

Confronting the Nihilism of Our Day with Thomas Nagel's Ethical Objectivity

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abstract

There are few scholars today who are challenging the notion "nothing is objectively right or wrong because nothing objectively matters," one such scholar is Thomas Nagel; we will pursue in this essay a keener understanding of the possibilities of ethical objectivity in the face of the popularity of the position mentioned above (often understood as "nihilism"). We will attempt to articulate Nagel's alternative, a "view from nowhere," as a way out of the rather relativistic and reductionistic tendencies of moral philosophies today.

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Introduction: The Quest for Objective Understanding

It has been a century and a half after the demise of the philosopher dubbed as one of the great founding fathers of existentialist thought—it was Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) who became the very exemplar of a mode of philosophy that dared to defend the “subjectivity” of man in the face of a modern, highly-technological, mechanistic world, a world that threatens to dehumanize the human subject, transforming him from being a legitimate center of meaning into a mere thing that can be manipulated, exploited, controlled, driven into calculative thinking. Existential phenomenology gave us good reason to suppose that our personhood is something inexhaustibly profound and irreducible to “cog in the machine,” or “a jar of chemicals,” a living human being is much more than just a mass of bones, tissues and cells—we are, after, all embodied subjects. However, we also realize that we *are* bodies, we conduct scientific procedures on ourselves as bodies whenever we treat bodily ailments and diseases; it is also true that brain activity is partially explained by the movement of electrical signals to and from the brain. Science demands us to be objective about what we know concerning ourselves and reality, and we conduct investigations and experiments that somehow would be methodical and would have a high degree of repeatability; science endeavors to conceive of knowledge about the world. In similar fashion, ethics demands objectivity with regard to reasons for doing what we ought to do.

Thomas Nagel (1937--) woke up to this intellectual climate when the so-called tension between subjectivity and objectivity is already in place. In the opening pages of his masterful work *The View From Nowhere* he addresses the problem of reconciling the subjective standpoint with the objective standpoint, but rather than aiming at complete unification (which he thought could occur occasionally but not always), he is quick to point out the often ignored intuitiveness drawn from the juxtaposition itself, the interplay of these two conceptions: “I find it natural to regard life and the world this way—and that includes conflicts between the standpoints and the discomfort caused by obstacles to their integration. Certain forms of perplexity—for example, about freedom, knowledge and the meaning of life—seem to me to embody more insight than any of the supposed solutions to those

problems.”¹ The tension itself is quite useful and we draw conceptions that will prove worthwhile, especially when it comes to knowing ourselves.

Science and reason have for the longest time been demanding that we undertake the objective method of understanding. Traditional academic inquiry suggests that objective understanding, often grounded on justified belief in accordance to available evidence, is to be differentiated from subjectivity which casually refers to raw, visceral, even “unargued or unjustified personal feelings and opinions.”² Drawing from this definition, it becomes impossible to create reconciliation, let alone a kind of back-and-forth interaction between objective and subjective, leaving us empty-handed. But Nagel endeavors to clarify further what he means by objective and subjective standpoints, which appear to be modified from the traditional meaning, and there is value in the tension itself: “To acquire a more objective understanding of some aspect of life or the world, we step back from our initial view of it and form a new conception which has that view in its relation to the world as its object...we place ourselves in the world that is to be understood [even if] the [initial] view [will come] to be regarded as an appearance... subjective...and correctable and confirmable by reference to it.”³ There are occasions, however, when the subjective standpoint cannot be subordinated, and as Nagel heeds the warnings of Nietzsche, we often wonder why it is easier for us to generate false objectifications than truer or sensible ones, “not all reality is better understood the more objectively it is viewed.”⁴ For instance, the ideas of “thought” or “emotion” are not reducible to brain circuits or organ functions, the idea of love is not simply a “trick of nature” as what material reductionists may have supposed, that religiosity may be more profound than the usual dismissal of it as simply a psychological delusion—there are plenty of human attributes that cannot be reduced to functionalism or calculativity. Nagel’s answer to the crisis of subjectivity is quite different from that of existential phenomenology, although he raises his own objections to the reductionistic tendencies of the sciences. The

¹Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4.

²See Robert Solomon, “Subjectivity,” *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 4.

⁴Ibid.

important thing to realize is that the interplay of the two standpoints aforementioned is necessary and essential.

A Critique of the Nihilism of the Age

The necessity of ethical practice will always constitute a problem in philosophy. The situation today is easily likened to that of Greek antiquity wherein Plato apparently called for ethical practice in order to prevent further moral and political degradation in the polis.⁵ We have come to realize, however, that the practice of ethics, Nagel is quick to say, must look up to objective values; they are necessary as conditions for its possibility, and it seems Nagel is more than willing to assert that reaching objectivity is the primary problem of ethics, it demands objectivity even more than science.⁶ It has become a kind of capitulation to human weakness when we absolutize our most base, whimsical, often malevolent, capricious interests; ethics demands, then, that we strive for objectivity, that we step back from our initial perspective (which include subjective appearances) and form an impersonal perspective about the world. In other words, we must create room for “the possibility...for the recognition of values and reasons that are independent of one’s personal perspective and have force for anyone who can view the world impersonally, as a place that contains him.”⁷ But this does not mean that subjectivity did not play a rather transient role in constituting objective values: “when we detach from our individual perspective and the values and reasons that seem acceptable from within it, we can sometimes arrive at a new conception which may endorse some of the original reasons but will reject some as false appearances.”⁸ Even if we are eventually going to end up with a centerless view, we must acknowledge that its formative stages necessitated a deliberation of our subjective reasons and values. But insofar as we are generating an objective set of values, we must recognize their capacity as normative judgments, if they are to be sensible at all, so that a fine ethical question would not so much be about “what should I do?” but rather “how should anyone act

⁵Ethel M. Albert, Theodore Denise and Sheldon Peterfrund, *Great Traditions in Ethics*, Fifth Edition (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1984), 8.

⁶Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 8, 138.

⁷Ibid., 140.

⁸Ibid.

under such-and-such circumstances?” Daniel Bonevac alludes to the example of the Chinese philosopher Mencius: for very real reasons, it is expected that any adult ought to be ready to rush to the rescue of a child who is about to fall into a well!⁹

This ethical objectivity, however, will not remain uncontested, especially with today’s moral climate, we have a Facebook generation where men and women are highly motivated by spectacular appearances, who will use the most squalid, shallow, or profane stuff of Hollywood movies (of course, there are a few exceptional films out there) as their only basis for truth, who have no regard at all for sound and level-headed research of what they ought to know and understand, many have lost the sentiment of becoming *accountable* to truth itself, many are more than willing to capitulate to their base consciousness and to be played for fools by political forces who master the populace—a lazy generation, if the likes of Nietzsche might characterize us. And so it appears most of us have ceased from hoping for any basis for objective values, an attitude that Nagel can only describe as a nihilistic form of thinking:

But the claim that there are objective values is permanently controversial, because of the ease with which values and reasons seem to disappear when we transcend the subjective standpoint of our own desires. It can seem, when one looks at life from the outside, that there is no room for values in the world at all. So to say, “There are just people with various motives and inclinations...when we regard all this from the outside, all we see are psychological facts...[it would appear as if the] ascent to an objective view, far from revealing new values that modify the subjective appearances, reveals that appearances are all there is...Beyond that it applies here with a nihilistic result: nothing is objectively right or wrong because nothing objectively matters.¹⁰

While such nihilistic position might be attractive for many, a number of seasoned philosophers have expressed their rejection of it. Nietzsche for one, despite the fact that he is branded as “nihilist” by mostly still untrained and haphazard scholars; a more rigorous understanding will show that Nietzsche, by claiming that “values

⁹Daniel Bonevac, *Today’s Moral Issues: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, Fifth Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 7.

¹⁰Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 141.

that are not transitory do not exist,” is not telling us to embrace nihilism, but is inviting us to become physicians of culture, to replace bad, anti-life sentiments with life affirming valuations.¹¹ Reading in context is everything. In *The View From Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel delivers yet another critique of nihilism, dismissing it outright as a lazily reductionistic view, likening it to physicalism in science,¹² it is a doctrine that tempts one to believe that appearances are all there is, since the physical world is all there is; We must naturally admit that there are occasions when physicalism turns into a form of myopia, one that pretends to capture the entire reality but simply is pretentiously sophisticated.

As we have contemplated on earlier, there is something debilitating about pursuing a science that claims to be able to physicalize all sorts of phenomena, including human thought and mental states, as in admiring a painting, as if all these were explainable in terms of motions of matter, atoms--the laws of physics alone; here we end up not only with a dry but also an incomplete account of reality. That is also the reason why, explains Nagel, “current attempts to understand the mind by analogy with man-made computers that can perform superbly some of the external tasks as conscious beings will be recognized as a gigantic waste of time.”¹³ This simply is the result of passivity, of not being able to transcend the senses if one already needs to, or simply a lack or a laziness to exercise one’s powers of imagination. It also undermines the role of the subject in giving meaning to things.

Furthermore, the nihilistic position for Nagel is a constant temptation to reoccupy a Humean position,¹⁴ this time scholars have applied Humean skepticism to ethics, in the attempt to justify the view that nothing can be objectively right or wrong. Hume originally claims that knowledge consists of nothing more than a succession of rather loose perceptions (ideas and impressions) that we associate with each other by sheer associative imagination (that is, without real objective basis) so that causality cannot really be explained in a meaningfully rigorous way.¹⁵ This, then, is the

¹¹See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 116.

¹²Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 141.

¹³Ibid., 16.

¹⁴Ibid., 141.

¹⁵Reginald F. O’neill, *Theories of Knowledge* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1960), 189.

unimaginative approach to ethics by some: since all that what we have are loose appearances, there cannot be any right or wrong about them. Those who adhere to this view are content to provide a “naturalistic explanation” to values, analogous to a physicalist explanation of phenomena, which is also a “psychological explanation” about how we might *arbitrarily* choose reasons for our actions and behavior. Nagel objects to this view: “What we see” when people take action with regard to how they ought to act, “is not just people being moved to act by their desires, but people acting and forming intentions and desires for reasons, good or bad.”¹⁶ He contends that if our choices about how we ought to act are to make sense as normative judgments at all, they must be driven by very real causes, not by arbitrary, fictional or fancied ones; and as the very agents that make choices, we are active agencies, not passive ones. To us the reasons behind our actions may be viewed as meaningful reasons, not tricks of nature or passive, even capitulating, automatized reactions to external stimuli, as some behaviorists might suppose they are.

Objectivity in Ethics

We will find it useful here to probe a few more objections to ethical objectivity and to take a closer look at Nagel’s defense of such position as well as the notion that values are not illusions, that they are driven by real causes in real situations.

It seems the idea that what appear to be normative judgments are always arbitrary assumptions generated from a confused collection of mere appearances, and therefore cannot constitute anything objective, is a misleading one. To illustrate this point, Nagel invokes one of the suggestions presented in John Mackie’s *Ethics*. Nagel finds unacceptable the latter’s claim that values are “not part of the fabric of the world,” retorting instead that we can have objective reasons and values even with regard to the cognition and treatment of pain, or perhaps we can objectively say that anyone would have very real reasons, as opposed to “imagined” ones, to get rid of a certain form of pain, such as a headache. Nagel replies to Mackie, “The objective badness of pain...is not some mysterious property that all pains have, but just the fact that there is reason for anyone capable of viewing the world

¹⁶Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 142.

objectively that they want it to stop. The view that values are real is not the view that they are real occult properties, but that they are real values.”¹⁷ Even if one was to say that “my pain is entirely mine” and that “you cannot experience my pain,” nevertheless, the fact that we experience pain and that we have objective reasons to be rid of it is very real and not a fabrication of imagination.

Now, if we are willing to expand our notion of pain to cover not only immediate physical pain but also the “pains” that humanity experiences in the social sphere, we will see an even better explication of Nagel’s point. Anyone who is still in the right mind will definitely object to the notion that history consists of mere appearances so that even the great social evils committed against mankind are nothing more than illusions, explainable psychologically or metaphysically in terms of the negativity of being. Can we not actually derive real reasons for the valuing of human life, or valuing human dignity, or protection of human rights? The sensible answer seems to be that we actually can. Here we can probably hope for a higher degree of objectivity. It is impossible for anyone to deny the evil of the Islamic State,¹⁸ their threat of global terrorism, the possibility that another holocaust can occur (despite that many muddle-headed history teachers nowadays assert that the Nazi holocaust did not happen!), we do not need to see people actually being beheaded before coming to our senses and realizing that evil is real. The modern excess of eugenics by enforced sterilization, as it was driven by real evil causes, cannot be denied. The writer Ladelle McWhorter once stressed the importance of bringing out into the open the knowledges subjugated in history, such as the enforced sterilizations that were done in Virginia State in the 1920’s by the US government (this includes forcibly taking out the ovaries of “fickle-minded” women), carried out with the goal of ensuring that the part of the population responsible for bringing about “imbecile” or “fickle-minded” or “dumb” offspring

¹⁷Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 144.

¹⁸The IS, Islamic State, formerly known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), designated as a terrorist organization by UN and composed mainly of Sunni Muslim jihadist fundamentalists. They are known for chopping people’s heads off and creating a public display of them. For more information, See Jim Muir, “Islamic State Group: The Full Story,” *BBC News*, 20 June 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35695648>, accessed November 3, 2016.

will not propagate.¹⁹ We cannot continue to be ensnared by the nihilism of our time, lest we all become armchair scholars, unable to act, and can do no other than just describe what is happening and explain away the human blunders of history in terms of, say, the metaphysics negativity of being, as if they were to be causes of celebration rather than embarrassment! Let us share this sentiment with Negri and Hardt:

[T]he tragic philosophers of Europe...from Schopenhauer to Heidegger...turn these real destructions into metaphysical narratives about negativity of being, as if these actual tragedies were merely an illusion, or rather as if it were our ultimate destiny...from the killing fields of Verdun to the Nazi furnaces and the swift annihilation of thousands in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the carpet bombing of Vietnam and Cambodia, the massacres in Setif and Sweto to Sabra and Shatila.²⁰

There are even misguided scholars today who claim that the proposition “values are not real at all” is an objective one. Again such a proposition is unacceptable to Nagel. It can be demonstrated in this way: If we push ourselves towards our objective standpoint far enough, we are tempted to believe that we are detaching ourselves from all forms of personal values, or personal interests, so that we end up with an objective view that is free from all forms of value, “we discover that there is *nothing*—no values left of any kind: things are said to matter at all only to individuals within the world. The result is objective nihilism,”²¹ describes Nagel. Nagel acknowledges this temptation especially if one is to attempt at a centerless view, an objective conception of the world from nowhere. But Nagel insists that the centerless, objective view does not simply dismiss personal values and interests, “But the objective view has more to go on, for its data include the appearance of value to individuals with particular perspectives, including oneself.”²² We must bear in mind that in generating the objective view, we become

¹⁹See Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo America: A Genealogy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

²⁰Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 46.

²¹Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 146.

²²Ibid., 147.

active participants in it, it is our reasons that will constitute what will be acceptable later on in the objective framework, with all the necessary tests for objectivity involved. In other words, Nagel seems to suggest that the objective view was a product of much deliberation, and only rational agents deliberate about values. Objectivity does not even entail the complete dissolution of all personal values: “the problem is not that values seem to disappear but that there seem to be too many of them, coming from every life and drowning out those that arise from our own.”²³ Nagel has already elucidated that these personal values arising originally from the subjective standpoint are subject to correction, confirmation, or even dismissal if they don’t seem to fit the objective view.²⁴ And nothing will stop us from deliberating about values.

There is another argument raised against the objectivity of values, one which Nagel would refer to as the empirical argument: “if we consider the wide cultural variation in normative beliefs, the importance of social pressure and other psychological influences to their formation, and the difficulty of settling moral disagreements, it becomes highly implausible that they are anything but pure appearances.”²⁵ Depending on the reader’s grasp of philosophical schools, one might see this position as closely associated with what many would term as moral relativism, as Bonevac explicates: “let us say that an *ethical relativist* believes that fundamental ethical truth—the basic truth about how one should live and what one should do—is relative to a group smaller than humanity as a whole. Something may be fundamentally right for one group but fundamentally wrong for another.”²⁶ Moral relativism has become highly popular in the academe so much so that Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* wrote: “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: Almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.”²⁷ The empirical argument earlier described by Nagel seems to be one of the direct logical implications of this relativist philosophy; it is easy to imagine how a relativist might suppose that the reasons for choosing a norm for action are simply *trivial* and *arbitrary*, hence, not

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., 4.

²⁵Ibid., 147.

²⁶Bonevac, *Today’s Moral Issues: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, 2.

²⁷Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). 25.

only can they not constitute objectivity but they may be deemed empty and unreal. Nagel clearly objects to this: “anyone offering [the empirical argument] must admit that not every psychological factor in the explanation of an appearance shows that the appearance corresponds to nothing real.”²⁸ That there are variations in normative beliefs does entail that the prejudices embodied in them cannot be transcended, neither does it necessitate that the agents that hold these normative beliefs are simply passive minds: “the degree to which agreement can be achieved and social prejudices transcended in the face of strong pressures suggests that something real is being investigated...that there are certain reasons for action,”²⁹ it is just that people often make a mistake of taking prejudiced, undeliberated “normative judgments” (which are disguised appearances) to be the best accounts for reality when, in fact, they are not. But the fact that people can deliberate, set standards, agree and disagree is very telling of what rational agents can do; what is lacking is practice of this capacity.

Conclusion

The nihilism of this age and time, the notion that “nothing ever matters objectively” is certainly debilitating and discouraging to say the least; proceeding in nihilistic fashion, we are unable to foster for ourselves the much-needed ethical accountability with regard to the reasons we hold behind our valuations. Perhaps the most important lesson in this paper is that we ought to disengage from such nihilistic frame of mind. In fact, ethics is quite the reverse of nihilism, it should be, from the outset, all about responsibility, or accountability with regard to our comings and goings, as even the ancients might have suggested with the term *ascesis*; such concept is applicable not only to religious life but to ethics in general, suggesting that one, borrowing a term from Michel Foucault, ought to put oneself in the activity of thought.³⁰ But we are not simply passive scholars; such a nihilistic manner of proceeding is not something that we can continue consenting to, as it has been the

²⁸Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 147.

²⁹Ibid., 148.

³⁰Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 9.

product of a confused, impulsive, irresponsible, often programmatic instruction.

Again as Nagel puts it, objectivity is the main course of ethics, and should be its main problematic, even in teaching ethics in contemporary education. We believe he has good reasons for the claim, and it is our hope in this paper that we are able to give justice to some of Thomas Nagel's useful insights with regard to how we can be ethically objective about things or how normative judgments based on realistic reasons can be arrived at. We are, of course, made aware by Nagel of the difficulties involved in this pursuit for objectivity. It was admitted that there seems to be "no preset method of carrying out a normative investigation,"³¹ although there is hope for objectivity because the act of stepping back, which might involve what he terms as "integrating" the subjective with the objective, is not impossible—that itself should set certain conditions or parameters. Nagel continues, "the process...can go on indefinitely...some aspects of practical reason may prove to be irreducibly subjective, so that while their existence must be acknowledged from an objective standpoint their content cannot be understood except from a more particular perspective. But other reasons will irresistibly engage the objective will."³² Again we stress that there is no guarantee for success, but such undertaking is worthwhile, if we have already made up our minds about not succumbing to the nihilistic mindset.

In this paper, then, we highly commend Nagel for his contributions especially in the study of ethics, although it is undeniable that his work traverses other realms in philosophy.

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³¹Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 149.

³²Ibid.

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