

Thomas NAGEL: *Über das Leben, die Seele und den Tod*, aus dem Englischen von Karl-Ernst Prankel und Ralf Stöcker, Königsstein: Hain 1984, 220 S.

As the German title indicates, the essays collected in this volume (all previously published except the last two) deal with some of the deepest and most perplexing topics of human existence. Few, if any, contemporary American philosophers are better equipped by natural temperament, philosophical power and imagination, intellectual brilliance, breadth of reading and lucidity of expression to shed fresh (if often wintry) light on them. They are pervaded by a profound skepticism and pessimism, about philosophers' and generally human ability, to change the world, or even to understand it. For Nagel suspects, and constructs ingenious arguments to lend color to his suspicion, that the oldest and deepest problems of philosophy are insoluble. On these to us most important matters, he thinks, philosophy can contribute only negatively, by showing us the limits of our comprehension (p. 12). Unlike Gilbert Ryle (with whose *Tarner Lectures, Dilemmas*, this book invites comparison because Ryle there takes up some of the same philosophical problems and also diagnoses them to be generated by asking, from importantly different points of view, what appear to be the same questions and getting conflicting answers), Nagel does not think that these problems disappear on discovering that the questions are asked from different points of view and therefore do not mean exactly the same thing. Nagel believes, on the contrary, that we cannot abandon either of these points of view and that each demands ascendancy over the other, while yet yielding conflicting answers to the same question. Where Ryle delights in dissolving the problems, Nagel persists in showing the inadequacy of past solutions and dissolutions, and in speculating about the ultimate insolubility of these problems. He believes "one should trust problems over solutions, intuition over arguments, and pluralistic discord over systematic harmony." (p. 40). His vision of human existence is tragic, the gloom that seeps from several of these essays lightened only by irony, the recognition — which adds insult to injury — that *sub specie aeternitatis* our concerns lack significance. The mixture of Nikolaus-Lenauesque melancholy and Thomas-Mannish irony should evoke a sympathetic response from readers of this journal.

The book is too rich and the topics are too disparate for me to discuss all of the pieces, but through most of them there runs a common theme, which not only gives the book its unity but also represents Nagel's own major distinctive philosophical position. The theme is briefly stated in the Preface ("The place of subjectivity in an objective world") and treated fully in Ch. 14, "Subjective and Objective". It was first expounded in his *The Possibility of Altruism* (Clarendon

Press, 1970) and further developed in his 1980 Tanner Lectures, "The Limits of Objectivity" (*The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, 1980, vol. I, ed., Sterling M. McMurrin, University of Utah Press, 1980). Nagel thinks of the subjective and the objective as opposite directions on a scale, "in which the understanding can travel" (p. 191; cf. also p. 224f.). To move toward a greater objectivity, we must abstract "from the individual's specific spatial, temporal, and personal position in the world, then from the features that distinguish him from other humans, then gradually from the forms of perception and action characteristic of humans, and away from the narrow range of a human scale in space, time, and quantity, towards a world which as far as possible is not the view from anywhere within it" (ibid.). Whether or not this process has an end point, the aim of the movement — and we are impelled to move in that direction — is "to regard the world as centerless, with the viewer as just one of its contents" (ibid.). The problem is that "the persistent pursuit of objectivity runs into trouble . . . when the objective view encounters something, revealed subjectively [e.g., the self], that it cannot accomodate" (ibid.). In many of the essays, traditional problems such as that of the identity of the self, the mind-body problem, the problem of free will, and one of Nagel's favorites, the problem of reconciling consequentialist (objective) and agent-centered (subjective) approaches to ethics, are construed as problems arising because there remain indigestible subjective lumps as one moves in the direction of greater objectivity. In view of the centrality of this theme, I think it best to concentrate on those essays which most illuminatingly develop it and, because of my own interests, to discuss primarily the ethical ones.

The first essay raises four problems. The first three, how death can be an evil even though the loser cannot know about or mind it, how the loss can be assigned to a subject, and why death is a misfortune, whereas not being born is not, despite the fact that the deprivation — not being alive — is the same, are disposed of by an interesting distinction: that whereas for an individual to suffer a misfortune, he must have a clear spatio-temporal location, the misfortune itself which he suffers need not. Just as a brain injury that reduces one to a "contented infant" may be a misfortune despite the fact that one does not mind it — even though it cannot be located in the life of the person who suffered it — so death may be a misfortune to one even though it cannot be located in one's life. But whereas in the case of death, there is someone with determinate spatio-temporal location whom death deprives although that deprivation cannot be located in his life, in the case of not being born, there is no one so located who is thus deprived. The time after one's death is time of which death deprives one — the time before birth is not. If one had not died at that time, one would have gone on living, but it is not true that one would have been alive if one had been born earlier — for anyone born (or conceived) substantially earlier would have been someone else (p. 21).

But, according to Nagel, there is a further, deep and insoluble problem, name-

ly, why death is thought less or more of an evil, depending on the stage in life when it occurs. Why was the death of Keats at 24 a tragic one while that of Tolstoy at 82 was not? Nagel's answer introduces the main theme of the book: the difference between the internal and the external points of view. "Observed from without, the human beings obviously have a natural life-span and cannot live much longer than a hundred years." (p. 22) From the external point of view, death at 24 is tragically premature, death at 82 is close to the natural limit. But from the internal point of view, there is no natural limit to a man's life. "Having been gratuitously introduced to the world by a collection of natural, historical, and social accidents, he finds himself the subject of a *life*, with an indeterminate and not essentially limited future." (p. 23) Viewed in this way, death deprives one of "indefinitely extensive possible goods" (p. 23), and is always a loss.

In this earliest of the essays introducing the distinction between the two points of view (1970), the conflict between them is not yet fully developed. It is not made clear what the relation between the two points of view is — whether it is sometimes right to adopt one, sometimes the other, or whether we can never abandon either point of view, and whether the opposing judgments from them are in real conflict or not. In the second essay, "The Absurd", that relation is further explored. "In ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality. . . as you are being knighthooded, your pants fall down." (p. 27) In the philosophical sense, not only some, but all lives are absurd, because there is a "collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt" (p. 27). When we look at our life from the internal point of view, the lines and end-points of choice and justification are given: we take care of our health, our appearance, our sex life, our relations with relatives, friends, colleagues, and so on. But we can step back from this practice and look at it *sub specie aeternitatis*, which presents to us a view that is "at once sobering and comical" (p. 29). All our justifications come to an end in things we accept without further justification, which we can therefore see to be arbitrary. The absurdity lies in the fact that we can take the external point of view without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded" (p. 29).

We cannot escape the absurdity by relying on more significant ends, such as "society, the state, the revolution, the progress of history, the advance of science, or religion and the glory of God" (p. 30). For any such larger purpose can be put in doubt in the same way. Nor can we escape it by the reflection that if we take the external viewpoint, then there is "no longer any content to the idea of what matters, and hence no content to the idea that nothing does" (p. 31). For stepping back and taking the external point of view will not give us an understanding of what *really* matters, so that we see that our lives are insignificant. When we adopt the external point of view, we realize that *no* standards

can be discovered, rather than alternative overriding ones, but we never abandon the ordinary standards that guide our lives.

Nagel concludes by investigating how we could and whether we should escape from absurdity. Since absurdity is the result of the clash between the two viewpoints, one might hope to avoid it by refusing to take the external viewpoint, but that is not something we can refuse to do at will. Nor can we easily give up our strenuous mundane life, since that too would involve a serious effort which is as unjustifiable as pursuing other ends. The most we could do is to allow our "individual, animal nature to drift and respond to impulse" (p. 36) but that would involve considerable costs in dissociation, and it would be no more meaningful than any other life.

How then should we respond to the absurdity of our lives? Should we perhaps commit suicide or should we, like Camus, live on defiantly? Nagel concludes that these responses, while no less or more absurd than any others, are "romantic and slightly self-pitying" (p. 37). He suggests that "a sense of the absurd is a way of perceiving our true situation" (p. 37) and so warrants neither agonizing nor "a defiant contempt of fate that allows us to feel brave or proud" for that would "betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation. If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that does not matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism and despair" (p. 37).

I am not able to follow Nagel's reasoning here. What exactly is the external point of view and what does adopting it reveal about our lives and the standards of importance, significance and meaningfulness<sup>1</sup> which we develop from the internal point of view? Nagel himself rejects the idea that the external point of view reveals the true, objective, sound standards of importance but insists that it reveals rather, that from it, no standards at all can be discovered. But then it cannot reveal the cosmic insignificance of our concerns, if that means their insignificance by *the best* standards of significance. Nor can it show that this cosmic insignificance of our concerns "does not matter either" if that means that it is unimportant by *the best* standards of importance. All it means is that from the external point of view, the distinction between importance/unimportance, significance/insignificance and so on, cannot be drawn. But then no general attitudinizing towards human life, is called for if and because we can or must occasionally, and for certain purposes, adopt the external point of view. Neither despair, nor defiance nor irony seems in place, but rather the simple and properly emotion-free acknowledgement, required by this account of the external point of view, that it is one from which no standards of importance, significance, or meaningfulness can be developed. There is simply no ground for disillusionment

1. These, incidentally, are not interchangeable: it may not be unimportant whether one exercises regularly, learns how to program a computer, or gets a well-paying job, but these things are unlikely to give one's life significance or meaning.

about the importance, significance or meaningfulness of human life or anything in it or for finding the whole situation absurd, because, from the external point of view, no standard of importance, etc., can be discovered. It is not that, *sub specie aeternitatis* we can be seen to have lost our pants, but rather that from that point of view, we cannot see whether we have or have not, in the evaluatively relevant sense. Or, to put it differently, we can see whether we have lost our pants, in the factual sense, but we have no standards by which to tell whether or not this matters. The external point of view is simply not a suitable one for discovering what is important, significant or meaningful in life. If one finds life absurd from that point of view, one has smuggled in a standard not rightly available.

Since the issue seems to me important (from the internal point of view) let me sketch, briefly, two different versions of the external point of view, from which "our ultimate concerns [may be] so coolly regarded". (i) Suppose we survey, employing our ordinary (internal?) standards of what is important, the various kinds of things that are important or unimportant to various species including our own. We might then find, to adapt one of Nagel's examples, that to a mole good eyesight is not important, whereas to an eagle it is; generalizing, we might say that what is important to a given creature will be determined by the ecological niche into which it has to fit. The criterion of 'importance', say, promotiveness of individual or species-survival, could be objective, in the sense of species-neutral, but what satisfies it, subjective, i.e., species-relative. Furthermore, we note that the concept of importance does not apply to a world of non-living things. Should the species-relativity of what satisfies the criterion and the limitations on the applicability of the concept of importance generate any disillusionment or skepticism about claims to the effect that some things *are* important to these species? Should we have *greater confidence* in such claims when they affirm the importance of something to more than one species? Hardly. Should we think of things that are important to more than one species as *more important* or as more truly important than those that are important only to one? Well, yes, perhaps this is one criterion of greater importance — perhaps numbers should count, but obviously not the only one: how strongly it motivates the individuals concerned is another. Should we give up the concept of importance because nothing can be important *in itself*, without reference to some living thing? Surely not. In the absence of concerns, the idea of importance loses its grip. Even the species-neutral criterion of individual or species-survival can be a criterion of importance only because we are concerned about that survival. Is anything incongruous or absurd revealed about our lives when we adopt this external point of view and look coolly at our ultimate concerns considering them as determined by what is important to us as a species occupying a certain ecological niche? I tend to think not. The discovery that we are members of a species is sobering and comical only for those who had a confused view of what importance and concerns might be. Even if our concerns are about whether we end up

in heaven or in hell, the concerns about enjoyment and suffering are the same. From the external point of view, concern about heaven and hell, though special, are not in a better position to escape absurdity. No concerns are. To demand that some should be is confused. (ii) Now consider a “more external” point of view. Imagine a world devoid of living things and ask yourself what would be important in such a world. Then the answer must be, ‘nothing’, for the very distinction between the important and the unimportant has lost its grip. But ‘nothing matters’ is intended for a world where this distinction does make sense and at least *could* apply. It therefore means something like this: there conceivably could be things we might do and things that might happen to us, which would matter, but in fact there are no such things, for the difference between the alternatives we are actually facing are unimportant. If, when adopting the external point of view, we were to find that nothing matters *in this ordinary sense*, then we would indeed have reason to be disillusioned. But clearly this is a confusion. For when we adopt this external point of view, we don’t discover that nothing matters in this ordinary sense. We discover that we have adopted a point of view from which the very distinction between what matters and what does not no longer gets a grip. In adopting this point of view, we have stepped so far back from our lives where that distinction applies, that we must now do without it. But then what is absurd is not our life but the wish to judge what is important or the standards we employ in such judgments, from a point of view from which such distinctions and standards cannot get a grip — a wish to discover what is *important in itself*, and not (merely) important *to some creature or type of creature*. It is like treating our concern about torture as absurd because although it is important from the internal point of view, we see from this external point of view that this standard of importance does not apply.

In essays (3): “Moral Luck”, (5): “War and Massacre”, and (6): “Ruthlessness in Public Life”,<sup>2</sup> Nagel tries to do two things. One is to contrast Kantian claims concerning what we must do with utilitarian moral claims concerning what would be better, or the best, states of the world. The second is to lay bare incoherences in our morality due to the incompatibility and inescapability of these two types of claim, although in essay (6), mainly the first line of argument is pursued. These two kinds of claim, the utilitarian and Kantian, are explored around the three different problems.

In “Moral Luck”, it is the problem of moral responsibility, “to which we possess no satisfactory solution” (p. 39). It arises because of the occurrence of (good or bad) moral luck, that is, of cases “where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment” (p. 40). The problem is that

2. I shall not discuss essay (4): “Sexual Perversions”, the earliest of these essays (1969), mainly because, though original and illuminating, it does not illustrate Nagel’s main theme, the conflict between two inescapable and irreconcilable points of view.

we think both that people and their actions “cannot be morally assessed for what is not their fault or for what is due to factors beyond their control” (p. 39) and that, nevertheless, often they and their actions should not be excused even when external factors beyond their control affect what is done by them. Suppose I recklessly drive through a red light and run down a child who happens to cross just then. If no one had been there, Nagel claims, I would have been guilty only of reckless driving; as it is, I am to blame for the death of the child (p. 43). From the internal point of view, we are agents performing actions, but from the external point of view “actions are events and people things” (p. 51). “Moral judgment of a person is judgment not of what happens to him but of him. It does not say merely that a certain event or state of affairs is fortunate or unfortunate or even terrible. . . . We are judging *him*, rather than his existence or characteristics. The effect of concentrating on the influence of what is not under his control is to make this responsible self seem to disappear, swallowed up by the order of mere events.” (p. 50)

What exactly makes this a case of moral luck? Well, “if the driver was guilty of even a minor degree of negligence — failing to have his brakes checked recently, for example — then if that negligence contributes to the death of the child, he will not merely feel terrible. He will blame himself for the death. . . . [whereas] he would have to blame himself only slightly for the negligence itself if no situation arose which required him to brake suddenly and violently to avoid hitting a child. Yet the negligence is the same in both cases, and the driver has no control over whether a child will run into his path.” (p. 43)

Nagel then goes on to describe and discuss four major ways “in which the natural objects of moral assessment are disturbingly subject to luck” (p. 42): the constitution one has somehow acquired, the social and personal circumstances one finds oneself in, the way one’s actions came to be determined, and the way they turn out. In the case of the luck of one’s constitution, for instance, since we must rely on the external as well as the internal points of view, we cannot simply exempt a person from moral condemnation just because he found himself with a terrible psychological constitution. “A person may be greedy, envious, cowardly, cold, ungenerous, unkind, vain, or conceited. . . . Even if one controls the [resulting] impulses, one still has the vice. . . . To some extent such a quality may be the product of earlier choices; to some extent it may be amenable to change by current actions. But it is largely a matter of constitutive bad fortune. Yet people are morally condemned for such qualities: they are assessed for what they are like.” (p. 47)

This conclusion is very convincingly developed and persuasively illustrated by rich materials to give color to the thesis of the two incompatible yet inescapable points of view. Nevertheless serious doubts remain. It is not clear why we must assume that all moral judgments of people are of the same sort and that all must be made from both these points of view. Is there not a great deal of difference between judgments of responsibility/irresponsibility and judgments of blame for

what has happened, and is not the former tied to the internal, the latter to the external point of view rather than that both types of judgment are made from both points of view? Perhaps we should look more carefully at the various kinds of moral luck.

Suppose my negligence never leads to unfortunate results, because I never have to use the brakes suddenly and violently. So I never become *liable* for anything since my negligence is not shown up in the usual way, by an accident. There is never anything for which I am to blame. Still, am I any less *irresponsible*, any less morally *reprehensible* just because no disaster has occurred? Suppose my car is inspected and found to have faulty brakes that should have been looked at ages ago. Am I not then subject to severe moral *condemnation* even though nothing happened? Or suppose I only narrowly missed the child — again I was lucky, but was I in any sense *morally* lucky? Would I not deserve to be *condemned*, would I not be *blameworthy*, although there is nothing, i.e., no misfortune for which I am *to blame*? Or suppose that I only injure the child instead of killing it. Am I not *just as blameworthy* though, of course, in this case I am to blame merely for an injury, in the other for a death? Should we not distinguish between two types of moral judgment, a judgment of moral irresponsibility and *reprehensibility* which is not a matter of luck, moral or otherwise and one of *liability* which is a matter of luck, but not of moral luck? For the negligent person knows or should know that these are the risks he is running and that he must take the blame and shoulder the liability for whatever harm or damage to others results from his negligence. If, however, he has taken all due care, then any accidents that happen nevertheless, do not imply moral reprehensibility, even though he may still be liable to compensate the victim. He need feel only terrible about the death of the child but need not feel any guilt or remorse. Of course, he must blame himself and others must blame him for the death, for he is to blame for the death, just as his brakes are, but that does not mean that he or his brakes are blameworthy. Of course, unlike his brakes, he might have been blameworthy, but since he did all that could be expected of him, he is not.

And much the same seems true of what Nagel calls constitutive moral luck. I think Kant is right, against Nagel, that we do not morally condemn people “for what they are like”. Of course “we assess them for what they are like”, including their strength, intelligence, beauty, and so on. But such assessments are not the sorts of moral judgment Nagel is insisting on. We distinguish between the things they can and those they cannot help doing or being. We can expect people to work on their character and desires, and we can expect them to do what is morally required of them even if they do not desire to do them, but only as long as they are capable of acting contrary to their strongest (most strongly felt) desire. Of course, if they are morally required to do something they are incapable of deciding to do, as a kleptomaniac may be incapable of deciding not to steal, then we may still be justified in imposing various liabilities on them, including incarceration to protect their fellows, but it would seem a mistake to condemn or pu-



nish them, much as it would be to condemn or punish the brakes.

It seems to me, therefore, that in the case of responsibility, there is hope for a non-paradoxical alternative to Nagel's paradoxical conclusion.

In Chapter 5, "War and Massacre", the central theme is characterized as "the conflict between two disparate categories of moral reason: . . . *utilitarian* and *absolutist*" (p. 70). In this chapter, Nagel is primarily concerned to develop and bolster the absolutist position against the recently more popular utilitarian. The absolutist's basic principle is that hostility or aggression should be directed only at the persons who provoke it and at what is provocative about it (p. 81). This principle supports two kinds of constraint and the exclusion of certain particularly cruel weapons designed not so much to stop the opponents as to maim or disfigure or torture them (p. 86).

Having made his case for the absolutist, he returns (in section VII of this chapter) to his main theme, that the utilitarian and absolutist approaches may be incompatible and "the world can present us with situations in which there is no honorable or moral course for a man to take, no course free of guilt and responsibility for evil" (p. 88). Nagel envisages a case in which one of the warring states would either have to violate an absolutist constraint on the conduct of war, say, the use of particularly cruel weapons, or else violate a utilitarian requirement of failing to save many of its own soldiers' lives. In such a case, whatever the party does, it must "feel that [it] has acted for reasons insufficient to justify violation of the opposing principle" (p. 88). I want to register two doubts. One concerns the absolutist moral constraints regulating the conduct of war, the other the pessimistic conclusion and its basis.

I am somewhat reluctant to spell out my first doubt for I wish I could believe in Nagel's distinction between combatants and non-combatants and between acceptable and unacceptable weapons. My doubt hinges on the appropriate model of war, both as far as concerns the nature of the conflict and the scope of participation. If war, or at least a so-called just war, is to be conceived on the model of a chivalric contest, something like a tournament conducted on some battlefield between uniformed soldiers, then it would be easy enough to separate combatants from non-combatants and permissible ways of dealing with combatants from impermissible ones. But as this "contest" approaches total war, in which the activities of all members of society are organized to win the war and the war aim approaches unconditional surrender or annihilation of the enemy, because neither side can feel secure from further aggression until the other is destroyed, then these two distinctions become dubious. All parts of society become "sup-

3. The only way I can see for showing both sides that they are wrong in allowing the war to move in that direction is one Nagel does not take seriously, namely, to show both sides that they would gain, by their own values, from imposing these restrictions on themselves, provided the other side does likewise. And, of course, in war, that raises the problem of assurance. Yet, there has been some success in respect of the treatment of prisoners, the use of poison gas, the protection of hospitals and the like.

porting personnel", since in such war governments allow only activities that advance "the war effort". As the relation between warring states approaches this condition, roughly that of Hobbes' state of nature, (and where people firmly believe in "better dead than red" or its "red" analogy, a war is likely to approach this condition), the appropriate rules of conducting it would seem to change.

I therefore have serious doubts about Nagel's distinction between combatants and non-combatants, because it rests on that between troops and their "supporting personnel" on the one hand, and people engaged in activities that "merely serve the combatants' needs as human beings, such as farmers and food suppliers, even though survival as a human being is a necessary condition of efficient functioning as a soldier" (p. 85). If the danger comes from the enemy soldiers and one is entitled to kill them (rather than merely prevent them in other ways from killing one), as Nagel concedes, then why, I want to ask, is one not entitled to destroy the necessary condition of their functioning as soldiers? This is different from attacking a soldier's wife and children to distract him, for they do not threaten one nor are they doing anything to satisfy the necessary conditions of his being a threat to one; after they have been killed and he is no longer distracted, he will again threaten one.

My second doubt concerns Nagel's renewed attempt to identify an irresolvable conflict between two ethical positions, this time the utilitarian and the absolutist, which we also encountered in essay (3) on "Moral Luck". He argues that because of the two types of principles, which apparently we cannot escape from — the utilitarian which require or forbid us to *bring about* or *prevent* certain events or states affairs and the absolutist which require or forbid us to *do* certain things — we may find ourselves in a situation in which, by doing *X* we would have to violate an absolutist principle, say that against using a cruel weapon, and by not doing *X* a utilitarian one, say, one against failing to prevent some of one's own soldiers getting killed, and that following one of these principles will be insufficient moral justification for violating the other.

Nagel rejects the idea that the statement of a moral dilemma involves a self-contradiction, on the correct grounds that the assertion that both doing *X* and not doing *X* would be wrong is a contradiction only if *ought* implies *can* (p. 88). Now it seems to me that Nagel can get his moral dilemma going only on the assumption that it will sometimes be impossible to justify acting in any way open to one. But the only reason he can give for that is that in certain situations a person will *feel* that neither of the two conflicting principles will be a sufficient reason for violating the other. He adds, "there may exist principles, not yet codified, which would enable us to resolve such dilemmas. But then again there may not. We must face the pessimistic alternative that these two forms of moral intuition are not capable of being brought together into a single, coherent moral system. . . ." (p. 88). I do not see that this pessimistic alternative is a serious possibility. Suppose we think of morality on the analogy of law, as a system of social guidelines we are required to follow and which are capable of being improved

when found wanting and moral reprehensibility as a term of moral condemnation we employ against those who have shown their unjustifiable or inexcusable unwillingness to follow them. On such a conception *ought* does imply *can* and that in turn requires us to provide principles to resolve such dilemmas, by developing second-order principles telling us which of the conflicting principles overrides the other or a principle allowing us to do either. What cannot be true on this conception is that neither doing *X* nor not doing *X* is right. Of course, in the absence of such recognized principles, a person may have to agonize over what he ought to do and may never know whether he did right, but he could know that one or other must have been right. Nagel's view (and it is now widely shared) seems to imply a conception of morality that seems to me implausible, namely, morality as a jumble of principles and precepts, possibly incoherent and unfolloable – as if the product of a bungling moral legislator – which *nevertheless* deserves adherence, as it stands.

In the sixth Chapter, "Ruthlessness in Public Life", Nagel takes up the difficult problem of how we can explain the apparent discontinuities between public and individual morality, between the moral constraints on those who play public roles and those who do not. This paper was written during the Vietnam war and mirrors the political passions of the time. It contains many personal attacks and in my opinion fewer ethical insights than the others.

He thinks that this continuity can be explained only partly by what he calls "the theory of obligation" (p. 96), for although those who occupy public office can be thought to have "assumed the obligation to serve a special function and often the interests of a special group" (p. 96), this obligation does not release them from general moral prohibitions against harming others (p. 97). But the theory of obligation, which tells us what obligations we can and cannot assume, does not explain the much greater impersonal aspects of public morality. Nagel here returns to the two types of moral concern distinguished in the previous essay, namely, "concern with what will happen and concern with what one is doing" (p. 98). According to him, if we are to understand the discontinuity between public and individual morality, we must turn from the moral concern with what people are doing – which is covered by the theory of obligation – to the second moral concern, namely, what will happen. Whereas individual morality "emphasizes restrictions against harming or interfering with others, rather than requirements to benefit them, except in cases of serious distress", thus leaving us largely "free to pursue our lives and form particular attachments to some people, so long as we do not harm others" (p. 99), public institutions and the public morality governing them emphasizes the impersonal aspects, the concern for what will happen, the concern to provide benefits, and indeed for masses of people rather than specific individuals. As a result, certain action-centered constraints will be weakened and producing desirable results on a large scale will be more important. At the same time, in their capacity as occupants of public roles, people will have no right of self-indulgence or favoritism, for they are subject to

a special requirement to treat people in the relevant population equally (pp. 99f). This “yields a moral division of labor between individual and society” (p. 101). “The impersonal benevolence of public morality is intended to provide a background against which individualism in private morality is acceptable.” (p. 102)

In the final section, Nagel claims that the special character of public obligations — the weight they give both to results and to impartiality — cannot be explained as the result of an individual’s assuming specific obligations attaching to the public role, but must be explained as the result of a direct application of *basic moral constraints* to public institutions. And he concludes that the assumed obligations of the public role will sometimes have to be set aside, for the public official “will see that the limits imposed by public morality itself are being transgressed, and he is being asked to carry out a judicial murder or war of unjust aggression” (p. 105).

There is a distinct difference in thrust between this and earlier papers. Although the question is raised whether “private individualism and public benevolence are socially compatible” (p. 102), the question is not pressed and later forgotten. Where, in the previous essays, the conflict between the absolutist and the consequentialist or utilitarian approaches casts a pall of skepticism over everything, in this essay no serious doubt is raised about the applicability of basic (absolutist?) moral constraints to public institutions despite their greater emphasis on consequentialist concerns. It is not clear to me why, if these two different sets of concerns can be authoritatively accommodated with one another, this should not be possible in other cases as well. Or why, if they cannot, the public official can be clear under what conditions he must resist an overall beneficial but discriminatory policy or resign. Nagel does not make clear what the basic moral constraints are and whether they can be overridden by social role-duties. Can legislators attach the death-penalty to certain crimes even though the basic moral constraints forbid killing human beings? Can judges or juries impose it? Can executioners carry it out? Can CIA agents terminate an enemy agent with prejudice? Can a Secretary of State prohibit the export of food to a hostile country in which large numbers of people are close to starvation? It does not become clear whether Nagel would allow public officials to be no *more* in the wrong if they follow the utilitarian principles and violate conflicting absolutist ones than if they did the opposite.

Chapters 7 and 8 deal with problems of equality and justice in the adjudication of claims of conflicting interest. Ch. 7 considers these problems in the context of racial and sexual discrimination, both primary and reverse. Nagel sets out to provide a defense of preferential policies for women and Blacks in hiring or in admission to professional programs. He begins with an admirably clear and fair sketch of the consequences of the massive discrimination against Blacks and women and of the reasons why the mere cessation of such discrimination is not enough to deal with the problems created by past injustices. His defense of such

preferential policies is that although they are not required by justice, they are not themselves seriously unjust and are justified or even required because they are needed to mitigate a great social evil, the exclusion of these groups from important social rewards, which is, at least in part, the consequence of past discrimination against them and because in any case they favor groups that are in a particularly unfortunate position, which should be helped even if they had not been treated unjustly.

In defending his view that preferential policies are not seriously unjust, he makes two important points often ignored. The first is that even if the *credentials* taken into account (e.g., LSAT scores or seniority) really represent relevant *qualifications* (which often will not be the case) and if those best qualified ought to be admitted or get the job or be promoted (which is probably correct), none of this has any bearing on the justifiability of the social and economic rewards that are attached to the positions competed for. People with different talents “deserve different opportunities to exercise and develop these talents” (p. 113) but they do not therefore “deserve different economic and social rewards” (ibid.). “So when ‘educational’ justice [admissions to educational programs] and economic justice come into conflict, it will sometimes be necessary to sacrifice the former to the latter” (p. 114). And the same is true for preferential hiring. In these cases, then, such preferential treatment will not be a serious injustice (p. 118), though neither will justice require it.

His second important point – discussed even more seldom – is that even if all sexual and racial discrimination and its consequences were eliminated, there would still be “the great injustice of the smart and the dumb . . . the talented and the untalented, or even the beautiful and the ugly” (p. 119), an injustice whose mitigation will pose “the familiar task of balancing liberty against equality” (p. 120).

These are important points, though I doubt whether they suffice to show that preferential treatment is not seriously unjust, if that means, “not worth worrying about”. The fact that the rewards that go with the more highly skilled jobs may be excessive cannot be undone by giving them to some that are less well qualified, unless that is itself done in accordance with the requirements of compensatory justice. But, as has often been pointed out, preferential treatment often, perhaps usually, cannot achieve that because being a member of a class of persons (such as Blacks or women) many of whom had been discriminated against in the past is only very roughly correlated with actually having been discriminated against, and being a member of a class of persons (such as whites or males) many of whom were unjustly preferred in the past is only roughly correlated with actually having been preferred in the past. Therefore now preferring a member of the first class (though with inferior qualification) is not necessarily an act of compensatory justice, and where it is not, it is necessarily an act of *prima facie* unjust discrimination. What can show that this is not an unjust act or not a seriously unjust act is, it seems to me, only that not giving such possibly unjust

preference, in a situation where this is the only thing society is prepared or able to do to remedy the injustice done in the past, is even more of an injustice (because a serious refusal to do corrective justice) than the injustice inflicted by preferential treatment. Of course, here the real problem lies with the society's inability or unwillingness to provide other ways of remedying the old injustice, to say nothing about the widespread continuation of discrimination against Blacks and women.

In Ch. 8, the central question concerns the correct understanding of the principle now widely accepted as central to ethics, that people ought to be treated equally; that each person's point of view ought to be given equal weight when there are conflicts of interest. Since the three major ethical views, moral-rights theories, utilitarianism, and egalitarianism, agree on this formula, but interpret it differently, the question arises which of these interpretations is the best.

Utilitarianism interprets moral equality to mean that each individual is given "the same (variable) weight" (p. 128), that is, each individual's weight is determined in the same way, on the basis of his "interests suitably weighted for intensity" (ibid.) "and the outcome is determined by the largest total" (ibid.). Thus, "the moral equality of utilitarianism consists in letting each person's interests contribute in the same way to determining what in sum would be best overall" (p. 129).

Under the rights-conception, "the moral equality of persons. . . is their equal claim against each other not to be interfered with in special ways" (pp. 129/130). Rights "give every person a limited veto over how others may treat him" (p. 130). On Nagel's reading of the rights-conception, "there cannot be. . . rights to *have* certain things — a right to medical care, or to a decent standard of life, or even a right to life" (p. 13). For the rights-theorist, a right to life can only be a right not to be killed, which is correlated only with other people's duty not to kill you, not even with a duty to insure that you are not killed, let alone that you stay alive.

A rights-conception presupposes unanimity about what is prohibited and so is more permissive than a utilitarian one: "the range of what may be done because it violates no right is rather large" (p. 131). Hence "a morality of rights tends to be a limited, even a minimal morality", and in politics it leads to "the libertarian theory of the minimal state" (p. 132). Another important aspect of this conception is that "the numbers of people on either side of an issue do not count" (ibid.).

The third interpretation, egalitarianism, adopts elements of the first two. Like utilitarianism it assesses outcomes rather than actions, but it does not then combine all points of view by an aggregative majoritarian method. And like rights theory it establishes an order of priority among needs and gives preference to the most urgent, regardless of numbers. Thus, "the moral equality of egalitarianism consists in taking into account the interests of each person, subject to the same system of priorities of urgency, in determining what would be best overall" (pp.

133/4). Each individual's claim includes all his needs and interests, but instead of being weighted by (subjective) intensity, they are ordered according to (objective) urgency or importance. A person's more urgent needs and interests are to be satisfied before his or other people's less urgent ones.<sup>4</sup>

The egalitarian conception of moral equality involves a requirement of unanimity which consists in assessing "each result from each point of view to try to find the one that is least unacceptable to the person to whom it is most unacceptable" (p. 138). On such a view, there will be unanimity on the chosen alternative in the sense "that any other alternative will be more unacceptable to someone than this alternative is to anyone" (p. 138). It is a consequence of this type of unanimity, that it requires the choice of the least unacceptable alternative, that is, "a radically egalitarian policy of giving absolute priority to the worst off, regardless of numbers" (pp. 139/40).

In answer to the question which of these is the best interpretation of moral equality, Nagel denies any need to choose. In his view, a sound interpretation must incorporate elements of all three. His own interpretation is offered as a combination of the following elements:

- 1) He adopts the egalitarian criterion of the urgency of interests and its measure by a pairwise comparison of the interests of individuals (p. 140).
- 2) He rejects Rawls' account of urgency or importance, according to which *any* improvement in the situation of someone worse off is *more urgent* or *more important* than any improvement in the situation of someone better off. "It is more reasonable to accord greater urgency to large improvements somewhat higher in the scale than to very small improvements lower down." (p. 140)
- 3) He rejects the irrelevance of numbers. "If the choice is between preventing severe hardship for some who are very poor and deprived, and preventing less severe but still substantial hardship for those who are better off but still struggling for subsistence, then it is very difficult for me to believe that the numbers do not count." (p. 141)

This compromise between the three most popular interpretations of moral equality raises the question why one should accept it rather than one of the "pure" types. The answer, he suggests, must come from the answer to another question, "What is the source of morality? How do the interests of others secure a hold on us in moral reasoning, and does this imply a way in which they must be considered in combination?" (p. 141). His own answer to that question that "the general form of moral reasoning is to put yourself in other people's shoes" introduces the two standpoints, "the personal and impersonal, i.e., from inside and outside your life" (ibid.), which are the central topic of *The Possibility of Al-*

4. It is worth noting that Nagel here does not make clear the difference between the intensity and the urgency of an interest, nor is he worried about the relation between the subjective or internal measure of urgency and the objective or external measure of importance that had bothered him in earlier chapters.

*truism*. Moral reasoning implies “acceptance of an impersonal concern for yourself that is needed to avoid a radical incongruity” (p. 142) between these two standpoints, what he called dissociation in that book, and treated somewhat like inconsistency. Morality, and the congruity between the two standpoints, requires that “you love your neighbor as yourself: but only as much as you love yourself when you look at yourself from outside, with fair detachment” (p. 142). Nagel thinks that from these foundations one can derive an egalitarian but not an aggregative moral method. “Imaginatively one must split into all the people in the world, rather than turn oneself into a conglomeration of them. . . . At the most basic level, the way to choose from many separate viewpoints simultaneously is to maintain them intact and give priority to the most urgent individual claims.” (p. 143) However, he claims, this is only at the most basic level, for “utility is a legitimate value” (p. 143), too, and so “there may be cases where the policy chosen as a result will seek to maximize satisfactions rather than equalizing them, but this will only be where all individuals have an equal chance of benefitting, or at least not a conspicuously unequal chance” (Ibid.).

I personally find myself in sympathy with much of this, but am unable to follow the argument by which Nagel lays his foundations of morality or by which he derives the modified egalitarian conclusions. I am unclear whether the foundations are intended to explain the psychology of morality, as opposed to immorality, that is, in the sense of ‘being moral’ (rather than immoral) or the foundations of morality as opposed to law or religion, that is, in the sense of ‘the institution of morality’ (rather than some other institution) and thereby the justification for being moral rather than immoral, or whether it is to be both. The sentence “The general form of moral reasoning is to put yourself in other people’s shoes” which “leads to the acceptance of a concern for them” suggests the former. If so, that leaves open the question of why one should put oneself into other people’s shoes to which Nagel has only the answer from “dissociation”, which he gave in *The Possibility of Altruism*, but which has been subjected to powerful criticism Nagel has never answered.<sup>5</sup> If the latter is intended, then, given Nagel’s conception of reason and the good, this could work as a justification again only if his contention were sound that a person could not have reasons from the subjective (personal) point of view unless such reasons could also be construed as reasons from the objective (impersonal) point of view. But then, his position still depends on the questionable soundness of his argument in his *The Possibility of Altruism*.

I am also quite unclear about how he proposes to derive from these foundations the conclusion that a radically egalitarian system – in which numbers do not count and Rawls’ Difference Principle holds without exception – is not cor-

5. Cf. e.g., Nicholas Sturgeon, “Altruism, Solipsism, and the Objectivity of Reason”, *Philosophical Review*, vol. lxxxiii, no. 3, July 1974, or Kurt Baier, “The Social Source of Reason”, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 51, no. 6, Aug. 1978.



rect (p. 143). He suggests that his foundations, unlike Rawls' contractarian ones, are better able to accomodate both a basically egalitarian and in exceptional cases "a majoritarian or conglomerate viewpoint", and presumably also the principle that numbers should count, where e.g., a small group of worst off are left worst off in favor of a large group of less badly off. It would have been helpful if he could have spelled out an argument for this.

But these are quibbles about what is an extraordinarily insightful and stimulating paper.

In Ch. 9, "The Fragmentation of Value", Nagel claims that "value has fundamentally different kinds of sources" (p. 150), that "they are reflected in the classification of values into types (ibid.), that there are "five fundamental types of value" (p. 146), and that "the disparity between the fragmentation of value and the singleness of decision" (ibid.) gives rise not merely to difficult choices but to genuine "practical conflicts" (ibid.), that is, "conflicts between values which are incomparable for reasons apart from uncertainty about the facts" (ibid.). The five types of value are: specific obligations (p. 147), constraints on actions deriving from general rights (ibid.), utility (ibid.), perfectionist ends or value (e.g., the intrinsic value of scientific discovery, artistic creation, space exploration) (ibid.), and commitments to one's own projects or undertakings (p. 148). Nagel tries to show that these five things, which he calls different types of value or different values, give rise to formally different types of reason and that these differences rule out the possibility of settling conflicts between these values by treating them as comparable or commensurable on a single scale. His explanation for this is the now familiar thesis that human beings "are complex creatures who can view the world from many perspectives — individual, relational, impersonal, ideal, etc. — and each perspective presents a different set of claims" (p. 152). The problem is that these conflicts can be resolved neither "by subsuming either of the points of view under the other, or both under a third" nor by simply abandoning one or other of them (p. 152). Nor does it follow, in Nagel's view, that because justification of what we choose cannot be unitary, it must be arbitrary. His solution is to fall back on Aristotle's theory of practical wisdom or judgment which, "in many cases. . . can be relied on to take up the slack that remains beyond the limits of explicit rational argument" (p. 153). But Nagel is not a "romantic defeatist" (p. 155) who "abandons rational theory because it inevitably leaves many problems unsolved" (p. 154). He merely insists that systematization must always be noncomprehensive, because "the role of judgment in resolving conflicts and applying disparate claims and considerations to real life is indispensable" (p. 155) since "our capacity to resolve conflicts in particular cases may extend beyond our capacity to enunciate general principles that explain those resolutions" (pp. 153/4). And he is anxious to avoid the danger of "exclusionary overrationalization, which bars as irrelevant or empty all considerations that cannot be brought within the scope of a general system admitting explicitly defensible conclusions" (p. 156).

I have serious doubts about Nagel's thesis of the fragmentation of value, but I postpone my comments on this topic to the discussion of Ch. 14. One concerns the claim that "there can be good judgment without total justification, either explicit or implicit" (p. 153). Nagel adds, "the fact that one cannot say why a certain decision is the correct one, given a particular balance of conflicting reasons, does not mean that the claim to correctness is meaningless". If having judgment means, as Nagel suggests, that "we are working with general principles unconsciously" (p. 154), then does not that imply that our decision based on judgment is justified if and to the extent that it is based on sound principles, which could eventually be made explicit? And is not that implicit total justification? And if it does not mean that we rely on principles even unconsciously, what then does 'judgment' mean? Of course, we may still be *justified* and *rational* in choosing as we do since having run out of reasons we have discretion to act as we please, but we are not holding out any hope that our choice can be vindicated even at some future point when we have become clearer about the underlying principles.

The other point concerns Nagel's picture of moral theory. Where he argues against "a single general theory of how to decide the right thing to do" (p. 154), he appears to think of moral theorizing as systematizing our intuitions and exhibiting them as based on underlying general principle, and of a moral theory as a set of such principles. If one thinks of these principles as based on five incommensurable types of value, one will think of moral theorizing along these lines as developing five separate moral systems, each incorporating a set of precepts of increasing specificity under a most general principle for each type of value, and of moral judgment as mediating in cases of conflict between these values.

However, Nagel also refers to another model of moral theory, which he calls "substantive moral theory" and which involves a "general foundation" (p. 156), but cautions against waiting for such a foundation before developing particular branches of moral theory (*ibid.*). I want to suggest, though it would take too long to argue for it, that Nagel cannot make sense of the idea of judgment in matters of practical and specifically moral conflict without at least implicit reference to a foundation-based moral theory, but that his theory of the fragmentation of value precludes such a theory. Judgment, our capacity to resolve conflicts in particular cases may indeed "extend beyond our capacity to enunciate general principles that explain those resolutions", but that would seem possible only within the scope of a moral theory. Under the first type, which makes explicit the principles that correspond to each of the five types of value, we can hope eventually to show that our intuitive judgments rest on these unconsciously held principles. What makes our hunch in such cases a judgment is the plausible hypothesis that we are unconsciously guided by principles whose soundness can be established by reference to the relevant type of value — utility, general rights, perfection, etc. But if there is no possibility of providing a sound foundation for a type of theory that can bridge the fragmented types of value, then our

hunches of what to do in such conflict cases cannot be shown to rest on sound principles of how to resolve such conflicts. They will not then deserve the title judgment, since they are not based on unconsciously held sound principles that could be made conscious, for ex hypothesi the fragmentation of value precludes the formulation of such principles.

Chs. 10 and 11 are peripheral from my point of view. In 10, *Ethics Without Biology*, Nagel makes the important and sensible point that human beings have “a capacity to subject their pre-reflective or innate responses to criticism and revision, and to create new forms of understanding” (p. 165). It is the exercises of this rational, critical capacity which have produced disciplines such as physics and ethics. “Biology may tell us about perceptual and motivational starting points, but in its present state it has little bearing on the thinking process by which these starting points are transcended.” (p. 166) It would therefore be “as foolish to seek a biological evolutionary explanation of the development of ethics as it would be to seek such an explanation of the development of physics”.

In Ch. 11, “Brain Bisection and the Unity of Consciousness”, Nagel discusses 5 hypotheses that attempt to reconcile the experimental data from brain bisection with the concept of the unity of consciousness or the concept of an individual mind, which seem pretty well to exhaust the possibilities, but finds all of them unacceptable. Since this essay neither directly develops the main theme nor deals with ethics, I shall not say any more about it.

Ch. 12, “What is it like to be a bat?”, also deals with the nature of consciousness and the mind-body problem. It develops Nagel’s central theme in a particularly brilliant and persuasive way. It is probably the best known though because of the prevailing anti-dualism the least widely accepted of his papers. However, it is in my opinion the most compelling defense of the ineliminability of the subjective point of view, the one that confronts objectivists with “the most indigestible subjective lump” and lends the greatest plausibility to his thesis that we have an irresistible urge to “flee the subjective under the pressure of an assumption that everything must be something not to any point of view, but in itself” (p. 226).

His central points are two. The first is that if an organism has conscious experience, then “there is something it is like to *be* that organism — something it is like *for* the organism” (p. 186). The second is that “we have at present no conception of what an explanation of the physical nature of a mental phenomenon would be” (ibid.), hence that none of the commonly offered reductive explanations “will shed light on the relation of mind to brain” (ibid.). For “it is useless to base the defense of materialism on any analysis of mental phenomena that fails to deal explicitly with their subjective character” (ibid.). But that is the most difficult part to explain. “One cannot exclude the phenomenological features of experience from a reduction in the same way that one excludes the phenomenal features of an ordinary substance from a physical or chemical reduction of it — namely, by explaining them as effects on the minds of human observers.

If physicalism is to be defended, the phenomenological features must themselves be given a physical account." (ibid.) But that seems impossible, because "every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view, and it seems inevitable that an objective, physical theory will abandon that point of view" (pp. 186/7).

In the remainder of the paper Nagel explores the connection between experience, subjectivity, and a certain point of view, by trying to imagine what it is like to be a bat. The general difficulty he tries to make clear is one involved in all psychophysical reduction. Thus, "in discovering sound to be, in reality, a wave phenomenon in air or other media, we leave behind one viewpoint to take up another, and the auditory, human or animal viewpoint that we leave behind, remains unreduced" (pp. 192/3). Now in seeking a fuller understanding of the external world, we can leave this point of view behind, but not when trying to capture the nature of experience, since "it is the essence of the internal world, and not merely a point of view on it" (p. 193).

In Ch. 13, "Panpsychism", Nagel examines the thesis that the fundamental constituents of the universe have mental properties. He claims that this thesis follows from four premisses, each of which is more likely to be true than false, but not more likely to be true than that Panpsychism is false. They are (i) that every organism is composed solely of material components; (ii) that mental states are not physical properties of the organism and are not implied by these properties alone; (iii) that mental properties are properties of the organism; (iv) that there are no emergent properties. In the central part of the essay Nagel raises and discusses three major problems generated by these premisses, but these matters are only indirectly related to Nagel's main theme and so I shall not discuss them.

In the final chapter (14), "Subjective and Objective", Nagel summarizes and develops his main theme in the book, the inescapability and incompatibility of the subjective and objective points of view. He gives five examples of philosophical problems: the meaning of life (pp. 215f.), free will (pp. 216f.), personal identity (pp. 218f.), mind-body (pp. 220f.), and consequentialist- versus agent-centered views of right and wrong (pp. 221f.). Nagel thinks that all these (and some further) problems are due to "a common philosophical difficulty behind all of them" (p. 224). I have already mentioned, in my introductory remarks, what this difficulty is: it is the difficulty that arises from the need we all feel (p. 228) to escape from the confines of our subjectivity and move as far as we can in the direction of objective reality. "The opposition between subjective and objective can arise at any place on the spectrum where one point of view claims dominance over another, more subjective one, and that claim is resisted. In the dispute over consequentialism in ethics, it appears in the clash between internal and external views of human life, both fully admitting the importance of human concerns and ends. In the mind-body problem it appears in the clash between an internal human view of human beings and the external view of physical theory.

In the problem of personal identity, it appears in the clash between the point of view of a particular individual toward his own past and future and the view that others may take of him as a continuing conscious being, characterized by bodily and psychological continuities." (p. 225) The "problems arise because the same individual is the occupant of both points of view" (p. 227), and they arise whenever the objective view encounters something, revealed subjectively, that it cannot accommodate" (p. 228). But the three obvious ways of accommodating "the recalcitrant aspect" (pp. 228f.), namely, reduction, elimination, and annexation (ibid.) cannot, according to Nagel, do justice to the subjective element.

At this point in the argument Nagel mentions an alternative method for dealing with these problems, namely "to resist the voracity of the objective appetite", either by refusing to objectify *everything* or *anything*" (p. 230f.). But he finds this alternative hard to accept, for "the deep source of both idealism and its objectifying opposite is the same: the conviction that a single world cannot contain both irreducible points of view and irreducible objective reality — that one of them must be what there *really* is and the other somehow reducible to or dependent on it" (p. 231).

In the end Nagel opts for a form of non-extreme "romanticism" (p. 232). "The task of accepting the polarity without allowing either of its terms to swallow the other should be a creative one. It is the aim of eventual unification that I think is misplaced both in our thoughts about how to live and in our conception of what there is." (p. 232)

If I correctly understand Nagel's alternative method for dealing with those problems that arise out of a conflict of the subjective and objective points of view, namely, to acknowledge "that understanding of the world and our position in it [cannot] always be advanced by detaching from that position and subsuming whatever appears from there under a single more comprehensive conception" (p. 230), then this seems to me often not merely the best way to *cope* with the problem, but a way to *solve* it. I have already sketched reasons for thinking that this is so in the case of the meaning of life and of moral luck. I want to conclude my comments with the suggestion that Nagel's thesis about our need to transcend our subjectivity in order to understand what things are in themselves does not plausibly apply to the practical realm. There the opposition between the subjective and objective viewpoints take many different forms and none of these is analogous to any in the realm of metaphysics or psychology. Unlike the opposition between the subjective and objective viewpoints in metaphysics, that between subjective (or agent-centered) and objective (or agent-neutral) reasons is not cut from uniform cloth. Both ethical egoism and utilitarianism are objective in the sense of consequentialist, but one rests on agent-centered, the other on agent-neutral reasons. It is a quite different contrast from that between general rights and consequentialist views, which latter are objective, even when they are egoist. It seems to me that such oppositions in ethics are not inescapable and troublesome conflicts forced on us by our moral consciousness.

Whereas, in the case of the body-mind problem and the problem of perception, Nagel has put his finger on something, “the voracity of the objective appetite”, that may well be the main cause of these problems – though even there I can see no compelling reason to reject the last-mentioned method for solving them – Nagel has not provided a comparable sound diagnosis of some of the other problems, especially those in ethics.

It remains only to comment briefly on the translation. As far as I can tell all the essays except one were translated jointly by two people (Karl-Ernst Prankel and Ralf Stoecker). The one exception is “What is it like to be a bat?”, which was translated by a third (Ulrich Diehl). This particular essay seems to have been faithfully, clearly, and pleasingly translated, except for the title. The German, “Wie ist es, eine Fledermaus zu sein?”, strongly suggests, more strongly than the English, that this is a question addressed to someone who has become a bat and is asked to report on bat life.

The other essays vary in accuracy, clarity, and pleasingness. There are some irritating colloquialisms, e.g., throughout essay 2, but nowhere else, a preference for the word ‘halt’, e.g., “um dann nach einer Weile ergebnislosen Reflektierens halt wieder damit aufzuhören” (p. 28), “nehmen wir sie halt wieder auf” (p. 34), “also leben wir halt weiter” (p. 35) and so on. There are several ugly Anglicisms, such as “zusammengemixt” (p. 92), “gesplittet” (p. 100), “Common Sense” (p. 154). There are strange translations, e.g., “Allgemeinplatz” (p. 122) for “commonplace”, (i.e., “Gemeinplatz”), or “Mensch, einen irren Apparat habt ihr da!” (p. 172) for “Wow, that’s quite a machine you’ve got there” (that is, “. . . einen tollen Apparat. . .”). The titles of two chapters “The policy of preference”: “Bevorzugung gegen Benachteiligung?” and “The fragmentation of value”: “Die Verschiedenheit der Werte” are infelicitous, if not incomprehensible, especially the first one. There are awkward sentences or clauses, e.g., “die These zu sein, daß der Tod stets von Übel ist” (p. 22); “sich ästhetische oder andere evaluative Analoga zu den auf diese Weise verbannten moralischen Einstellungen zu eigen zu machen” (p. 49); “Nach einer Theorie, die den Schwerpunkt auf die Rechte des Einzelnen legt, ist es falsch, die Freiheit der Menschen, das, was sie verdient haben, auch zu behalten und zu vererben, einzuschränken, bloß um Ungleichheiten bei der Verteilung zu verhüten” (p. 126). Nagel’s sentence “for it leaves us with no one to be” becomes “denn ihr zufolge müßten wir uns damit abfinden, daß es niemanden gibt, der wir sein könnten” (p. 52). There are implausible and inconsistent renderings of words. Thus the word ‘wrong’ is sometimes (misleadingly) rendered as “verkehrt” (p. 69) even though it is quite clear from the context that it is used in a moral sense, at other times (correctly) as “Unrecht” (p. 106, 126). This is done quite deliberately (the translators add the word ‘wrong’ in brackets) but for no good reason: “Unrecht” would have been correct in all cases.

However, these are minor flaws which diminish the pleasure of reading the book in translation and often fail to convey, to the reader, the eloquence and

elegance of Nagel's essays, but do not seriously impede understanding or generate misunderstandings.

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