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NAGEL'S ARGUMENT FOR ALTRUISM

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Thomas Nagel has argued that the rationality of prudence is secured by the fact that reasoning about what to do necessarily involves the adoption of a standpoint which is temporally neutral.¹ He argues that a rational agent must regard practical matters from a standpoint which is neutral with respect to whether what is considered is past, present, or future. In short, the argument is supposed to issue in the conclusion that if it is true that a person has, had, or will have a reason to do something, then it is now true that person has a reason to desire the doing of that action. And thus if the possibility of action is present or future, he has reason to take steps which will aid in or constitute the performing of that action, or if it is past, to desire (wish) that the action was performed, or perhaps, to be glad that it was. Nagel also asserts that this conclusion can be equivalently stated in metaphysical terms; namely, that a rational agent must see himself as a temporally extended being for whom "the present is just a time among others, and that other times are equally real" (p. 88).

In a recent article², Richard Kraut dissents from Nagel's conclusion and from his contention that having a conception of oneself as a being which exists throughout a series of times which are 'equally real' implies that in practical reasoning one must adopt a standpoint which is temporally neutral. In particular, Kraut argues that it is rational to prefer that a pain be in one's past rather than in one's future and thus that "Nagel is wrong in holding that a rational person regards *all* his reasons as being timeless." (p. 353) Furthermore, having this preference does not mean that one considers one's past any the less real than one's future.

Kraut also suggests that a similar objection can be brought against Nagel's argument for altruism. Nagel argues (in absolute parallel to his argument for the rationality of prudence) that practical reasoning necessarily involves the adoption of an impersonal standpoint. That is, if one is to reason practically one must consider practical situations from

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a standpoint which abstracts completely from one's place in the situation (just as one must abstract completely from whether the time is before, simultaneous with, or after, the present). But, Kraut asks, what about someone who cares only about himself (and perhaps some friends)? Surely he does not adopt an impersonal standpoint. Is he incapable of practical reasoning? Is it true, as Nagel says it is, that he must think that these other beings with whom he converses, competes, *et cetera*, are not persons just like he is?

I, too, share Kraut's doubts about the conclusions that Nagel attempts to establish; namely (in his own terms), that all reasons for acting are objective and timeless. What Kraut does not do, and what I wish to do, is to give rather close attention to Nagel's argument for his conclusions – in particular his argument that all reasons must be objective. What I shall try to convince you of is that Nagel's argument depends on a confusion, and that once this confusion is seen, it is plain that the conclusions do not follow. What, then, is the argument?

Nagel's argument against egoism employs a distinction between what he calls *objective* reasons and *subjective* reasons. As we shall see, this distinction plays a role in the argument against egoism which is formally analogous to the role that the distinction between tenseless and tensed reasons plays in the argument that all reasons are timeless. Just as the latter argument concludes that all reasons are tenseless or 'timeless', so the latter argument concludes that "the only acceptable reasons are objective ones." (p. 96) The distinction between objective and subjective reasons is this. Nagel construes a reason for acting as "a predicate R, such that for all persons p and events A, if R is true of A, then p has prima facie reason to promote A." (p. 90) A reason is said to be *subjective* if its "defining predicate R contains a free occurrence of the variable p" (p. 90) Thus such facts as 'A is in one's interest', 'A is what one desires', or 'A is good from one's own point of view', if they are reasons to act are *subjective* reasons. They contain occurrences of a linguistic item which functions as a variable to be instantiated by the agent for whom that fact's being true of the action is prima facie reason to perform it. *Objective* reasons are all reasons which are not subjective; for example, 'A will be in someone's interest' or 'A will benefit Thomas Nagel'.

The first premise of Nagel's argument is that whatever can be said of a practical situation (or of any situation, for that matter) must be assertable

from a standpoint which is person-neutral. In short, if I judge (as Nagel says, from the personal standpoint) that I have reason to do A, then what I judge to be the case is no different from what you would judge to be the case if you were to judge that Darwall has reason to do A. Let us call this premise (A') (since it is the formal equivalent of Kraut's (A)): ³

- (A') Judgments from the personal and impersonal standpoints must have the same content. That is, what is judged to be true of a practical situation is not affected merely by the standpoint from which it is judged.

In Nagel's own words, "Shifts of grammatical person, like shifts of tense, cannot be permitted to alter the sense of what is asserted about the circumstance which is the subject of the statement." (p. 101) The denial of this premise, in Nagel's view, amounts to a kind of solipsism; namely, that statements about other people, or about myself considered impersonally, (i.e., not as *myself*, but, perhaps, as Darwall), cannot be true *in the same sense* as statements about myself. Thus:

According to the solipsist, an impersonal description of the situation in which he finds himself, and of his condition, cannot avoid being radically incomplete. It is incomplete not only because it fails to specify who he is, but because it fails to describe what is really happening. (p. 105)

Thus, according to Nagel, the solipsist is committed to thinking that impersonal practical judgments cannot have the same content as personal practical judgments. That is, he thinks that if I judge that *I* have reason to do A then I judge something different to be true than what you would judge to be true if you were to judge that Darwall has reason to do A. It is important to see that for Nagel the charge of practical solipsism is essentially one of denying the truth of (A'). It is the charge of an "inability to make practical judgments about other persons in the same sense which one can make them in one's own case." (p. 107) Thus, for Nagel, the charge of practical solipsism levelled against the egoist is actually the charge of denying (A'). All of this may seem quite mysterious; especially in view of the fact that (A') appears to be so utterly unexceptionable. Why would anyone think that the egoist would want to deny it?

Nagel's answer is that the egoist is committed to denying (A') because he must deny something which is a consequence of it. The reason for this is that practical judgments made from the *personal* standpoint have

motivational content. In particular, the personal practical judgment, 'I have reason to do A' has *motivational content*. Roughly a judgment is said to have motivational content if (i) a person's acceptance of that judgment is sufficient, by itself, to explain that person's acting in a way that the judgment recommends; and (ii) in accepting that judgment one accepts something which *justifies* one's desiring something that the judgment recommends.⁴ The following quotation will give textual evidence for this account of motivational content:

I explained the sense in which first-person present-tense practical judgments possess motivational content; the acceptance of such a judgment is by itself sufficient to *explain* action or desire in accordance with it.... I have referred to this motivational content as the *acceptance of a justification* for doing or wanting something. (p. 109)

Thus Nagel holds that the following is true:

- (B') The personal practical judgment ('I have reason to do A') has motivational content; i.e., a person's acceptance of that judgment is sufficient to (i) explain his bringing about what it recommends, and (ii) justify his desiring to bring about what it recommends.

But according to Nagel this is all that one needs to demonstrate egoism false. For (A') and (B') together entail (C'):

- (C') The impersonal practical judgment ('Darwall has reason to do A') must have motivational content; i.e. a person's acceptance of that judgment is sufficient to (i) explain his bringing about what it recommends, and (ii) justify his desiring to bring about what it recommends.

For if (C') were false, according to Nagel, this could only be because the personal practical judgment does not have motivational content or that the practical judgments made from the personal and impersonal stand-points could differ in content. Motivational content is part of the content of the personal practical judgment. But then, since (A') is true, (C') is true. Furthermore, (C') is clearly inconsistent with egoism or with any position which holds that there are subjective reasons to do A like 'A is in *my* interest' which are not backed by objective reasons such as 'A is in *someone's* interest' or 'A is in *Darwall's* interest'. For (C') holds that the

recognition that another person has reason to do something is enough, by itself, to justify one's desiring to promote his doing it.

If Nagel's argument is sound it will do no good to protest that its conclusion (in this instance that all reasons are objective, in the other, that all reasons are timeless) is at variance with preferences we suppose to be rational, or at any rate, not irrational – namely for past rather than future pain or for the promotion of one's own interests rather than the promotion of those of others. I suggest therefore, that what is required is a careful look at the argument.

The first premise, (A'), appears to be utterly unexceptionable. It is quite doubtful that an attack on the argument could be mounted by questioning it. However, this is not at all true with the second premise. Nagel says that the personal practical judgment has motivational content. And this is supposed to mean that anyone who accepts it accepts a justification for desiring what it recommends. However, in order for the conclusion (C') to follow it must be that motivational content is part of the *content* of the personal practical judgment – that is, it must be part of *what is judged to be the case* when one judges that one has reason, oneself, to do A. But in *this* sense, because of the truth of (A'), it is misleading to speak of a personal or an impersonal practical judgment. Because, since (A') is true, what I judge when I judge that I have reason to do A is identical with what you judge if you judge that Darwall has reason to do A; in that sense, our judgments are the same. But in *this* sense, there may well be *no* judgment which has motivational content. That is, there may be no judgment which is such that *any* person's accepting that judgment is capable of justifying a desire to promote what that judgment recommends. For example consider the judgment that *I* (the writer) have reason to do A. If you accept *that* judgment, does that justify your desiring to promote my doing A. Well, not necessarily. For if you accept that I (Darwall) have reason to do A, that will only *justify* your desiring to promote my doing A on the *assumption* that all reasons are objective and that egoism is false. But, of course, Nagel cannot *assume* that. He is trying to prove it to us.

The problem with Nagel's argument is that in the one sense of 'judgment' which will make the conclusion (C') follow from the truth of the premisses (A'), (B') (namely where it can be glossed as 'what is judged to be the case'), to claim the truth of (B') as a premise is to beg the question against the egoist or anyone who would hold that some reasons are

subjective. It is to assume what the argument is supposed to prove; namely that all reasons are objective reasons.

Thus the egoist's position together with the truth of (A') (which he has no reason to dispute) imply that (B') is false. And since Nagel gives the egoist no reason to think (B') is true, I conclude that Nagel's proof that the egoist is committed to being a practical solipsist, that is, to denying the truth of (A'), does not go through.

It should be noted that the principle which Kraut suggests that Nagel might adopt; namely his (D): "If two utterances differ only in personal vantage point and one has motivational content, so should the other" (p. 358) has not been mentioned at all. The reason for this is that Nagel gives no argument that might issue in such a conclusion. He takes motivational content to be a property of *judgments* (what one judges); for if he did not (A') and (B') would not imply (C').

Finally it deserves to be noted that the same objection could be brought against Nagel's argument that all reasons must be timeless. As he himself claims, these arguments are meant to be formally analogous. Thus, in virtue of such counterinstances as Kraut's, one could reasonably doubt the truth of Kraut's (B).⁵ For if it is to be true in the relevant sense, namely, that what one judges when one judges that one has a reason to do A *now* has motivational content, this means that it is being claimed in a premise of an argument to the conclusion that all reasons are timeless, that all reasons are timeless.

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NOTES

¹ Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, Oxford 1970.

² Richard Kraut, 'The Rationality of Prudence', *The Philosophical Review* 81 (1972), 351–359.

³ Kraut formulates his (A) in terms of utterances. It is an important fact that Nagel never mentions utterances. He always speaks of judgments.

⁴ Again I diverge from Kraut's account of motivational content. He characterizes it as a property of utterances. Nagel never speaks of the motivational content of an utterance. For Nagel's various discussions of motivational content, see pp. 64, 65, 67, 100, 109, 110, and 143–144.

⁵ "Present-tense practical judgments (for example, I have a reason to do *a now*) have motivational content for everyone." (p. 356)