

## On Objectivity

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In "Other Minds" John Austin imagines a case where we have finally managed to identify the bird at the bottom of the garden as a goldfinch. In a kind of bird watcher's worst case scenario he asks what would happen to our identification if the bird suddenly did something outrageous, like exploding or quoting Virginia Woolf. The answer is, of course, that we would not know what to say. The conventions of our language only take us so far. They are not designed for extraordinary circumstances.

Thomas Nagel, writing in a recent issue of the "New York Review" (March 4, 1993), believes that we are at a similar loss for ways to describe the essential and irreducibly subjective element in experience. The occasion of his concern is the publication of John Searle's latest volume, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. According to Nagel,

Not only do materialist reductions fail to imply that the system is conscious, it is clear in advance that no further development along the same lines, no added structural or behavioral complications, could do so. The reason is that there is a crucial difference between conscious phenomena and behavioral or physiological phenomena that makes the former irreducible to the latter: consciousness is in Searle's terms "ontologically subjective." That is, its essential features cannot be described entirely from an external, third-person point of view. Even the physiological description of what goes on inside the skull is external in this sense: it is described from outside. It is not enough to summarize the third-person observations, that lead us to ascribe conscious mental states to others. *The first-person point of view, which reveals what a conscious mental state is like for its subject, is indispensable.* (emphasis added)

Later Nagel refers to the "irreducible subjectivity of the mental," and observes that the issue is "how to construct an intelligible and complete scientific world view once we deny the reducibility of the mental to the nonmental." Following Searle, he allows that we can describe how liquid and solid states emerge from H<sub>2</sub>O, "but we can't do this with subjectivity, which we have to imagine from the inside, whether it is our or someone else's." Hence, "we do not really understand the claim that mental states are states of the brain..."

There is much here that invites comment, but I will confine my remarks to the conception of subjectivity that seems to be operating here. Nagel tells us in a footnote that he prefers to be known as a defender of a "dual aspect theory" rather than as a defender of "property dualism." Whichever way his views are characterized the ontological split between the physical and mental corresponds to the split between objective and subjective states. In other words, the term "subjective" is taken as roughly synonymous with "mental" and the term "objective" as roughly synonymous with "physical." (I say "roughly" because it seems likely that the terms are not interchangeable in all contexts.) This use of "subjective" and "objective" I will call metaphysical. It is clear that on this interpretation it would indeed be impossible to describe a subjective state in objective terms.

There is another use of the term "subjective" that does not appear in the above passages, but which it may be helpful to mention here. "Subjective" in this sense designates statements that relate to matters accessible only to the person making the statement. "Objective" in this case would designate statements that can be confirmed or disconfirmed by anyone who wishes to take the trouble. Let's call this the verificationist sense of subjective. In this use the terms are independent of any mind-matter distinction. Statements regarding mental states may be subjective, but they are not necessarily so. As Austin points out in "Other Minds" there may be objective reasons for believing that someone is angry. In other words, we may have good reasons for deciding the accuracy of the statement "I am an-

gry," when it is uttered by someone else. Further, it is conceivable on this use that as non-invasive ways of mapping brain states improve we will be able to give objective descriptions of subjective states (e.g. correctly say "She is angry," while watching a PET monitor). Obviously, Nagel is not using "subjective" in this way since he denies emphatically that an objective description could ever capture a subjective state.

There is yet another sense of "subjective," that is close to Nagel's use but which is difficult to define. Nagel insists that subjective experience is identical with first-person experience. The long quotation cited above concludes with the claim that "the first person point of view which reveals what a conscious mental state is like for its subject is indispensable." In the succeeding paragraph Nagel expands on the idea that subjectivity is equivalent to first person experience. That paragraph is as follows:

This becomes clear when we ask what is consciousness? Though we can describe certain of its features and identify more specific types of mental phenomena as instances, it is so basic that it cannot be defined in terms of anything else ... Searle's claim is that no amount of third person analysis ... could possibly tell us what these experiences are in themselves – what they consist of as distinguished from their causes and effects. This is perfectly obvious because *subjective facts about what it is like for someone to be in a certain condition – what it's like from his point of view – can't be identified with facts about how things are*, (emphasis added) not from anyone's point of view or *for* (sic) anyone, but just in themselves. Facts about your external behavior or the electrical activity or function organization of your brain may be closely connected with your conscious experience but they are not facts about what it is like for you to hear a police siren. (pp 38-39)

On the face of it, this appears to claim that subjective understanding would require that we actually have someone else's experience. "Subjectivity" would be roughly synonymous with "experiencing" or "having an experience." For you to grasp what it is to be king, you would have to have the king's experience. This is not necessarily the same as the experience of being a king yourself and then of supposing that someone else's experience resembles your own although Nagel insists on the word "like" when he talks about subjective facts, i.e. "what it is like from his point of view." The difficulty here is that "like" suggests a comparison and comparison is only possible if the things to be compared are both accessible. Moreover, likeness admits of degrees. We might say, for instance, that being a bat is a little like hang-gliding but not exactly. That is, if we somehow had access to a bat's being. If "like" is used in some absolute sense, then it would appear that our initial interpretation is the most plausible; that is, that by "subjective" Nagel intends the experience itself. In that case it is tautologically true that we can never have an adequate third-person account of consciousness since we can never have anyone else's consciousness except our own. If this is what Nagel means by an "irreducible element of subjectivity," his claim is, of course, true but trivial.

There is yet another sense of "subjective" that is implicit in Nagel's remarks. Nagel specifies this sense of the word in the introduction to his book *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford 1986). In the introduction Nagel says there that the book is "based on a deliberate effort to juxtapose the internal and external or subjective and objective views ..." In this sense "subjective" means states internal to a human and objective means states external to a human. He elaborates on "objectivity" in the following passage:

The limit of objectivity with which I shall be most concerned is one that follows directly from the process of gradual detachment by which objectivity is achieved. An objective standpoint is created by leaving a more subjective, individual, or

even just human perspective behind; but there are things about the world and life and ourselves that cannot be adequately understood from a maximally objective standpoint however much it may extend our understanding beyond the point from which we started. A great deal is essentially connected to a particular point of view or a type of point of view and the attempt to give a complete account of the world in objective terms detached from these perspectives inevitably leads to false reductions or to downright denial that certain patently real phenomena exist at all. (p. 7)

A detailed analysis of this passage is beyond the limits of this essay but clearly Nagel has gone beyond the simple internal-external distinction since there is nothing in such a distinction that demands the denial of the internal or the priority of the external. It is not at all clear how in any explanation or account of the world it would be possible to leave behind a human perspective (One can imagine Austin asking "As opposed to what? A non-human or super-human perspective?" Either would be a notable achievement). This view of the objective-subjective distinction seems positively perverse. The earlier distinction between mental and physical for all its difficulties at least leaves open each of the areas for separate development. So it is that in one important vein of the Continental tradition there is a sharp distinction between the sciences of nature and those of the spirit. But Nagel's internal-external view sees the subjective and objective accounts as opposed rather than complementary. Physics is a threat because it is the paradigm of objectivity. It is "the science in which we have achieved our greatest detachment from a specifically human perspective on the world." We have moved here from a simple internal-external distinction to a human-nonhuman distinction. "Subjective" now means human and objective "non-human." While this view or something quite like it is widely held among "New-Agers" and undergraduates, it is not well-founded.

While it is not an entirely different version of the subjective-objective distinction, there is Nagel's citation of a passage from Searle's book which seems to exhibit a degree of confusion that matches Nagel's own. The passage is as follows:

"The second crucial misconception behind the compulsive search for materialist theories, according to Searle is a simple but enormously destructive mistake about objectivity:

There is a persistent confusion between the claim that we should try as much as possible to eliminate personal subjective prejudices from the search for truth and the claim that the real world contains no elements that are based on a confusion between the epistemological sense of the subjective/objective distinction, and the ontological sense. Epistemically, the distinction marks different degrees of independence of claims from the vagaries of special values, personal prejudices, points of view, and emotions. Ontologically, the distinction marks different categories of empirical reality." (Nagel, 1993 p. 37)

In this passage Searle distinguishes two senses of "objective-subjective." The epistemological sense is concerned with the "different degrees of independence of claims from the vagaries of special values, personal prejudices, points of view and emotions." At the beginning of the passage he observes that "we should try as much as possible to eliminate personal subjective prejudices from the search for truth." These sentiments echo the interpretation of the subjective as internal which characterizes Nagel's view and which leads Nagel to the extreme human-nonhuman position. The passage concludes with Searle's remark that the ontological sense of the subjective-objective distinction "marks different categories of empirical reality." Here the

distinction appears to be similar to the one we have already characterized as “metaphysical.”

When logical positivism sought to isolate the essence of scientific thinking, it produced the principle of empirical verification which didn't work. But the principle was not created arbitrarily and the weaker version of it introduced above does capture an important condition of all serious research not just scientific inquiry. That version defines “objective” as applying to statements that may be confirmed or disconfirmed by anyone who wants to take the trouble. Science certainly insists on this as a minimum condition and it is an essential part of scientific objectivity. One of the consequences of its adoption may be the elimination of unconfirmable statements from consideration as science. Among such statements may be some that have their origin in “personal subjective prejudices.” But they are rejected not because they are personal, subjective, or prejudiced but because they are unconfirmable. Fleishman and Pons certainly were prejudiced in favor of cold fusion and their judgements were apparently subjective but it was the inability of others to confirm their findings that led to their rejection.

When Nagel and perhaps Searle adopt the view that scientific objectivity requires the suppression of the personal, the subjective, or the human, they at best misunderstand what it means to be objective, and at worst are trading on a kind of anti-intellectualism that encourages unfounded claims.

If Searle's claims regarding intentionality succeed, it will not be because there is something irreducibly subjective in the world that is not accessible to confirmation or disconfirmation by empirical methods. That, after all, is the claim of mystics. It will be because arguments about Chinese rooms or Chinese gymnasiums prove meritorious or because investigation shows that there are indeed intentional states that cannot be produced by a formal system.

## Notes

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