

## What does it all mean?

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A very short introduction. A very short introduction indeed. To philosophy. More of a pamphlete than a book, to be savoured after dinner, like a sweet.

Clearly Nagel does not address the professional philosopher, neither the serious student, but maybe the so called intelligent layman, who happens to have no interest in philosophy at all. A somewhat unfortunate state of affairs, to which Nagel feels a resigned duty (obviously assigned as well) to if not set right, at least give a half-hearted stab at effecting a change of attitude.

In the short space allotted to him any attempt at a systematic presentation would be bound to fail, so what better strategy than to whet a readers appetite by presenting some core problems of philosophy, in particular to illustrate how philosophy differs from science?

Does philosophy really differ from science? After all both ultimately address the same questions and, at least in its serious kind, strive to enlarge and deepen our understanding of the world around us and why things are as they are. Some would say that philosophy is but a rudimentary form of science, a primitive proto-science, which progresses, according to Russell, by amputation. To the hard-nosed scientist, the proper subject of philosophical inquiry has retreated to the infertile hunting grounds of the extreme arctic, and as far as it has any relation to serious science, it is at best but a decorative one, and at worst a pedantic pick-nicking having no relevance to the real business of science but providing a kind of protected academic community for ineffectual nerds. Nagel does not in fact, apart from a few cursory sentences, really probe into a serious discussion of the relationship of philosophy to science, and given the extreme strictures of space, such a choice cannot but be commended, yet to any reader who fails to draw some significant conclusions of his own, the book is a failure.

One obvious difference between science and philosophy lies in the technical prerequisites of the former. Science progresses. Typically the insights of the ancients are superseded by the contributions of the moderns. As a consequence of progress there is specialization in which no scientist can claim expertise but on a narrow sub-field, and whose pronouncements on matters beyond his mastery, do not essentially differ from those of the ignorant mob. To explain the results of science is thus almost impossible, as any serious explanation takes as prerequisites an erudition normally reserved for those already initiated. Thus the fruits of science are made tangible to the general man, not by their intellectual juices, but by their practical applications; and their contents presented, when presented at all, as simple-minded cartoons suitable for the amusement of children. Some would even go as far as to say that any popular science is perfidious, presenting promises that cannot be delivered, generating egregious misunderstandings parading as insights. With philosophy it is clearly different?

Yes and No. Yes, because there seems to be no sense of progress in philosophy. The

philosophy of Plato being as relevant today, to say nothing about its readability, as it was at its inception<sup>1</sup>. In fact the core problems of philosophy, as opposed to science, are continually being rediscovered by each inquiring individual. And it is precisely those eternally recurring questions that Nagel chooses to comment upon. Questions which are as natural to formulate as they are intractable to solve. In fact there is a temptation to classify problems as being philosophical if there is no hope of their resolution. This has inspired some philosophers, notably Wittgenstein, to discard philosophy as a failed language-game of ill-posed questions. The inability to make progress, i.e. to permanently weed out the chaff, makes for an interminable recycling. It is indeed very hard to come up with essentially new formulations, let alone points of view, in philosophy<sup>2</sup>. As Schopenhauer remarks, the finding of new combinations of words and thoughts, to which all creative activity can be ultimately reduced, is so much harder in philosophy, where the field has been trampled by so many and still remains accessible to almost everyone; than in science, where the individual practitioner having travelled so far into virgin territory any new combination is bound to be stumbled upon<sup>3</sup>. Thus, Schopenhauer concludes, the fame accorded the thinker in philosophy, or other matters close to the heart of the multitudes, is bound to be more extensive than the obscure variety that is the lot of the diligent specialist.

Nagel chooses to start out with the problem of solipsism. That is the assumption that nothing exists but as phantoms in your mind. This is indeed a most disturbing thought that any youth of philosophical temperament is bound to phrase. It concerns the very foundations of knowledge and the quest for making those unassailable. Such a quest is bound to flounder, at least in any conventional sense. What to do? To give up once and for all? Maybe to commit suicide? (But if so, how would we be assured it would work?) In one way it teaches humility, after all we have to take reality on faith, a leap not essentially unlike the one that religion requires. And in fact this was the attitude of Descartes, who first realised that illusory as the world may appear, at least the very appearance was not an illusion bespeaking an activity at least of thinking. The leap was to conceive of that thinking as having an external cause, namely that of God. Descartes was not original. Similar conclusions are being drawn, totally independently, all over the world and throughout history. But few take the trouble to formulate them, let alone succeed in getting them into print for posterity. The history of ideas, like any dramatic piece set for the stage, can only afford to employ a limited number of characters. What is wrong with solipsism? Logically it seems unassailable, and as a consequence impervious to the treatment by science. Some, as noted above, may thus dismiss it as idle phantasies. Few do indeed persist in it, although different levels of belief may subconsciously be held.

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<sup>1</sup> To Thomas Kuhn, this is due to the fact that in philosophy nothing is permanently rejected, while the most tangible aspect of progress in science is rejection. As a consequence history of philosophy becomes almost inseparable from philosophy itself, and in particular there is a tendency to argue by authority through evoking the sages of the past.

<sup>2</sup> It is tempting to argue that philosophy as poetry do not concern itself with arguments but with evocations. Thus the characterization of philosophy as the poetry of science. A designation that can be taken both ways

<sup>3</sup> According to Schopenhauer, the major part of the mental effort involved consists in simply getting there, not in effecting the new combinations

One may argue that the fear of death is nothing but a presentiment of ultimately being jolted from the comfort such an illusion confers. On the other hand, as Nagel indicates, assuming solipsism creates philosophical problems of its own. What does it really mean that everything is 'I'. What is the nature of the personal identity? In what way is the illusions of appearances under my own will and control, and if not, in what sense can it then be said to be internal?<sup>4</sup> Once you subtract external reality, the notion of sensory illusion is extinguished as well. To say that the world is an illusion presupposes that it is after all something different than it appears to be. If 'illusions' are all that remain, illusions they are not<sup>5</sup>.

This leads to a refinement of the issue, namely that of the existence of other minds. We all live in our private universes imprisoned in our own perspectives, and as soon as we try to transcend our specification of individuality we lose it, and by it an inescapable component of 'what is'. You cannot directly experience the world of someone else without becoming that someone else and thereby no longer being someone else<sup>6</sup> Are other people zombies? If so the world would indeed be a lonely place. The assumption of the existence of other minds is yet another instance of a religious leap of faith. It does point to a crucial difference between science, as it is practised, and philosophy, namely the postulation of things we can in principle never know. In science hypotheses are judged by their consequences. A hypothesis having no discernable consequences is for all intents and purposes meaningless. A philosophical attitude given a systematic dress in the pragmatism of William James<sup>7</sup> and also playing a crucial role in the scientific philosophy of Popper with his criteria of falsification as well as in the positivistic attitudes of the Vienna circle. As a reaction against elaborate systems of metaphysics, so prevalent during the 19th century, it is commendable. On the other hand one may wonder that in rejecting silliness it also rejected the 'soul' of philosophical inquiry. Seductive as such an attitude may be, it still is unattractive as it clearly is too restrictive. What about the future of which we cannot in principle know? or the past? Has an event that left no traces as good as never happened? Or does every event in principle lead to a trace so everything that has ever occurred is in principle reconstructable? As an example of this unsentimental approach one may well refer to the strong version of Artificial Intelligence especially fashionable in

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<sup>4</sup> The rules of logic and say elementary arithmetic seem to be hard rocks on which wilful phantasies will stump their toes.

<sup>5</sup> An extreme form of solipsism, seldom as Russell sarcastically remarked, considered, is one not only concerned with the abolition of space but time as well. The universe existed only for a brief moment replete with an illusion of a rich history as well as with the spurious promise of a continuation

<sup>6</sup> I remember as a child of five momentarily being confused by the supposed impenetrability of the barriers defining personal identities. I wondered why I could not suddenly be someone else (an infantile phantasy not uncommon, one may compare the initial phantasies of Alice in Lewis Carrolls depiction of her adventures). Meaning that just as I was able to move around in space and assume new perspectives, it should be possible to view the world from the different perspectives provided by other minds. A vicarious, and trivial version of which, the classical novel is supposed to provide.

<sup>7</sup> James was inspired by C.P.Pierce, who, according to legend was aghast at the vulgarization provided by the psychologist, thereby renaming his philosophy as pragmatism.

the early nineties<sup>8</sup> which in consequence denies the notion of a zombie. Anything that appears conscious by the most exacting tests and criteria may for all intents and purposes be assumed conscious. Any question of whether it 'really is' conscious is metaphysical and hence unanswerable<sup>9</sup>.

The question of other minds in its turn leads to attempts to effect a conciliation between our dual conceptions of reality. Our reasoning and feeling selves and the material, mechanical world out there, so shockingly indifferent to us. The mind/brain duality introduced by Descartes is by most scientists and philosophers conceived as an embarrassment. A primitive avatar of thought. Yet it does faithfully represent the way we think of reality, and it is a philosophical bone of contention whether it can be transcended. And thus we are now entering a domain of inquiry in which philosophy gets something substantial to chew on. Intimately connected with the problem of the relation between the brain, as a material object subjected to the laws of physics, and the mind, is the problem of free will, a fact not usually fully appreciated in philosophical and scientific discussions on the nature of consciousness, meaning its materialistic nature. Nagel separates the discussion into two chapters. The notion of free will inevitably highlights a gap between physical causes and effects, regardless if deterministic or accidental; and the human mind, who seems, within obvious limits, free to impose itself on nature. In the 18th century the physical universe was conceived in purely mechanical terms, with small particles subjected to forces. With the growing sophistication of 19th century science with its discovery of the truly microscopic world and its working, the simple mechanical picture became more problematic and intricate, and a purely deterministic picture seemed far less obvious, yet the basic conceptual problem refuses to budge. Our theories of the material world are in fact creations of our minds. Do we not get into a vicious circular reasoning if we want to explain the mind by its off-springs, in fact by only a tiny minority of them<sup>10</sup>. This is a philosophical argument which at least appears to set *a priori* limitations on our understanding of the processes of the brain.

One thing lead to another, and the next step of inquiry would be language itself, which is the means through which all philosophical inquiry is conducted. Now we are really entering a domain in which philosophy appears to come on its own. filling out a niche unoccupied by the traditional sciences. And not surprisingly, the most scientifically ambitious of all philosophical disciplines - analytic philosophy, can be thought of as an inquiry into the structure and limits of thought as mediated through language<sup>11</sup>. One of the greatest mysteries, some aspects of which Nagel touches, is the 'meaning' of words, something that appears not just to emerge from the formal structure of language itself.

The issues of right and wrong and social inequity are not of the same fundamental and exalted level as the epistemological issues of knowledge, nevertheless they may be-

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<sup>8</sup> One may consult Dennetts 'Consciousness explained' for a somewhat longwinded exposition of such ideas written at the time.

<sup>9</sup> Popper teaches that one should never ask 'what is'-questions, only 'how'-questions.

<sup>10</sup> One may compare with Penrose conception of three worlds nestled into each other as presented in his 'the Road to Reality'

<sup>11</sup> The most spectacular, or at least well-known and precise results in that area being those of Gdel; although their significance may be exaggerated

long to those having the most tangible applications. Any such theory of ethics, however, presupposes a free and unfettered mind capable of choice, a fact that incidentally is not established without doubt, (although it is not clear on what basis we so easily divest people of personal responsibility, once their power of choice is considered significantly qualified). One point, however, may be worth highlighting in a short account, and one that most reflective adolescents encounter: namely why do 'good'? Is not doing 'good' an act of supreme selfishness? Do you do 'good' because it feels 'good', or in a religious setting, it will bring definite rewards? If you are seriously concerned about being a 'good' person those questions are disturbing.

The question of personal death is hardly a philosophical one, save that it is fundamentally connected to the notion of selfhood, and as such certainly looming large in any reflecting consciousness<sup>12</sup>. In the same way one may discard the question of the meaning of life as being meaningless, being asked in too general a context (something has a meaning only as far as its consequences can be related to something else. That opposition is tautologically dissolved when the entirety of experience is considered.) Still, philosophy for most people does not mean to ponder the imponderable, but to look for instruction how to lead the good life, and in particular how to infuse meaning (and provide consolation) to our miserable existence, the most damning aspect of it being its briefness.

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<sup>12</sup> and sets a different limit on what an individual man may know, as opposed to what is knowable to mankind in principle