

# The View from Nowhere

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Thomas Nagel was 78 on 4th July this year. He is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy and Law at New York University, and in 1986 published his influential book, *The View from Nowhere*<sup>1</sup>, which gives my talk both its title and its subject matter. The book's first sentence states,

"This book is about a single problem: how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and the viewpoint included"<sup>2</sup> [end quote]

- in other words, how to incorporate the reality of subjective experience within a total picture of reality that also includes the physical reality which is the subject matter of physics and all 'third person' statements about the world. This quest raises some profound metaphysical and epistemological issues, including that of the mind-body problem and the claims on our allegiance of realism, idealism and scepticism. I shan't attempt a précis or a digest of the whole book, but rather explore, on my way to a somewhat anti-Kantian conclusion, three areas tackled by Nagel that are most pertinent to today's topic, which you may remember is: 'What is the world *really* like, and how can we know?'. My three areas are:

1. The subjectivity of consciousness.
2. Ontology and epistemology.
3. Levels of objectivity.

So first, the subjectivity of consciousness. Nagel tells us,

"The subjectivity of consciousness is an irreducible feature of reality - without which we couldn't do physics or anything else - and it must occupy as fundamental a place in any credible world view as matter, energy, space, time and numbers."<sup>3</sup>

The *irreducibility* is immediately controversial, being part of Nagel's avowed realism, which rejects both idealism and the reductionism of physicalist philosophers who would equate mind and brain. For Nagel not only is the world independent of mind; but the sciences which study physical reality, including neurological science, have nothing to say about subjective consciousness - the view from within - which we are all aware is as much a part of reality as the external world. His task, one for philosophers rather than scientists, is to seek an objective view of reality which incorporates the subjective reality that physics and biology omit from their world picture.

He has pointed out in the passage I quoted that without the subjectivity of consciousness we couldn't do physics or anything else. This implies a partial acceptance of the Kantian picture of the phenomenal world we perceive through our senses, the phenomena or 'appearances' being created in part by external reality and in part by ourselves. I shall come back to the nature of that external reality, and how or whether we can say anything about it, in the second and third parts of my talk. Let it suffice for the moment to say that Nagel (and I, even more strongly) differ from Kant's view that external reality is unknowable, but just look for a moment at the peculiarity of the subjective view which lends credence to Kant's conclusion.

Every human being, and every sentient creature, has its own personal or subjective picture of the world, which science would confirm is the outcome of environmental impacts plus a great deal of biological and neurological processing after impact. We have I believe a reasonably well justified faith that all the members of a species perceive the same kind of picture of the world as other members of the species, a faith based upon similar intra-species behavioural reactions and biological similarities (sense organs etc), and the intra-

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1 Nagel, Thomas, *The view from nowhere*, OUP, 1986

2 *Op cit* p3

3 *Op cit* pp7-8. Underlining added by presenter

species ability to communicate with others of their kind. It is, however, faith, since we have no means of directly comparing any two creatures' or persons' subjective views of the world, either of the external world or of their internal worlds of aches, pains, pleasures and moods. So, since we are cut off from an ability to compare our individual subjective consciousnesses, and in realisation that our entire knowledge of the world depends on an extraordinarily complex combination of external impacts and our own biological and psychological contributions to that knowledge, it is little wonder that Kant pronounced the external world 'as it is in itself' unknowable.

Before leaving subjectivity and the apparent difficulty of incorporating its reality into an objective world view, which we usually think of as being a 'third person', or at best an *intersubjective*, view of all reality, I want to touch on a curiosity from the study of personal identity. The indexical, personal pronoun 'I' can perhaps be seen to bring together the subjective and the objective views, as follows.

When I, or anyone, uses 'I' in conversation, as in "I own this house", the referent of the 'I' is the publicly, objectively recognised speaker, John Smith or whoever; and the sentence "I own this house" could be transliterated with identical truth conditions to "John Smith owns that house". But from 'my', or John Smith's, subjective viewpoint there is also a referent who has all of John Smith's feelings, maybe pride in his house, an ache in his left knee etc. His 'I' therefore has two referents, one being the 'I' that only he knows from his unique, subjective point of view, the other being the John Smith whom even he can think about as an object in, to use Nagel's terminology, 'the centerless universe'. This peculiarity of the first person pronoun helps to distinguish the two realities perceivable from the subjective and objective viewpoints, and also locate them in close proximity, both in my, or John Smith's, head.

I turn, secondly, and more briefly to ontology and epistemology, the studies of what there is, and of how we know - anything, including what there is. The relationship between them seems quite simple: in order to be convincing in our statements of what exists, we had better explain how we know it.

Two kinds of knowledge theory, Idealism and scepticism, make different claims about knowledge of the world. Idealism of the Berkeleyan kind says epigrammatically *esse est percipi*, to exist is to be perceived. That makes the world mind-dependent, quite close in fact to Kant as regards the phenomenal world, though Kant tried to distance himself from Berkeley and recognised the greater reality of the mind-independent, noumenal world. The Berkeleyan view rather cleverly collapses the epistemology-ontology distinction between perception and being by denying any reality beyond that held in the mind of man or God. Believe that as you may, I am not going to argue with Berkeley's view, but merely reject it, while arguing in partial support of a view that has a Berkeleyan flavour. This is, in Nagel's words:

"... not the view that what there is must actually be conceived or even currently conceivable. Rather it is the position that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us, or possibly something for which we could have evidence. An argument of this general form of idealism must show that the notion of what *cannot* be thought about by us or those like us makes no sense." [end quote]

Nagel's argument for accepting the possible existence of the humanly inconceivable relies heavily on an analogy that compares, on the one hand, the different levels of human knowledge currently possessed respectively by young children and, say, professors of quantum science. For the children, and for many of them even when they grow up, the professorial grasp of complex facts will be quite inaccessible for lack of intellectual capacity. That situation, says Nagel, is analogous to there being a myriad of yet-to-be-discovered facts about the world which are currently inaccessible to those with even the greatest mental capacities and may never in the future be accessible to the greatest intellects on Earth, either because those facts may not happen to be discovered or, more

to the point, because the human organism may not be mentally or physiologically capable of grasping them. That doesn't entail that there couldn't be an intelligence with superhuman capability, a Martian or a galactic brain, who could access facts forever unavailable to human beings. Such a being is analogous to the professor whose intellect gave him access to facts about the world that were beyond the grasp of young children. It is not therefore necessary that human beings should be able to conceive everything there is; there could be realms of existence beyond human conceivability. Although I think this argument is strictly correct, it needs qualification. I shall keep my reasons for this caveat until my third section on levels of objectivity.

Meantime I shall revert to scepticism, the uneasy doubt that gnaws at the mind of every realist. Scepticism about the knowability of an external world is of the Kantian or the Cartesian kind, which points out that all we receive from any such world are apparently filtered and processed sense impressions that give us a picture of a world of mere appearances that we have no means of comparing with whatever may be the cause of those appearances. We could be dreaming. We could be the victim of an evil demon, etc etc. According to Hume and Nagel such scepticism is irrefutable, even though Nagel points out that,

"In the course of arriving at a skeptical conclusion, we pass through thoughts to which we do not simultaneously take up a skeptical stance ... the skeptic reaches skepticism through thoughts that make skepticism unthinkable."<sup>4</sup> [end quote]

Nagel believes that sceptical arguments spawn reductive theories. He says,

"Assuming that we do know certain things, and acknowledging that we could not know them if the gap between content and grounds were as great as the skeptic thinks it is, the reductionist reinterprets the content of our beliefs about the world so that they claim less."<sup>5</sup>. [end quote]

It's a bit unfair to throw in that sage comment, as it's not absolutely central, but consider for a moment how it applies to eliminativism. The eliminativist, faced with the problem of consciousness, finds he, or in Mrs Churchland's case, she, can't explain it as a feature of reality, so she explains it away reductively by reducing the mental to matter. Problem solved, or - I would say - ducked.

Nagel divides theories of knowledge into three types: sceptical, reductive and heroic. He classes scepticism and realism as examples of the heroic, and espouses a healthy mild scepticism, which he claims is made intelligible by realism. His realism, which he admits he can't prove, is an attitude towards the world that sees it as having the two kinds of reality that can be accessed subjectively and objectively. It is time in the third section of my talk to examine that objectivity.

I therefore turn now levels of objectivity.

In considering the referents of the first person pronoun 'I', I identified both the subjective 'I', which is perhaps akin to Hume's bundle of perceptions - of feelings, moods, seeings, hearings, tastings etc; and also the objective, public 'I', whom I can recognise as other people do as this person called Frank Brierley, or John Smith, a person who is part of the world out there and like other people can, as a matter of fact, feel, get moody, see, hear, taste and, through the intersubjective commonality of a mutually understood language, communicate with other members of his species. As the referent of this objective 'I', I take an objective view of myself and the world, a view that Nagel calls 'centerless' or 'the view from nowhere', even while I am dependent upon representations of that world which I know are 'mere appearances', the outcome of complex neurological and psychological processing of the physical impacts upon my person of inputs from my environment. That is why, following Kant, we call that perceived world the phenomenal world.

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4 *Op cit* p88 fn 13.

5 *Op cit* p68

At what I would call the first level of objectivity, though we are supremely adapted by Darwinian selection to cope admirably with our surroundings we can make mistakes about what we perceive. Tepid water can feel hot when we plunge into it a hand that has just been immersed in icy water. Snowy mountains can appear pink in early morning sunlight. But we can correct these illusions through greater experience of the phenomena by observing them in different, more usual conditions. Thus we deepen our knowledge of reality, I say a little contentiously, at least at this phenomenal, first level of objectivity. I'll come back to that.

But we can dig deeper when we consider the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. What is red is what appears red in normal light conditions, just as what is sweet is what normally tastes sweet, and so on for all the secondary qualities: how they are generally perceived is how they are. But science has shown that such secondary qualities are a function of something more fundamental, the *primary* qualities of those objects. The surface shape and texture of a material is what 'gives it its colour', makes it appear as it does. The chemical composition of a substance is what 'gives it its taste'. We can consider these more fundamental qualities, dubbed 'primary qualities' by Locke who identified them as figure (or shape), solidity, extension, motion and number, as more objective than the phenomenal secondary qualities of colour, taste, smell, and sound. The primary qualities do not just depend on how they appear, but on how the world is. Knowledge of them gives us a *more objective* view of reality.

Of course, since Locke's time, science has taken us much further, and given us deeper and deeper insights into reality, higher levels of objectivity one might say with which to view the world from a centreless perspective. Time and space were absolutes in Newton's day, even to the great man himself. Einstein, perhaps partly anticipated by Kant, relativised both. Kant told us that time and space were constructs of the human psyche that enabled us to cope with the phenomenal world in which we appear to live. Einstein went further, acknowledging if you like that the concepts of time and space are biologically necessary contributions to our perception of the phenomenal world of everyday life, but also explaining *why* they appeared to us as absolutes, rather than relative aspects of a greater reality. Arguably he further lifted a veil that was hiding from us the *noumenal* that Kant thought was unknowable. He added to Copernicus's, Locke's and Newton's revelations concerning that reality, enabling us to view the world with a greater degree of objectivity. And so with all paradigm shifts in scientific knowledge, right up to the quantum science which Mike Arnautov will tell us more about.

I wonder, though, if Mike will question, as I haven't done so far, what we mean by reality. I have perhaps too glibly called 'objective' any view of the world that is expressible in language which is totally dependent on an apparent, and certainly contingent, consensus of human perceptions, which by their very nature cannot be compared to each other except by plausible guesswork, or as a matter of faith? This sceptical query comes even more into focus in quantum science and the study of subatomic particles and fields, of which our only descriptions are mathematical, symbolic. As I understand it, there could be many possible 'models' of reality that seem both self-consistent, and consistent too with the humanly detectable readings that instruments give us of otherwise humanly undetectable phenomena from electro-magnetic fields to the effects of surmised dark matter.

Here I revert to my marginal quibble with Nagel, and his claim that nothing rules out the existence of aspects of reality that are, and may always be, humanly inconceivable. I said that, strictly speaking, I agreed with him, but that agreement needed qualification. My qualification needs explanation, as follows.

At the risk of being accused of the reductionism (which I agree with Nagel to reject), since we human beings, and all creatures, are made of the same stuff as the rest of the universe, I do find it most likely that our sentience, our consciousness, is a very special

sort of outcome of our physical nature, which is our Earthly, historical nature. Even though consciousness is a feature of physical creatures, that does not justify a physicalism which would make consciousness and all the mental amenable to physical description. Subscribing to a dual aspect theory<sup>6</sup>, Nagel would say it is an aspect of sentient beings. As a subscriber to anomalous monism, I don't mind 'aspect' or 'property', but my monism, whose anomalous nature allows a living creature to have unsharable subjective experiences unanalysable by laws of physics, which apply only to its physical and material constitution, does ensure that it cannot experience any part of its environment that does not physically affect it.

Can we make the jump from 'experience' to 'conceive'? I believe we *can*, because our ability to conceive, to have concepts, emanates from physical inputs from our environment, which provides the objects of our conceptions of the external world - and they include the interaction with our fellow human beings on which depends the language we need to formulate at least our more sophisticated concepts. Thought and language depend upon those environmental impacts which through biological processing become the stuff of our experience and our conceptualisation of the world. Anything in the universe that couldn't impact on us physically, either directly or by conversion to a form that we can become conscious of (say ultraviolet light converted to visible wavelengths), or physically affect other bodies which could similarly influence us, say via instrument readings of their effects, could not in any way affect us and must be undetectable by us. Nor could such uninfluencing elements of the universe, if they exist, be specifically conceived by us, since we lack the language for framing or communicating such concepts, dependent as they are upon our experiencing, and so conceiving, the world we *are* able to experience. Our subjective experience, itself physically unanalysable, is dependent upon our physical nature and its subjection to the physical environment of which it is a part, and whose phenomena comprise the only external, objective reality we *can* know.

*Non-specifically*, of course, we can speculate, as Nagel contends, that inconceivable elements may have some kind of existence or reality in the universe, except that even the words 'existence' and 'reality' carry for us Earthly creatures connotations of likeness to all or some of the things to which we can meaningfully apply them in the world we know. In that particular sense, I am inclined to deny *existence* to anything which is inconceivable by us - except non-specifically in phrases like 'beyond our ken', and of course allowing existence to the unsharable subjective experience of other human beings and of other Earthly species, because I'm damn sure those experiences are a reality, though we can never experience them.

My conclusion, then, is the supremely realist and anti-Kantian conclusion that we can, in principle, know the causes of the phenomena we perceive, and the deeper we delve into them the better we shall know and understand them at ever higher levels of objectivity. There is no other physical reality than the one that science is progressively revealing, though our knowledge of it depends upon the physically unanalysable reality of subjective experience.

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6 In his later *Mind and Cosmos* (2012, OUP), Nagel shows leanings towards neutral monism and even panpsychism.