

# Critical Notices

## The Last Refutation of Subjectivism?

*The Last Word.*

By Thomas Nagel.

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£16.99.

The wide-ranging debate between objectivism and subjectivism is pursued today as vigorously as ever. It has been given a new impetus by currently fashionable postmodernism, with its unambiguously subjectivist and relativist edge. One can even say that outside the analytical movement, subjectivism and relativism are the views of the overwhelming majority, while objectivism and absolutism are supported by quite a small group of proponents. According to Thomas Nagel, one of the most astute and firm defenders of objectivism, such a situation has disastrous implications, since the more or less direct result of subjectivism has been, as he puts it, ‘a growth in the already extreme intellectual laziness of contemporary culture and the collapse of serious argument throughout the lower reaches of the humanities and social sciences, together with a refusal to take seriously, as anything other than first-person avowals, the objective arguments of others’ (p. 6). As a remedy for that disaster he proposes a vigorous defence of objectivism and a sustained attack on subjectivism. Putting aside the very tricky and delicate issue of the apparent impact of philosophical views on declining standards of contemporary culture, I would like to consider the cogency of Nagel’s attack on subjectivism, and especially examine his claim that any interesting form of global subjectivism is self-refuting. But before that it may be helpful to sketch a version of objectivism favoured by Nagel.

### **The Objectivism Grounded in Realism**

‘Objective’ seems to be for Nagel mainly, although not exclusively, an epistemological predicate. It applies to such bearers of cognitive content as beliefs, statements and propositions, as well as to such items of discursive

thought as arguments and reasons. Something is objective if it is universally valid, if it obtains irrespectively of the point of view from which it was stated. In other words, it holds good in virtue of its content and relation to the world, and not in virtue of a particular mental framework of a given subject. Epistemological objectivism is an expression of optimism in respect to our knowledge; it amounts to the claim that we are in possession of an enlarging body of beliefs or propositions that are objective in the above sense.<sup>1</sup>

Nagel holds that human beings, however limited as contingent creatures of biological evolution, are capable of forming objective beliefs, judgements, and theories in virtue of such a faculty as reason. By using reason I am able 'to think systematically in ways anyone looking over my shoulder ought to be able to recognize as correct' (p. 5). It means that the deliverances of reason carry with them the claim to unrestricted validity or generality. Even if this claim has to be qualified sometimes by the imposition of various constraints, the stages of that apparently restrictive procedure are formulated in strictly general terms and supported by generally valid reasons.

But obviously the claim to something is one thing, and its more or less frequent fulfilment quite another. It is relatively easy to make claims that are never fulfilled, or even cannot be fulfilled. So it is possible that reason can systematically yield the results claiming to be universally valid, but which are, as a matter of fact, not valid at all or valid to a very limited extent (only from the point of view of a given individual or society). Nagel is well aware of that point. Although he insists on separating 'the idea of reason from the idea that its results must carry absolute certainty' (p. 18) and holds that the results of rational arguments and justification are not immune to revision, he also maintains that in many simple and the most fundamental cases it would be hard to deny that we have formed beliefs, or thoughts, or judgements that are certain and indubitable. Among them, for instance, is the thought that I mean something, more or less determinate, by my current thoughts. I just cannot attempt to doubt it without realizing that the content of that supposed doubt is intelligible. The other contentful items having the status of indubitability or certainty are simple arithmetical or logical thoughts. They are, as Nagel puts it, 'pervasive elements of the thought of anyone who can think at all' (p. 55). The pervasiveness and validity of such thoughts show themselves not only in the unintelligibility of their denial but also in understanding them: we cannot properly understand them without acknowledging that they are self-evidently true.

Although we come to realize that a given thought does not only seem to be universally or unconditionally valid, but simply *is* valid in that sense, as if 'from inside' – by engaging our own mental capacities in a careful consideration of its content – we are nonetheless able to transcend our own particular perspective, both personal and societal. Hence one can suppose that a given thought is valid since it is grounded in the way the

world is, and not merely in the way it appears to us. This is announced by Nagel right at the beginning of his book: ‘the last word in philosophical disputes about the objectivity of any form of thought must lie in some unqualified thoughts about how things are – thoughts that remain, however hard we may try to get outside of them or to regard them merely as contingent psychological dispositions’<sup>2</sup> (p. vii). This suggests that Nagel combines his uncompromising objectivism with unqualified realism. To put it very roughly, our thoughts are universally valid since they reflect the structure of the real world, that exists independently of us. Such a strongly realist conception of objectivity lies, for example, behind Nagelian construal of Kantian philosophy as not ‘strictly relativistic’, but nonetheless ‘the most famous form of subjectivism about reason in the history of philosophy’ (p. 93). The rationale of that classification of Kant’s doctrine is of course realistically conceived objectivity: Kant is subjectivist because he gives an account of unconditional validity of our judgements not in terms of the independent reality as it is in itself, but in terms of the structure of our mind and the world as it appears to us. This classificatory example clearly suggests that realism is a very distinctive feature of Nagel’s conception of objectivism or objectivity, especially if one takes into account that by supposing a different picture of it, Kant turns out to be the most outstanding advocate of the modern notion of objectivity.<sup>3</sup>

### **Contentious Self-Refutation and Equilibrium**

Nagel accepts the common distinction between global subjectivism or relativism, which holds that everything is subjective or relative, and various kinds of local subjectivism or relativism, which are restricted to certain domains or areas of discourse. His claim is that the latter are clearly false, or at least less satisfactory and less plausible than their objectivist competitors, while the former is simply self-defeating or self-refuting. In what follows I shall focus only on Nagel’s criticism of global subjectivism.

His charge about the self-refuting character of subjectivism<sup>4</sup> is based, as happens very often in philosophy, on a very simple argument: (1) global subjectivism maintains that everything is subjective; (2) one cannot have the subjective without the objective; therefore (3) global subjectivism is self-refuting. So the question is not whether the argument is valid, since it clearly is, but whether its premises are justified or well supported. One can almost immediately exclude the first premise from consideration: it is simply true by definition. In other words, it only states what global subjectivism means. The second premise is much more substantial, and thus seems to be the real driving force of the argument. Let us then try to unpack its content and assess its support.

The most plausible construal of the premise in question, closely pertinent to the charge of self-refutation, runs roughly as follows: ‘one cannot

have the subjective without the objective' means simply that if one claims that something is subjective, then in order to make that claim defensible and acceptable one has to present it as an objective statement and support it by objective reasons. Otherwise no one would be bound to take it seriously. For a defender of global subjectivism this situation creates an extremely troublesome dilemma. 'To put it schematically', Nagel writes, 'the claim "Everything is subjective" must be nonsense, for it would itself have to be either subjective or objective. But it can't be objective, since in that case it would be false if true. And it can't be subjective, because then it would not rule out any objective claim, including the claim that it is objectively false' (p. 15).

However, it is not clear whether an advocate of global subjectivism must put herself into that hopeless predicament, and it is not clear whether the above reading of the second premise is tenable in its own right. This is because the practice of forming statements and the epistemic status of their results are more complicated than the simple dichotomy between purely subjective (that is, idiosyncratically personal or societal) and purely objective (that is, universally valid and correct). Perhaps such a dichotomy would be adequate for a perfect, omniscient being, but it is certainly not adequate for ordinary human beings. In the case of the latter we have to admit that many of their claims are put forward as recognizably neither subjective nor objective. That is to say, they belong to the third category of claims: those having indeterminate epistemic status. While making them, one can of course present them with a certain force, and even suggest that they may turn out to be objectively valid at some stage of our inquiry or in some envisaged counterfactual circumstances. But from that there is a long way to the categorical statement that those claims *are* objectively valid. If so, then a global subjectivist can easily avoid the Nagelian dilemma by insisting that she proposes her view as a hypothesis whose epistemic status is indeterminate (perhaps irremovably), and thus cannot be classified as objective or subjective. It seems, then, that under the first construal the crucial premise of the argument is not defensible.

The second interpretation of the premise relies on a particular idea of what the subjective account of our thoughts and beliefs consists in. If one wants to give such an account, Nagel maintains, one has, as it were, to stand outside the content of those thoughts, and provide a completely external description of them in terms of various contingent psychological influences and habits that have formed and created the illusion of their justification. But that task appears to be impossible. One cannot give a completely external account of absolutely all our thoughts without thinking some of them 'from inside' and assuming their unconditional validity. To put it differently, 'the discrediting of universal claims of reason as merely subjective or relative has inescapable built-in limits, since that external view does not itself admit of a still more external view, and so

on ad infinitum' (p. 20). For instance, if the subjectivist claims that all our logical, mathematical and empirical reasoning are simply manifestations of contingently formed habits, then in doing so she must exclude from that external assessment her own thoughts about those reasonings and take them 'from inside' as universally valid.

This construal, as it stands, does not appear to be any more promising than the first one. It is based on a suggestive but analytically elusive distinction between considering thoughts from outside, that is, externally, and thinking them from inside. The distinction is elusive because, as is widely known, spatial metaphors are particularly unhelpful in discussion of thoughts, beliefs and other contentful items. Moreover, two further critical remarks are in order here. First, although the subjectivist account of our thoughts is in some respects external, it is not an account completely 'outside' the contents of those thoughts; it takes them as contentful items while undercutting their pretensions to universal and timeless validity. Second, even if one admits that we have no option but to think some thoughts 'from inside', or, as Nagel puts it as well, to think them 'straight', that by itself does not turn our alleged commitment to their validity into their *actual* unconditional validity. Thus being all the time 'inside' the contents of some thoughts does not warrant that they are objective. So if it is really the case that a comprehensive account of our thought from the outside is not feasible, that in itself does not establish the premise 'one cannot have the subjective without the objective'.

The third and final construal of that premise relies heavily on the idea that a fully articulated statement of subjectivism carries with it, or presupposes, a certain metaphysical view of the world and the way in which human beings interact with it. In general, the view in question usually presents humans as contingent products of evolution whose cognitive capacities are shaped mainly by the need of survival, and are severely limited by their particular generic features, that is, by the fact that they are capacities of a given biological kind. Human beings are simply too immersed in their biological nature and too dependent upon various historical or psychological influences to be capable of forming completely neutral or objective thoughts about the world. Thus the most interesting forms of subjectivism, Nagel insists, 'are radical positive claims, and not, as their proponents represent them, merely the rejection of metaphysical excess. To take such a claim seriously, one has to try to interpret it as a genuine alternative – something we are being asked to believe about our relation to the world' (pp. 30–1). And since such a claim or claims are presented as objectively true, one has a very good reason for accepting that it is impossible to have the subjective without the objective.

The main problem with this *prima facie* plausible construal is whether any form of subjectivism has to carry with it a considerable amount

of objective metaphysical baggage in order to be counted as 'a genuine alternative'. Arguably not. To show this, let us consider how the real debate between the objectivist and subjectivist might look. The objectivist puts forward a certain body of epistemological and metaphysical claims concerning, among other things, the nature of unconditional validity of some thoughts and their grounds, the possibility of their indubitable grasp, and the nature of reason and its implementation in human beings. She may insist that those claims seem to be very intuitive and form a perfectly coherent theory applicable even to itself. However, if the objectivist is reluctant to base her conception upon some theological story of the inherently intelligible world created by an infinitely rational mind (and that supposition would certainly make her conception quite contentious), she may follow Nagel and honestly admit that it is to some extent mysterious how we, contingent biological creatures, are able to have such a faculty as reason.

It is worthy of notice that Nagel himself maintains that this explanatory failure of objectivism provides some account of why 'sophisticated forms of subjectivism keep appearing in the philosophical literature' (p. 4). But this is only a partial account, the subjectivist may add. The objectivist view seems to suffer from other failures as well. Indeed, the objectivist is even caught by the following dilemma: either she accepts the traditional version of the view in question, assuming that a considerable number of unconditionally valid thoughts are infallibly known to us, or she adopts its modern version devoid of those aspirations to absolute certainty. If she did the former, it would be almost impossible to explain the persistence of disagreements that surround those supposedly infallibly knowable thoughts; if the latter, it would be hard to tell what the idea of universally valid thoughts, but only fallibly known, really amounts to, how it differs from the idea of ordinary variously restricted and defeasible thoughts. Taking into account all those difficulties of objectivism, the subjectivist seems to have every right to put forward her alternative view without any need to support it by an elaborate, apparently objectivist, metaphysics. And what is more important, she can do it without exposing herself to the charge of self-refutation. While criticizing the objectivist view she may safely use its principles and rules just for the sake of argument, and then, after pointing out its various failures in terms of its own 'rationalistic' framework, suggest an alternative view as a kind of hypothesis that qualifies neither as objective nor as subjective.

To conclude. Contrary to what Nagel claims, global subjectivism does not seem to be a self-refuting view. It is a genuine alternative to objectivism, and perhaps even those two views remain (as is the case with many other philosophical doctrines) in a permanent state of equilibrium.<sup>5</sup>

**Notes**

- 1 In order that this optimism is not made reducible to a mere expression of faith, it has to be supported by some idea of how it is possible to attain knowledge of that kind. Therefore epistemological objectivism or objectivity has to include also an account of the way or ways in which we can acquire objective knowledge. So objectivity is, as Nagel puts it in his earlier work, 'a method of understanding' (*The View from Nowhere*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 4).
- 2 This passage also explains the rather puzzling and somewhat apocalyptic title of the book.
- 3 See, e.g., M. Friedman, 'Objectivity and History', *Erkenntnis*, 44 (1996), pp. 379–95.
- 4 The way in which this charge is put by Nagel varies. Sometimes he does not explicitly say that global subjectivism is self-refuting or self-defeating, but that it collapses into self-contradiction or is simply unintelligible. No doubt, all those matters are very closely related, but they do not always come to the same thing. However, there is no need to raise the very delicate and controversial issue of their relationship here.
- 5 I am grateful to Michael P. Lynch for helpful comments.