REVIEW

Thomas Nagel, *The view from nowhere*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989 (paperback edition).

The scope of this book is impressive: it treats issues concerning 'morality, knowledge, freedom, the self and the relation of mind to the physical world' (p. 3). Yet, as Nagel points out, it deals essentially with 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 his viewpoint included' (p. 3).

For reasons of space and of personal competence, I shall in this review only be concerned with how Nagel thinks the subjective/objective distinction affects our claims to (objective) knowledge.

Nagel calls something (an experience, a belief, an attitude, ...) subjective if its nature is determined by its possessor's makeup, by his position in the world, by his particular point of view. The realm of the objective is located on the opposite pole: it includes everything that could be shared by subjects or creatures with very different points of view (e.g. humans and animals or even alien creatures).

The most obvious candidates to inhabit the subjective realm are the elements of consciousness. In the second chapter of this book, Nagel reaffirms his claims, already pronounced in his 'What is it like to be a bat?', that these can not be understood in the way the physical sciences understand the physical world. This kind of understanding, which Nagel calls 'physical objectivity' tries to conceive of the world in terms of its 'primary qualities', those that persist without our perceiving them (he mentions shape, size, weight and motion' (p. 14)). Nagel claims that by adopting this attitude it fails, and will always fail, to account for experience, the domain of the 'secondary qualities', which cannot be reduced to, or understood in terms of primary qualities.

What Nagel aims at is a new form of objective understanding of subjectivity: one that accepts consciousness as a general aspect of reality, of which our own consciousness is but one instance.

Nagel claims that the fact that we can understand attributions of consciousness to fellow people shows that we already possess some kind of such a general concept of consciousness. He argues that this general concept cannot be analysed in behavioral or functionalist terms, because this would imply first/third person

assymmetries and even solipsism: we would not be able to make sense of real minds other than our own (no doubt, a though-minded functionalist would accuse Nagel here of begging the question: he or she would insist that ascribing functionally characterised mental concepts to fellow creatures is counting them among the real minds, without leaving anything out).

Nagel wants to generalise the concept of consciousness even further: he argues that it might be possible to conceive of types of experiences of which we could not possibly have first person understanding (as we can have in the case of our fellow humans). Thus we would be able to conceive of the consciousness of creatures that have unimaginable different mental lifes.
At this point, the reader is eager to be told more about the content of this general concept of consciousness. The only thing Nagel specifies, however, is that it expresses 'that we know there's something there, something perspectival, even if we don't know what it is or even how to think about it' (p. 21). Yet at the same time, having such a concept of consciousness should enable us to investigate 'the quality structure of a sense we do not have, ... by observing creatures who do have it' (p. 25). Finally, Nagel admits that even this extended form of objectivity will not reach the complete understanding of experiences that can only be obtained by being the subject of those experiences.

It seems to me that if the new form of understanding is completely different from 'physical objectivity', it can't investigate the quality structure of a sense we do not have by observing the behavior of creatures who have it, because that would be one of the ways in which physical objectivity would carry out its investigation. Moreover, if it is stuctural descriptions and explanations Nagel is aiming at, physical objectivity seems most appropriate. It seems to me that the only way to try to understand the quality structure of a sense we do not have, is to investigate what parameters in the physical world the creature who has that sense, is sensitive to, and how it infers invariant properties of objects in the world from variations in this parameter (cfr. Boden, M.(1984)). This kind of approach probably would be regarded by Nagel as a kind of physical objectivity. Yet if his general concept of consciousness tells us nothing more than 'that there is something there, something perspectival, ...', I fail to see how it could replace or improve upon the understanding gained from the standpoint of physical objectivity. I think that at the root of the problems Nagel encounters here lies some sort of category error: he confuses the separate domains of experiencing and understanding and he thinks understanding from the standpoint of physical objectivity is incomplete because

it cannot achieve what no form of understanding can achieve (this is why he fails to specify the form of understanding that would transcend its limits).

Consciousness is in Nagel's eyes not the only obstacle for objectivity. Another finds its roots in the apparently innocent thought that we are creatures in an independently existing reality, whereof we might have knowledge. The aim of objectivity arises when we become aware that our initial appearances might not conform to reality because our mind might have made its own contributions to them. We then try to reach a more objective point of view by developing a conception that includes the world and us as knowing subjects. Such a conception might show us where our appearances conform to reality and where they are mere appearances. Ideally, such a conception should explain itself: its picture of our interaction with the world should explain how we are able to arrive at it.

However, the mistrust of our initial appearances, which initiated the search for objectivity, might equally give rise to an all pervasive scepticism, that calls into doubt the project of self transcendence at which objectivity aims. For, according to Nagel, if the reliability of our initial appearances is questioned, we can also ask why we should rely on the products of our more detached (objective) points of view. Scepticism tells us there are ways in which we could be wrong that we might never be able to discover.

Nagel adopts an attitude he calls 'double vision': we should pursue the kind of self-transcendence mentioned earlier, but with an acute awareness of its limits. These are twofold. Firstly, this self- transcendence has its internal limits: the kind of detached understanding it aspires at might never be achieved because of the contributions of our own constitution can never be ruled out. They might affect any form of higher order understanding and might prevent the kind of self-referential self-explanation mentioned above. Secondly, there are the sceptical possibilities (e.g. that we really are brains in vat) that, Nagel thinks, can never be absolutely refuted.

Interestingly, he takes a somewhat Humean stand towards scepticism: despite the irrefutability of the sceptical attitude 'we can't cure our appetite for belief, and we can't take on this attitude toward our own beliefs, while we're having them' (p. 88). I found Nagel's discussion of these topics far too general and metaphoric. He fails to sketch a clear picture, let alone give an example, of how the mind's constitution contributes (in a misleading way) to our understanding of the world. The way I can make sense of such a contribution of the mind, is by thinking of

'assumptions' the brain seems to make in perception. Most researchers of the visual system agree, I think it is safe to say, that the brain makes assumptions about the physical world in order to arrive at an interpretation of the retinal image (cfr. Bruce, V. & Green, P. (1985), p.94). Such assumptions may express very general properties of the world (e.g. that a point can be in only one place at a time, that surfaces tend in general to vary smoothly in their orientation, ...). Insofar these assumptions -which might be hardwired in the brain- can be considered as 'contributions of the mind's own constitution', they are in no way arbitrary or misleading: they arise from very general features of the world. So to speak, if vision would be possible without them, it would see the same things.

I think Nagel would be forced to regard this as an example of a contribution of the mind's constitution to our knowledge, especially because he thinks this activity operates at the level of appearances, of secondary qualities - how things 'look, feel, smell, taste or sound' (p. 14). Indeed, in chapter 6, section 3, he argues at some length that our knowledge of the primary qualities gives us knowledge of things as they are in themselves.

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