he wants to convince us of more than this. Nagel wants to convince us that pain and pleasure provide more than what he calls “agent-relative” reasons for action: they can provide “agent-neutral” reasons. By this is meant that I have a reason not only to avoid pain to myself, but I also have reason – at least prima facie – to relieve the pain of others. The objective value that pain has is a value regardless of who is suffering it. Nagel suggests that the relation between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons is “probably the central question of ethical theory” (p. 159).

Once impersonal value is admitted, there is a temptation to go the whole hog. This is how Nagel sees traditional forms of consequentialism (especially utilitarianism). According to Nagel, consequentialists take seriously the idea of impersonal value at the expense of personal value. What the consequentialist misses is the way in which personal value limits what may be done in the service of impersonal value. In this connection Nagel discusses deontological constraints. Deontological constraints give reasons not to treat others in certain ways that derive not from impersonal considerations regarding the interests of others, but from personal demands that govern one’s relations with others. These constraints involve obligations created by promises, restrictions against lying, prohibitions against the violation of various individual rights and the like. As Nagel points out, “Deontological reasons have their full force against your doing something – not just against its happening” (p. 177). This is why they are not impersonal. Deontological constraints are precisely what utilitarians reject. According to the utilitarian, a death is a death and it matters not how it comes about. Nagel disagrees, although he admits that understanding deontological constraints can be baffling. The important factor here, as Nagel sees it, is intention. According to Nagel, there is something unacceptable about intending to cause someone harm, despite the fact that a greater good may result. What is unacceptable is that intending to cause harm in such cases involves allowing oneself to be guided by evil. If you must kill one person in order to save the life of, say, twenty others, then if your victim does not die after the first wound you must, perforce, administer a second wound. In other words, you must aim to achieve this death. And the problem with doing evil intentionally is that it involves striving against value (p. 182). What deontological constraints point up is the real conflict between subjective and objective points of view. From the objective point of view one is considering the impersonally best alternative; from the subjective point of view one is choosing the best action. These two points of view must be balanced against one another, and it is this balance that Nagel thinks will ultimately yield truth in ethics.

There are further complexities here. One of these arises once we notice that not all values are as simple as the ones that are given rise to by the suffering
of pain and enjoyment of pleasure. Take, for example, my desire to be a good
philosopher, or Ellen MacArthur’s desire to sail around the globe. While these
desires may give me and Ellen reasons for action, they do not obviously give
others reason to help us satisfy our desires. Value in such cases is “essentially
perspectival” (p. 168). Nagel struggles to say something that will help us to
decide which values are essentially perspectival and which have more objective
value. Must we conclude that only pains and pleasures yield objective value?
Nagel does not think so. He argues that objective value also attaches to liberty,
opportunity and the basic resources of life — what Nagel refers to as “very gen-
eral human goods” (p. 171). And what informs these as agent-neutral values
is the idea that no one is more important than anyone else. Once both agent-
relative and agent-neutral values are admitted, the question is raised how a life
is to be organized so that both can be given their due (p. 174). Nagel sees this
as much an issue for political theory as for ethics.

Living right, living well and living a meaningful life

The tension between objective and subjective points of view manifest itself eve-
dewhere. Another manifestation of this tension that interests Nagel is between
the impersonal demands of morality (living right) and the way each of us leads
our lives in accordance with our personal tastes and attachments (living well).
Another is an impersonal perspective on our birth, life and death, and a sub-
jective perspective on the same. I shall end by briefly discussing each of these
tensions in turn.

The tension between living right and living well that interests Nagel is one
he finds discussed in the works of Aristotle (who defines living right in terms
of living well), Plato (who argues the reverse of Aristotle’s position), Nietzsche
(who gives priority to living well), various utilitarian and Kantian writers (who
give priority to right living), and those (unidentified) who concede priority
to neither. Nagel positions himself closest to utilitarian and Kantian writers,
although he wants to allow that we have reason to want both (p. 197). On the
side of living well we find considerations of personal interest (I may like to
spend my money on an expensive sound system and fine whisky, and to give
priority to my friends and family); on the side of living right we find various
impersonal demands (such as giving to charity and helping others regardless of
their relationship to me). As Nagel sees it, both personal and impersonal con-
siderations give us reasons for action. Impersonal demands weigh very strongly,
but they cannot completely block personal ones. Although both considerations
may give reasons for action, we may think that morality lies on the side of the
impersonal and — given the strength of impersonal demands — conclude that liv-
ing right is incompatible with living well. Nagel hopes to avoid this conclusion
by suggesting that a commitment to living well can be impersonally recognized
and acknowledged. Interestingly, Nagel here sees a role for politics in helping
to ease the tension between living well and living right by arranging the world
so that we can all live well without injuring others. One of the aims of politics,
according to Nagel, ought to be moral harmony.

This takes us to the last of the tensions between objectivity and subjectivity
that Nagel discusses. He writes: “The pursuit of objectivity with respect to
value runs the risk of leaving value behind altogether” (p. 209). This can seem
particularly true when we consider a human life from an objective perspective.
From the outside one’s birth and death can seem insignificant, and one’s life
without point. From the inside, on the other hand, one’s birth, life and death can
seem “monstrously important” (ibid.). The different perspectives can be seen
in the development from a child (engrossed in the personal) to the adult (with
the dawning realization of the impersonal). And the problem is not just that
I can view my life sometimes from this perspective and sometimes from that,
but that I can simultaneously be involved and detached from the life that I lead.
A sense of absurdity can result if one overdoes the detachment; life can come
to seem meaningless. An inability to act in the world can be an extreme reac-
tion to the detached perspective. Nagel sees this sense of absurdity as a form of
skepticism at the level of motivation. Faced with the problem of meaningless-
ness, Nagel once again reminds us that the engaged and the detached perspec-
tives exist side by side in each of us. But recognition of the two perspectives
alone may not be enough. The tension and conflict they produce in us may
lead us to try to deny one or another perspective. Thus the religious ascetic
may try to deny the subjective perspective by throwing off all worldly ambi-
tion and distancing himself from close personal ties. Or the bon vivant may
try to shake the objective perspective by devoting himself only to his pleas-
ures and interests. Characteristically, Nagel rejects both reactions in favour of
a recognition of real conflict. In the place of denial, one must seek to promote
harmony between these two very different perspectives on one’s life. Indeed,
Nagel thinks that the recognition of an objective perspective need not result
in absurdity; it can, he suggests, play an important part in human motivation
(p. 221). It can do this if we react to the objective stance with a form of humil-
ity: “the recognition that you are no more important than you are, and that the
fact that something is of importance to you, or that it would be good or bad if
you did or suffered something, is a fact of purely local significance” (p. 222).
But even with a healthy dose of humility the tension persists; it is, after all, part
of the human condition.
ANITA AVRAMIDES

The power of the subjective perspective can be felt most strongly, perhaps, when one contemplates one’s own birth and one’s own death. Consider first one’s own birth. Of course, it is an accident that one exists (just think of all the things that had to be in place for your conception to occur); and from a detached perspective one’s own birth is not really very important. Nevertheless, it is not very easy to consider one’s birth in these terms. There is even a feeling that the world around me could not exist without me. This feeling is not at all compatible with the idea that my life is an accident and my birth unimportant. I may be able to bring myself to think of my birth in these terms, but it is very difficult indeed to shake the feeling that my existence is undeniable. When we turn to contemplate our own death we find a similar difficulty. Even the suicidal can find the contemplation of their own death difficult. As Nagel writes, “Death as an event in the world is easy to think about; the end of my world is not” (p. 225), no matter how awful my world may be. Nagel suggests that the problem here may be deeply embedded. It may be that the subjective point of view simply does not allow for its own annihilation. From the objective point of view things come into existence and then pass away. But the subjective point of view does not contain the possibility of its own non-existence; my life is the actuality on which depend all the possibilities that make up my life. As Nagel writes, “we cannot rise above death by occupying a vantage point that death will destroy” (p. 231). When contemplating one’s own death the force of competing perspectives is particularly strong.

As in so many other areas of our lives, we must acknowledge the force of both the subjective and objective standpoint and strive to understand the place of each. Nagel does not deny that there will be real difficulties associated with this acknowledgement. But it his firm belief that the attempt to reconcile these two perspectives gives us the only chance we have to come near to living our lives “in the light of truth” (ibid.).

Notes


Bibliography