

PHIL 260; Spring 2007

The Normativity of Ethics

David O. Brink

Handout #6: Normative Authority and Nagelian Rationalism

Thomas Nagel's The Possibility of Altruism (1970) is one of the few sustained attempts to reject instrumental and prudential conceptions of practical reason and to defend the possibility of practical reason that is impartial or altruistic. Nagel makes claims about both moral motivation and practical reason, and each claim has both negative and positive constituents.

- (a) **Motivation**: Nagel both rejects the need for pro-attitudes in moral motivation (including the Humean view about motivation) and defends a purely cognitive account of motivation.
- (b) **Practical Reason**: Nagel both rejects agent-centered assumptions about practical reason (that it is instrumental or prudential) (including the Humean view about rationality) and defends impartial practical reason.

We have already discussed some of his claims about moral motivation (Handout #2). We will focus here more on his claims about practical reason. Nagel may see these issues as connected if he assumes that practical reason must motivate. If so, he may see (a) as necessary to defend his main claim (b).

1. The rational authority of other-regarding morality requires that practical reason be impartial.
2. Insofar as practical reason is impartial, reasons for action cannot be grounded in an agent's pro-attitudes (or interests).
3. Practical reason motivates in the sense that recognition of reasons for action (normally) motivates.
4. Hence, other-regarding morality is authoritative only if motivation does not require pro-attitudes.

But (1)-(3) do not imply (4) if pro-attitudes can be consequential on judgments about practical reason. If so, (b) does not require (a); we can reject the Humean theory of practical reason (instrumentalism) without rejecting the Humean theory of motivation (motivation depends on desire or pro-attitude).

There is also some question about how exactly to understand Nagel's thesis about altruism. The title of the book signifies a comparatively modest ambition, namely, to establish the **possibility** of altruism. But the structure of the argument of the book (see below) seems to have the more ambitious aim of establishing the **necessity** of altruism – that is, that other-regarding concern and behavior is a requirement of reason.

In the 1978 postscript, Nagel describes the original aim of the book as a defense of objective reasons against subjective reasons. Nagel clearly regards desire-based reasons as subjective ones. For the most part, I think Nagel treats prudence as a kind of objective reason, and altruism as another kind of objective reason, though there may be places where he treats objective reasons as referring exclusively to altruistic reasons.

- **Objective Monism:** Only objective reasons are defensible; subjective (desire-based) reasons are legitimate only if they can be derived from objective ones.

This involves a sort of eliminativism about subjective reasons.

The thesis which I propose to defend is simply that the only acceptable reasons are objective ones; even if one operates successfully with a subjective principle, one must be able to back it up with an objective principle yielding those same reasons as well as (presumably) others [96; cf. 88, 90, 98].

Looking back, Nagel says he now thinks the argument of the book supports a somewhat more modest conclusion.

- **Objective Dualism:** There are objective reasons corresponding to every subjective reason (and the force of subjective reasons is exhausted by parallel objective reasons).

Even this, he now suspects, is too strong. He now thinks that the force of some subjective reasons may not be exhausted by the corresponding objective ones.

- **Dualism:** There are objective reasons corresponding to every (most?) subjective reasons, but the force of subjective reasons may not be exhausted by parallel objective reasons.

As far as I can see, this leaves the necessity, and not just the possibility, of impartial practical reason intact. What it acknowledges is the possibility that practical reason may not be exclusively impartial and/or objective. He may be leaving room for the possibility of what he calls **reasons of autonomy** in The View from Nowhere (1986).

ALTRUISM/IMPARTIALITY

Nagel takes altruism to be committed to the existence of non-derivative reason to be concerned about and help others.

The general thesis to be defended concerning altruism is that one has *direct* reason to promote the interests of others – a reason which does not depend on intermediate factors such as one's own interests or one's antecedent sentiments of sympathy and benevolence [PA: 15-16].

Does this mean that altruism requires agent-neutrality? Elsewhere, Nagel distinguishes between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons.

- Reasons are agent-relative iff their general form involves essential reference to the agent who has them; otherwise, they are agent-neutral (The View from Nowhere, pp. 152-53).

Agent-neutrality is usually thought to imply a consequentialist normative doctrine in which if one person has a reason to do or care about something (fear or relieve his own pain) then anyone

else has a reason do or care about that thing (e.g. to care about or relieve his pain). By contrast, there are many different possible forms of agent-relativity. Instrumentalism and prudence or egoism are both agent-relative. But so are deontological normative doctrines that recognize side-constraints on promoting the good and C.D. Broad's self-referential altruism, which claims that one has non-derivative reason to benefit anyone it is in one's power to benefit but that the weight of one's reasons to benefit are a function of the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary ("Self and Others").

Nagel himself appears to reject an agent-neutral conception of altruism insofar as he expresses doubts about whether consequentialist normative conceptions can recognize the separateness of persons and the prohibition on demanding uncompensated sacrifices (138-42). While some agent-relative conceptions, such as instrumentalism and prudence, deny the existence of nonderivative reason to be concerned about or help others, others, such as self-referential altruism, embrace the existence of nonderivative reason to be concerned about and help others.

Would Nagel regard self-referential altruism as an acceptable conception of altruism? While self-referential altruism does recognize nonderivative reason to be concerned about others, it may not recognize the sort of equal normative concern that Nagel appears to endorse (138-42). His challenge is to find an interpretation of equal concern that does not require the agent-neutrality, which he rejects.

In fact, Nagel is concerned with the necessity, and not just the possibility, of altruism (96; cf. 88, 90, 98, 145-46).

INTERTEMPORAL AND INTERPERSONAL DISTRIBUTION

In contrast with instrumentalism, prudence claims that reasons extend **across time**; in contrast with prudence, altruism claims that reasons extend **across persons**.

The interpretation of prudence relates it to the conception of oneself as a temporally persistent being. The failure to accept as reasons for present action the reasons which one expects for the future is the practical expression of a failure to identify with the temporally persistent person of whom one's present self is only a stage among others.

The validation of objective reasons must deal with a transmission of the influence of reasons from one person to another corresponding to the transmission of their influence over time, and this may suggest that if the interpretations are to be parallel, the interpretation of altruism will have to link it to a mystical identification of oneself with other persons, or perhaps with a mass self consisting of all persons. But we have already seen why this is not necessary. To identify with one's future self is not to hold the absurd view that present and future stages of one's life are identical. One need only identify the present as one time among others all of which are contained in a single life. And what corresponds to this in the interpersonal case is not an identification of oneself with other persons or with all persons, but rather a conception of oneself as simply a person among others all of whom are included in a single world [99-100; cf. 19, 58, 89].

Just as the agent's future self provide him with reasons now, so too the interests of others provide him with reasons for actions. Failure to recognize prudence involves **temporal dissociation** -- failure to recognize the present as one time among others. Failure to recognize altruism involves **personal dissociation** -- failure to recognize oneself as one among others.

One concern about this defense of altruism is that it seems to appeal to the **parity** of intertemporal and interpersonal distribution -- interpersonal distribution should privilege the agent's own interests no more than intertemporal distribution should privilege the agent's current desires or interests. But Nagel appears to defend temporal neutrality. Parity would require interpersonal neutrality or agent neutrality, which Nagel resists as an interpretation of altruism.

In any case, intertemporal and interpersonal distribution are importantly disanalogous if, as Nagel appears to believe, there must be compensation for sacrifice (142). Intrapersonal balancing is automatically compensated, because benefactor and beneficiary are the same. But interpersonal balancing is not automatically compensated, because benefactor and beneficiary are distinct.

CONSTANCY OF MOTIVATIONAL CONTENT ACROSS PERSPECTIVES

Nagel believes that motivational content (= authority) must be constant across both temporal and personal perspectives. Consider the prudential case.

Just as the change from a tenseless to a tensed factual judgment does not alter what is believed, but only the standpoint from which one views it, so the change from a tenseless to a tensed practical judgment does not alter what one accepts a justification for wanting, but only the standpoint from which one wants it. If the sense of practical judgments were changed, or their motivational content lost, when one shifted out of the present tense, then practical reasoning would be an area divorced from the conception of oneself as equally real over time [71; cf. 61, 68].

Nagel illustrates the requirement of intertemporal univocity (68-69).

1. I will in six weeks have reason to speak Italian.
2. I now have reason to be able to speak Italian in six weeks.
3. At t_6 I have reason to speak Italian.
4. At t_6 Brink has reason to speak Italian.

Intertemporal univocity of motivational content is supposed to show that if (1) is true then (2) must be true. Both (1) and (2) are supposed to commit us to the temporally-neutral formulation in (3) and the temporally-neutral and impersonal formulation in (4).

Nagel claims that interpersonal univocity of motivational content involves universality or universalizability.

The avoidance of [interpersonal] dissociation therefore requires the acceptance of universal practical principles which apply in the same sense to everyone, and which are impersonally formulable, so that one can arrive at any true conclusion about what the persons in the situation should do, or have reason to do, without knowing what one's own place in the situation is, or indeed whether one occupies a place in it at all [108].

But universality doesn't seem to imply altruism. Altruism's rival, egoism, also respects universality. Consider this line of reasoning.

1. I have reason to F insofar as it promotes my interest (first-person prudential judgment spoken by me).
2. You have reason to F insofar as it promotes your interest (second-person prudential judgment spoken by my interlocutor).
3. He (David Brink) has reason to F insofar as it promotes his interest (third-person prudential judgment spoken by an observer).
4. Anyone ought to F just insofar as it promotes his own interest (universal egoism).
5. I have a reason to help him F insofar as it promotes his interest (first-person altruistic judgment spoken by me).
6. (x)(y) (if F-ing is in x's interest, then y has reason to help x F) (universal altruism).

(1) expresses the content of the first-person practical judgment (spoken by me, David Brink). This ought to be expressible by a second-person practical judgment (made by someone else), as in (2). And the thought expressed by (1) and (2) ought also to be expressible by a third-person judgment (made by someone not party to the conversation), as in (3). Perhaps these claims commit anyone to a universal third-person practical judgment of the sort expressed in (4). But none of these judgments commit one to the altruistic judgments in (5) or (6). But then it's hard to see how a univocity requirement takes us from judgments that the egoist affirms to altruism.

RESENTMENT

Nagel rests his intuitive case for altruism on the existence of emotional reactions such as **resentment**. If you fail to tell me that there is a wasp on my hamburger or refuse to walk around my gouty toes, I am likely to respond to you with resentment (16n, 85). Resentment has normative presuppositions that disappointment, anger, and frustration lack.

- If an earthquake knocks a book off my shelf and onto my gouty toes, I may be pained, frustrated, and angry, but not resentful. There is no one to resent.
- If an earthquake knocks you onto my gouty toes, I may be pained, frustrated, and angry but not resentful.
- If you have Tourette's Syndrome and a tic causes you to treat on my gouty toes, I may be pained, frustrated, and angry, but (probably) not resentful.
- If you knowingly step on my gouty toes, because you couldn't be bothered to veer around them, I will be resentful.

Presumably, what distinguishes resentment from disappointment, anger, and frustration is that it implies, as they do not, that one has been wronged and that someone else has acted as he ought not to have. Moreover, resentment is not predicated on the belief that the offending agent had a self-interested reason not to engage in the destructive behavior. But then it looks like feelings of resentment are evidence against egoism -- the idea that all reasons for action are prudential -- and for altruism.

This argument seems to present a problem of normative accommodation for the egoist that is independent of Nagel's official line of argument that exploits parallels between the justification of prudence and of altruism and that appeals to considerations of universalizability or interpersonal univocity. But Nagel might deny this appearance of independence. He might claim that the egoist who experiences resentment is making judgments that are not interpersonally stable. My feeling of resentment implies the judgment that you (or others) have

reason to refrain from causing me unnecessary pain, independently of your own interests. But this requires me to judge that anyone similarly situated (including me) has reason to refrain from causing unnecessary pain to others, independently of his own (my own) interests.

What this shows is that the egoist cannot consistently harbor feelings of resentment toward the inconsiderate. Of course, he has self-interested reason to object to such behavior both prospectively and retrospectively, and he may have self-interested reason to act as if they had necessarily flouted reasons to behave otherwise. But he cannot actually resent them inasmuch as this would imply that they did have and flout reasons for behaving otherwise. But we can avoid inconsistency by abandoning either egoism or feelings of resentment toward the inconsiderate. Abandoning reactive attitudes such as resentment may seem like a steep price to pay for a philosophical commitment, revealing the unsustainable cost of the egoist living his egoism. Perhaps so. But Nagel also purports to show that egoism is an unstable normative position and that the egoist must recognize the demands of altruism. But the egoist can resist the demands of altruism if he is willing to abandon his attitudes of resentment. The egoist need not be inconsistent, but are we willing to pay the price of being egoists?