

## The Peculiar Flavor of Nagel’s Metaethics

REGAN LANCE REITSMA

*King’s College, PA*

“What counts as a good explanation depends heavily on an understanding of what it is that has to be explained.” (Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* [2012], 102)

“[E]veryone, even in common life, is forced to conduct himself in greater or lesser degree like a scientist [...]. [And yet] [w]e don’t know how far we ought to trust our ordinary vulgar methods of reasoning.” (Philo, from David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* [1776], 5)

### I. A Question

Thomas Nagel’s *Mind and Cosmos* (2012) has provoked from commentators what at first glance seem to be contradictory objections about, of all things, his intellectual confidence. One reviewer describes Nagel as seemingly “unconvinced by his own ideas.”<sup>1</sup> Others, cited in the introduction to this forum, have found his most significant (anti-materialist, Darwin-tweaking, value realist, teleological) conclusions audacious, if not completely unhinged. So, is Nagel’s book intellectually modest or intellectually bold?

There are grounds in *Mind and Cosmos* for both judgments.

Nagel does make remarkable claims. The subtitle of *Mind and Cosmos* is “Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False”; value realism strikes Nagel as “glaringly” correct; non-realism about value loses credibility because of the “epicycles” it generates in attempting to explain away the seeming reality of value; the materialist’s best attempts to account for consciousness and for some aspects of cognition are “flagrantly implausible”; Nagel thinks the universe both has a “cosmic predisposition” to form “life, consciousness, and the value that is inseparable from them” and is, through producing reflective creatures such as us, “gradually waking up and becoming aware of itself.”<sup>2</sup>

That said, more often than not the tone of *Mind and Cosmos*, unlike its subtitle, is notably modest. Nagel consistently attempts to reveal his guiding presuppositions, and several times he presents one of his argumentative beginning points as (no more than) an “ungrounded intellectual preference.”<sup>3</sup> To give one example, Nagel dismisses “intentional” explanations of the origins of human consciousness and cognition (such as that a personal god deliberately created us with the ability to reflect and reason) without claiming to have powerful arguments for this dismissal—he’s remarked more than once that he simply doesn’t “want the universe to be like that.”<sup>4</sup> (Intellectual preference, indeed!) Further, Nagel sometimes describes his own exercise in positive theory-construction as “inconclusive,” as providing only an “admissible conjecture” or two, even as speculative.<sup>5</sup>

So, which is it? Is Nagel timorous or temerarious? Worse, is he, at least in *Mind and Cosmos*, scattershot in his judgments? You don't have to be Aristotle to find yourself wondering whether audacious conclusions can sensibly be constructed on a foundation of ungrounded intellectual preferences. What, if anything, justifies—what, if anything, even explains—Nagel's unusual admixture of intellectual modesty and intellectual boldness? Is there something, some more or less unified, philosophical outlook that holds together Nagel's higher-order attitudes about his own beliefs and his own theorizing?

I think so. Though there are most certainly other factors at work, part of what explains Nagel's general bearing in *Mind and Cosmos* is his philosophy of philosophizing. Nagel is a thinker who finds the world truly puzzling. In his theorizing Nagel exemplifies, I will argue, an attitude of irony-tinged critical engagement classically expressed by Philo in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Nagel's honesty about his beginning points, his "decision" to give subjectivity and objectivity "equal standing," his openness to "mystery," and his complicated views about the power and limits of reason all seem to ground, in his thinking, a certain philosophical license both to challenge what he sees as the intellectual status quo and to speculate.

None of this should be surprising. Nagel has evinced this general, Philo-style outlook before, for instance in his widely-respected, 1971 essay "The Absurd." There he applied a lesson he takes himself to have learned from Philo's reflections on philosophical skepticism to questions about the meaning of life. In *Mind and Cosmos*, readers see at work, I think, the same intellectually engaged, truth-seeking, but philosophically bemused mentality applied to topics such as metaethics.

Nagel's book is difficult to assess. It raises in my mind big questions about philosophical reasoning itself. For example, after reading his chapter "Value," I find myself asking fundamental questions about metaethical theorizing, such as: How much authority should I give whatever value realist intuitions I happen to have? Should I privilege instead, as many non-realists do, the abstemious impulse to explain as much as possible about the moral life in terms of the categories preferred by modern science?<sup>6</sup> Or should I be willing to construct, or even to reconstruct, my metaphysical outlook in the light of whatever value realist intuitions I happen to have? Even more deeply, how, pray tell, to settle—with even a modicum of intellectual comfort—into a set of answers to such fundamental questions?

## II. Nagel's Philosophy of Philosophizing

Throughout his career, Nagel's thinking has been characterized by the belief that philosophizing is ultimately grounded in, for lack of a better word, a certain *choice* about how best to respond to various tensions, especially tensions between subjectivity and objectivity, that arise within our lives as reflective creatures.<sup>7</sup> Nagel evinces this belief about philosophizing for the first time in "The Absurd." In this section, I attempt to describe (what I'm calling) Nagel's philosophy of

philosophizing. In the next and last section, I consider the role this broad attitude to the reflective life plays in Nagel's metaethical thinking.

"The Absurd" is about the meaning of life. But in this essay Nagel attempts not so much to answer the question whether life ultimately has meaning as to analyze why, when thoughtful people consider "life as a whole," they experience—whether episodically or systematically—a sense of its absurdity. This perception can arise, Nagel emphasizes, even as we are pursuing our most self-defining, heartfelt, and effective life pursuits.<sup>8</sup> For example, for a period of his life, Tolstoy felt acutely a sense of the absurdity of all of his bustling activity at the same time that he knew he was writing books of profound intellectual and cultural significance.<sup>9</sup> Why? What leads reflective people—even some enviably successful people—to this judgment about their lives?

First, a question of basic definition. To make it clear why life as a whole can seem absurd, it's useful to begin with a general idea of what it means to call any situation "absurd." In ordinary life, Nagel says, "a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality."<sup>10</sup> Nagel provides several colorful examples: "someone gives a complicated speech in support of a motion that has already passed; a notorious criminal is made president of a major philanthropic foundation; you declare your love over the telephone to an answering machine; as you are being knighted, your pants fall down."<sup>11</sup>

Nagel supposes that if life as a whole seems absurd, we must perceive—though perhaps only dimly—"an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life."<sup>12</sup> In Nagel's analysis, the philosophical sense of absurdity arises because of a profound "collision within ourselves."<sup>13</sup> We are able to occupy two, conflicting vantage points, both exceedingly difficult to escape. What clashes in us, Nagel intimates, is the "pretension" that our lives and their central pursuits are truly important, or perhaps our aspiration to do with our lives something truly worthwhile, and the "reality" that, when we step back from these pursuits, they can seem arbitrary and their importance open to doubt.

Here's how Nagel speaks of life's "pretension." When we live our lives, we generally do so, Nagel says, with "seriousness." We behave as though our choices and our activity truly matter. Most of us, as Nagel puts it, "sweat" over our appearance, or our career decisions, or our children's welfare, or how to build God's good kingdom, or how to get out of work to watch today's Dutch World Cup match: "we cannot live lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others."<sup>14</sup>

The issue, Nagel emphasizes, is that we "humans have the special capacity to step back and survey ourselves" from perspectives more "objective" than our own personal cares and concerns.<sup>15</sup> We can take up, for instance, the vantage point of a spectator.<sup>16</sup> There is always, at every moment, the "perpetual possibility" that we can take a backward step away from our lives, our decisions, our cares, commitments, and concerns and wonder, *sub specie aeternitatis*, whether they truly matter. From such a highly disengaged vantage point, we seem like scurrying ants. Like ants, we do, no doubt, "succeed" at some of our pursuits. But the impact on the world of even our greatest successes seems trivial when we look at them from an eternal standpoint.

From this view, our lives appear, Nagel says, "curious and slightly surprising," even "sobering and comical."<sup>17</sup>

What should you and I do about this? What is the best response, the very best response, to this "inescapable" collision?

I imagine some readers might wonder whether the collision is truly inescapable, or whether it can be dispelled by thoughtful reflection. It's clear that in "The Absurd" Nagel thinks the perception that our lives as a whole are absurd is "fundamentally correct."<sup>18</sup> If someone senses that his life as a whole is absurd because he feels the force of the judgment that his strivings do not appear, from the perspective of eternity, to be truly significant, then he is glimpsing, Nagel thinks, a profoundly important truth about human life. As Nagel puts it, this doubt "cannot be laid to rest"; we are "full of doubts" we can't answer, but also "full of purposes" we can't abandon.<sup>19</sup> And so, if we choose to persist in living, this amounts to "the dragooning of an unconvinced transcendent consciousness into the service of an immanent, limited enterprise like a human life."<sup>20</sup>

Nagel doesn't think it the better part of wisdom to ignore this "discrepancy." Perhaps we can't anyhow. Nagel construes us as, at some level, recognizing—though "perhaps dimly"<sup>21</sup>—the absurdity of our lives. To return to my earlier example, Tolstoy, who initially considered questions about the meaning of life childish embarrassments, persistently attempted to set them aside. But against his will, they kept cropping back up. Admittedly, most of us, confronted with the problem, do at some level, Nagel says, "ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them."<sup>22</sup> But this tension-filled, half-ignorance doesn't satisfy Nagel. Ignoring a tension isn't the same as resolving it, and in "The Absurd" Nagel seeks out a better, more lucid, more considered response.

How to discover one? Here's one idea. Perhaps reflection on ordinary life will lead us to some helpful practical advice. Nagel points out that in ordinary circumstances when we find ourselves in an absurd situation, we typically attempt to change things for the better. There are at least three possible ways to escape ordinary instances of absurdity: modify the relevant pretensions and aspirations, change reality so that it better fits the relevant pretensions and aspirations, or abscond.

With your pants at your ankles and the queen's scepter on your shoulder, you'll need, I suppose, to decide whether you are willing to down-grade your life-long pursuit of being considered an indisputably great man among men; whether you are going to double down to prove, contrary to the present evidence, that you are truly worthy of being considered so; or whether it is time to flee the public eye entirely. Any of these three strategies would mean that there is no longer a collision between the way things really are and the way you proudly believe or deeply hope they are, maybe because the relevant pretensions or aspirations no longer exist.

Is there any useful practical advice here? Do any of these three broad strategies provide a good model for those of us who feel, whether intermittently or systematically, that our whole lives are absurd? The brief answer, Nagel thinks, is no. The discrepancy that prompts the

philosophical sense of absurdity is especially difficult to escape, and to the degree that it is escapable, trying to do so is profoundly inadvisable.

Take the option of modifying our pretensions and aspirations. To modify the relevant “inflated” pretension, it would be useful, first, to be able to identify it very precisely. Nagel doesn’t. But he does indicate that if modifying our pretensions is tantamount to not living seriously, we can’t really modify them—at least not without great difficulty and profound (“dissociative”) cost. Many of us do have cares and concerns, and some of these cares are inexorable. Can you stop caring about your appearance? About wanting to find an aspirin to get rid of your headache? Can you drum up in yourself any desire no longer to care about your children’s welfare? Further, can we desist treating at least some concerns as basic concerns? Nagel suggests: “no,” any choice involves taking something, some goal or end or value, as important. Even the would-be suicide who is attempting to flee the life he perceives as absurd can’t escape, at least in his suicidal act itself, the charge of seriousness, as he is taking the absurdity of his life as something that he has reason to flee.

How about the second option? Can we modify reality? Nagel doesn’t discuss this option at much length. At times, Nagel seems to operate from the assumption that our behavior, no matter what we do, is not truly important from the most objective vantage point we can occupy; at others, he simply regards this vantage point as raising legitimate, even unanswerable, doubts about the true value of what we pursue. In any case, reading between the lines, Nagel’s answer is “no.”

No doubt, you can attempt to take on goals that are larger and “more objective.” If what you’ve been striving for to this point in your life is, say, personal leisure or physical beauty, you might wonder whether your pursuits are especially trivial and self-absorbed and whether the best response is to commit yourself to broader pursuits, pursuits that matter from a vantage point more expansive than your own comfort or popularity. Some people—hedonists in a mid-life crisis—might decide, accordingly, to commit to morality, a vantage point that attends to the welfare not merely of you but of all people.

So, what if we were to suppose that the basic problem is that our lives aren’t being lived in pursuit of sufficiently “large enterprises”? At this point in his argument, Nagel doesn’t talk metaphysics, he talks epistemology; he doesn’t claim that nothing truly matters. Instead, commitment to larger enterprises, Nagel emphasizes, isn’t immune from the same basic doubts that can vex narrower concerns. From a highly objective perspective, we can doubt the importance of whatever we care about from our own subjective perspectives, even an expansive commitment to social justice or to building God’s everlasting kingdom.

There is, to recall, a third option: absconding. We could choose to remove ourselves from our absurd lives by fleeing the scene, that is, by committing suicide. Nagel discourages this response for several reasons. Committing suicide would be, Nagel says, “hasty.” True enough, once dead, you can no longer be accused of taking your life more seriously than a disengaged spectator could. Collision avoided. But the act of suicide presumes that living an absurd life is, all things considered, not only a bad thing but worse than death. Again, that takes something, the desire not

to live absurdly, seriously. And Nagel might think, though he doesn't say it, that this presumes that we know, or have very good reason to suppose, that there isn't anything that truly matters, which we don't know, or at least don't know that we know.

Nagel also discourages us from wallowing. If we think greater objectivity reveals that our activity is meaningless, should we continuously mutter, "Life is meaningless. Life is meaningless"? Or if we grant merely that greater objectivity in the very least raises legitimate doubts about our implicit pretensions of meaningful activity, should we mutter, "I can't know with certainty that my pursuits truly matter. I can't know with certainty that my pursuits truly matter"? What good would that do? Such a response strikes Nagel as unattractively self-pitying. And, at least near the end of "The Absurd," he seems to think this strategy reflects a missed lesson. If nothing truly matters, then the fact that your pursuits don't matter doesn't matter itself and so doesn't call for despair.

At the end of his analysis, Nagel gestures at what he takes to be the very best response to the philosophical sense of the absurdity of life. To put it tersely, reflection on absurdity shouldn't significantly change our day-to-day strivings (whatever they happen to be); it should change, instead, our general attitude toward all of our strivings (whatever they happen to be). The philosophical perception of absurdity should suffuse your strivings with "a peculiar flavor," an attitude that Nagel calls "a certain irony and resignation."<sup>23</sup> Unable to abandon some of our central pursuits and the seriousness with which we pursue them, "we return to our lives, as we must, [. . .] our seriousness laced with irony."<sup>24</sup>

There's no need to despair, Nagel tells us. The aspect of ourselves that leads to questions about whether our life pursuits are truly significant is "a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics."<sup>25</sup> Recognition of absurdity is possible only because "we possess a certain kind of insight—the capacity to transcend ourselves in thought."<sup>26</sup> Better to be, in other words, Socrates feeling absurd than a pig blithely satisfied, or a lifeless corpse.

It's natural to ask, though, what Nagel has in mind when he encourages a life lived in "ironic resignation," and in what ways it should "flavor" our lives. Seemingly for clarification, Nagel turns to Hume's Philo.

Philo believes that philosophical skepticism raises more questions about our ordinary beliefs and how we generally form them than "reason" can satisfactorily answer. Think about Descartes and his *Meditations*. In ordinary life, you and I generally trust, among other things, our sensory perceptions, our memory, and our reasoning faculties, whether mathematical or logical. We build a large edifice of beliefs on the basis of such faith. But should we trust these belief-forming processes? They do, of course, sometimes mislead us. Is there then some way to ensure—at least in some cases—that the way the world appears to us is the way it truly is? Can we be sure that, when we gaze at what seem to be medium-sized objects at fairly close proximity, this is a veridical perception? That we're not, for instance, presently dreaming, or being deceived by an all-powerful, all-knowing demon whose sole goal is to trick us into nothing but false beliefs?

In the *Meditations*, Descartes attempts to argue that our everyday reasoning is trustworthy, even "demon proof." But as both Pascal and Hume classically object, in arguing that our

reasoning faculties, including our logical faculties, are trustworthy, Descartes is forced to rely upon the very same reasoning faculties to get the argument off the ground—a clear case of circular reasoning. As Philo puts it, “We don’t know how far we ought to trust our ordinary vulgar methods of reasoning,”<sup>27</sup> and yet, to form any kind of structure of belief, we find ourselves having to rely on these methods. The upshot is that, as Nagel puts it, once skeptical hypotheses are raised, there are inevitably, if we’re lucid and honest, more “frameable questions” than satisfactory answers.<sup>28</sup>

What to do about this? In his own voice, Hume thinks philosophical skepticism can’t erase a kind of unsupported natural confidence we generally display in our ordinary processes of forming beliefs about the world. And in a famous passage, Hume indicates his penchant for setting aside these “melancholy” reflections by playing backgammon with his friends for as long as it takes for the unhappy psychological effects of these skeptical concerns to peter out.<sup>29</sup> That strategy amounts to ignoring the tension between our earnestly striving for true beliefs and wondering whether we can trust our everyday belief-forming mechanisms. As we’ve already seen in his reflections on absurdity, Nagel wants more than ignoring the problem.

And so, Nagel turns to Hume’s Philo, who does say a bit more. Melancholy reflections about skeptical hypotheses don’t lead Philo to a highly revisionary set of beliefs, for instance to a remarkably smaller set. Philo does think, however, that reflection on skeptical hypotheses should matter. In his view, a person who has thought intelligently about philosophical skepticism will be different from, wiser than, someone who hasn’t. Clear-eyed awareness of skeptical hypotheses does lead to a person’s belief system—here’s the phrase Nagel borrows—“a peculiar flavor.”<sup>30</sup>

So, a similar “collision” occurs in our theoretical life if we reflect upon our reasoning patterns. If I regard my system of beliefs as being well-grounded, but then see that I can’t provide non-circular justifications of some of my most influential assumptions, I might feel a “discrepancy” between my “aspirations” (to true and justified beliefs) and “reality” (my worrying doubts that I am failing to attain them). Or, I might see myself as “a very reasonable person,” with a well-grounded structure of beliefs, then notice that my reasonings are grounded in “unsupported natural confidence,” and wonder whether I’ve been caught, like the vainglorious knight, with my pants at my ankles. And yet, we can’t do without basic assumptions; we can’t do, probably, without a fairly extensive edifice of beliefs. Can we quit being “serious” about our believing lives, even as there are more “frameable questions” than satisfactory answers? Some skeptical questions, Nagel emphasizes, are not particularly far-fetched. We can easily be led to suspect that many of our beliefs are the consequence more of contingent factors such as where we were born than of careful reasoning. We can easily suspect that our vaunted belief in our own freedom is mistaken. And so on. The grounds for doubt can begin to pour in.

For better or worse, I confess to being impressed with Nagel’s broad reflections, both about skepticism and about absurdity, in “The Absurd.” Nagel seems to be onto something. Not only does the essay bring much-needed clarity to an old puzzle about the philosophical perception of absurdity, it helps us understand what’s so intractable about this perception and why it can arise—forcefully—for most any reflective person. More, a whole philosophical bearing, a whole

attitude to practical and theoretical thinking, seems to emerge from this paper. (And Nagel's deft writing lends that philosophical bearing significant attraction.) The reader can sense Nagel's piercing intelligence and his intellectual modesty. His spirit, bemused about the prospects of a life of careful thinking, simply won't quit seeking out the truth even so, and even if it makes him seem (to himself) a bit ridiculous.

That said Nagel's broad philosophical bearing isn't as clear as we might like. As mentioned, it would be helpful to think very precisely about what "inflated pretensions" we (allegedly) more or less inescapably bring to our lives. And what precisely are we forced to be "resigned" to? Is it that for the rest of our lives we will be arguing from basic premises and treating some normative considerations as basic? (I suppose I can live with that; it can even seem to be a banal point.) Is it that we are forced to act as though we truly or wholeheartedly believe even when a part of us, and a venerable part at that, does not? Acting as though we truly regard our pursuits as of objective value when part of us does not?

Also, there seem to be some very significant practical lessons afoot. But what are they? Clearly, Nagel doesn't want us to quit striving, both after "important" practical goals and after the truth. And just as clearly Nagel wants certain second-order attitudes to hover over our "serious" pursuits. Which attitudes, though? Perhaps intellectual humility. Perhaps a properly bemused attitude toward our own strivings should lead us to a certain type of tolerance for other (thoughtful) people, whose strivings have led them to bend in other directions than we have. If we take our cue from Nagel's allusion to Philo, perhaps there is even an edifying lesson about intellectual friendship here. Whereas Philo and Cleanthes, who have very different stripes of mind, are able to converse with "unreserved intimacy," Demea, who demands that his interlocutors agree with his starting points, is cut off from such enjoyable and affirming conversation and friendship.<sup>31</sup>

I suppose we can all nod our heads at humility, tolerance, and intellectual friendship. But does Philo's outlook also warrant idiosyncrasy in philosophical starting points? Re-thinking metaphysics in light of realist intuitions?

### III. Nagel's Metaethics

To understand the worldview at work in *Mind and Cosmos*, we need to recognize Nagel has changed his mind in at least one important way since he wrote "The Absurd." One of his operating assumptions has been flipped upside down. In "The Absurd," the reader—or at least this reader—is left with the very strong sense that Nagel does not think there are objective values. As mentioned, at times 1971 Nagel merely insinuates that our "pretension" that what we pursue has objective values is, when we step back from it, *doubtable*. But at times he seems to assume more: that the taking of the (more) objective viewpoint of the "spectator" of our lives *reveals* that our central pursuits do not have any claim to be real values. (Recall Nagel's argument that since *nothing* truly matters, there is truly no reason for despair that our life pursuits don't truly matter.) By the time Nagel writes *Mind and Cosmos*, his thinking is no

longer governed by the stronger, more metaphysical assumption. He is a value realist. He continues to think value realism is subject to doubt, but he calls his value realism a “defeasible presumption.” Is this, too, a commitment, however seriously it is held, that is to be flavored by ironic resignation?

Let’s see.

As a value realist, Nagel holds that there are basic, mind-independent evaluative truths, among them moral truths. In the normal run of human life, we confront a variety of “oughts”: “Don’t end a sentence with a preposition,” “Don’t chew with your mouth open,” “Don’t take a dive in a soccer game,” “Don’t torture animals”—in all these cases, we *ought not*. This type of experience, a confrontation with an “ought,” is a quotidian feature of “the mundane existence...of value in our lives,”<sup>32</sup> and it naturally raises the question, sometimes called the normative question, of whether we should grant the relevant “ought” normative authority (and, if so, why).

Certainly, some “oughts” do not warrant being treated as normative. If the central point of the rules of grammar is to help writers produce clear, flowing prose, the rule against sentence-ending prepositions is invalid: it leads too often to stilted sentences (such as Churchill’s witty *reductio ad absurdum*, “That is a rule up with which I will not put”). And some “oughts,” even if they should be treated as normative, aren’t basic. The moral rule against diving in soccer, let’s suppose, should be followed. But it certainly isn’t a fundamental evaluative or moral rule; it’s an application of a more general moral principle against behaving unfairly. And so, if we were to examine critically the normative question about “don’t dive,” we would need to inquire into the validity of the more basic rule from which the moral rule against diving is derived, along with whatever facts are relevant.

In Nagel’s all-things-considered view, the “oughts” of etiquette and grammar are not basic, mind-independent, evaluative truths. They’re social constructions.<sup>33</sup> And explaining their validity, to the degree that some of these rules enjoy it, requires us to appeal to common human motives and conventions. The reasons we ought to follow them, if we should, are grounded in concerns we bring to the context of practical deliberation.<sup>34</sup>

By contrast, in Nagel’s view some “oughts”—among them moral “oughts” such as “torturing animals is wrong”—are basic, mind-independent, social-convention-independent, and valid. Claims such as “torturing animals is wrong” are, Nagel says, “just true in their own right.”<sup>35</sup> As Nagel sees it, the “explanation” for why we ought to follow them is that they are real, objective values; their status as normative does not depend on any attitudes we personally bring to the context of practical deliberation.

In Nagel’s broad outlook, the hard work of practical deliberation, once the relevant objective values have been glimpsed, is to discern the “actual structure and weight” of these various objective values.<sup>36</sup> So it turns out that, in Nagel’s complete world picture, the world isn’t bereft of objective values; it’s replete with them. Not wanting to be anthropocentric, Nagel thinks that many objective values aren’t values that you and I will be able to incorporate into our practical

lives; instead, we should commit, most directly, to those objective values that tie to our particular “form of life.”<sup>37</sup>

How does Nagel articulate and defend this view in *Mind and Cosmos*?

In the philosophical literature, everyday moral practice is sometimes treated as providing *prima facie* evidence in favor of value realism. Everyday moral practice seems to be predicated on realist assumptions. This idea is likewise the starting point for Nagel's thinking: as a value realist, Nagel treats everyday moral experience as, in this respect, getting things right. But as we also speak of “truth” when we discuss the rules of grammar and etiquette, we clearly cannot just take for granted that everyday experience is reliable in this regard. This leads to Nagel's claim that value realism is a “defeasible presumption.” And he frames his metaethical discussion in the following way: should we maintain this presumption or regard it as “defeated”? Obviously, Nagel argues for maintenance.

In *Mind and Cosmos*, Nagel's metaethical theorizing seems to me to fit into two categories, which initially seem to be in tension. First, Nagel attempts to diffuse the various, long-standing objections that value realism is, in some sense, a philosophically extravagant hypothesis. For example, Nagel attempts to strip away “metaphysical baggage” often ascribed to value realism, lest it motivate the reductionist impulse to explain away the *prima facie* intuition that there are “real values.” But second, Nagel attempts to reveal the “pervasive” implications of value realism for constructing our best anthropology and our best metaphysics. In other words, value realism should lead us to make (or even re-make, if we're metaphysical naturalists) our metaphysical outlook. The tension is—to put it in colloquial terms—that the first, diffusing strategy is supposed to lead to the conclusion that value realism isn't really a big deal, while the second strategy is to reveal what a big deal it truly is.

With respect to his diffusionary strategy, Nagel remarks that, in any domain in which there are truths, some will be basic. So, assuming value realism, there will be basic evaluative truths. Nagel emphasizes that, in his view, value realism does not posit any “new” elements in the universe. Evaluative truths “exist” in the same sense that valid logical rules exist: when we try to think carefully through arguments, we recognize that *modus ponens* is a valid reasoning method, and arguing in a circle isn't. A basic, valid rule of logic exists only in the sense that it has a certain kind of explanatory or justificatory value: to justify why I accept the conclusion of an argument that has the form *modus ponens* (and the premises of which are true), I need only appeal to the logical truth that “*modus ponens* is a valid rule.” Likewise, Nagel thinks that, to justify why I take aspirin for a headache, I need only appeal to the basic evaluative truth that “pain is bad” (along with the fact that aspirin is a cure).

What about the standard objections to value realism? For instance, what about the existence and extent of moral disagreement? Nagel isn't so impressed. He thinks it is common to exaggerate the levels of moral disagreement, at least in the basics. Moreover, there are disputes about empirical, logical, and numerical questions, too, but these disputes don't generally lead us to doubt scientific, logical, or mathematical realism. After all, there are explanations for such disputes other than that such domains lack truths. Some disputants haven't learned to think

successfully empirically, logically, or numerically, and sometimes irrelevant motives or concerns jigger the thinking. For any valid domain of reasoning, there will be people who don't learn to practice it successfully, and some of these people will be otherwise intelligent and well-intended.

Also, Nagel relies heavily on an analogy. When it comes to sensory perception and our theorizing about it, Nagel is strongly inclined to treat realism about empirical matters as a “defeasible presumption,” one which we do not ultimately have adequate reason to reject even though people disagree, scientists even disagree, sometimes about empirical issues. Recall, with respect to our ordinary methods of reasoning, that there are more “frameable questions” than satisfactory answers; but Nagel does not regard this skeptical worry as an adequate reason to reject realism about empirical matters. More or less, Nagel thinks we should approach evaluative and moral realism in the same way. He chooses to trust, among other “vulgar methods of reasoning,” his value realist intuitions. Of course, doubts can be raised, and so value and moral realism “may be impossible to establish decisively”; but sticking with a belief in the original realist intuition is “not unjustified.”<sup>38</sup> Treat value realism as the default position, and there simply isn't a compelling reason, Nagel thinks, to leave it.

To reiterate, Nagel's second strategy is to argue that value realism does have implications, even “pervasive” implications, for our everyday evaluative thinking and for our metaethical theorizing. As noted in the introduction to this forum, Nagel accepts the argument made by Sharon Street that, though the existence of real values isn't logically inconsistent with Darwinism, the thesis is a fifth wheel to a purely Darwinian outlook.<sup>39</sup> And yet, value realism “seems” to Nagel “glaringly correct,” leading him to respond to Street's *modus pollens* with a *modus tollens*.<sup>40</sup> Darwinian mechanisms aren't, he concludes, the only factor in our development into a morally engaged species. Since Nagel isn't disposed to think that the still, small voice of a god has encouraged us to notice evaluative truths, he sees himself as needing an account that explains how we come to recognize such truths. So, from metaethical theorizing, the argument moves quickly, and dramatically, to speculation about the *telos* of the universe.

Other “big conclusions” flow into the discussion as breathtakingly quickly as the *modus ponens* to *modus tollens* move. We should posit, Nagel suggests: (1) that we have a moral sense that is able to discover moral truths; (2) that our moral judgments are able to motivate our behavior independent of desires (such as impartial benevolence); and, (3) that teleological value realism accords, perhaps better than other metaethical theories, with the very slow but steady advance of moral knowledge in human history. I suppose Nagel is correct at least this far: “What counts as a good explanation depends heavily on an understanding of what it is that has to be explained.”<sup>41</sup>

#### IV. What To Conclude?

Does Nagel's philosophy of philosophizing explain Nagel's striking admixture of intellectual modesty and intellectual boldness? It seems to play a significant role. Though Nagel regards value realism as “glaringly correct,” he admits it only “seems” so to him. The pose he strikes is

of a person who simply hasn't been able to shake, after considerable flights of reflection, this intuition, which he ends up both defending as an "admissible conjecture" and using as the beginning point of significant psychological, historical, and metaphysical speculation. How better to describe this than as a form of "bemused confidence" in his own theorizing?

Does this philosophy of philosophizing justify Nagel's thinking? As I stated earlier, I'm not entirely sure what to think about Nagel's metaethics. So much seems to turn on how ultimately to assess the realist intuitions that drive Nagel to a cascade of big conclusions. (Of course, in fairness to Nagel, the chapter "Value" is probably less a sustained argument for his value realist views and their "pervasive" implications than a distillation of the arguments he's been making for some time. And so the "big conclusions" come fast and furious partly because he is sketching his views rather than fully arguing for them.) To answer the question, we'd need to think carefully about whether it truly is our lot in intellectual life, as Nagel supposes along with other thinkers such as Pascal and Hume, that we can build our edifices—no matter how intelligent and observant—on nothing much better than an "admissible conjecture" or two.

In the end, it's fairly obvious to me that Nagel doesn't warrant—he is too thoughtful, too intelligent, and too intellectually honest to warrant—some of the condescending accusations Demea-like critics have levied at him. Philo's general bearing deserves more respect.

## Notes

1. Chorost 2013.
2. Nagel 2012, 106, 100, 92, 118, 82, 112.
3. Ibid., 25.
4. This claim first appears in *The Last Word* (Nagel 1997, 130) and is repeated in Nagel's recent "The Core of *Mind and Cosmos*" (Nagel 2013).
5. Nagel 2012, 119.
6. Admission: I suppose I previously have. Though I don't consider myself a metaphysical naturalist, I'm guilty of what Nagel describes as constructing "epicycles" on behalf of Humean subjectivism, a form of value non-realism. See Reitsma 2014.
7. See Avramides 2006.
8. Nagel 1971, 720–721.
9. See Tolstoy 1905.
10. Nagel 1971, 718.

11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 721.
14. Ibid., 719.
15. Ibid., 720.
16. Ibid., 725.
17. Ibid., 725 and 720.
18. Ibid., 718.
19. Ibid., 721, 725.
20. Ibid., 726.
21. Ibid., 718.
22. Ibid., 719.
23. Ibid., 724.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 726.
26. Ibid., 727.
27. Hume 1776, 5.
28. Nagel 1971, 723–724.
29. Hume 1739–1740, 144.
30. Hume 1776, 5.
31. Sessions 2002, especially chapter 16.
32. Nagel 2012, 92.
33. Ibid., 99–100.
34. Ibid., 93.
35. Ibid., 98.

36. Ibid., 95.
37. Ibid., 114–115.
38. Ibid., 100.
39. Ibid., 105.
40. Ibid., 107.
41. Ibid., 102. Accordingly, I'm not sure I understand why Nagel says that value realism "is a metaphysical [theory] only if the denial of a metaphysical position like naturalism itself counts as a metaphysical position" (97).

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