



THE SOLIPSISM OF SELF-INTEREST

REVIVING NAGEL'S ABANDONED ARGUMENT

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§ INTRODUCTION

The core argument of Thomas Nagel's *The Possibility of Altruism* (1970) seeks to demonstrate that the moral sceptic, he who refuses 'to be motivationally persuaded by moral considerations',¹ cannot rationally engage in this refusal without implicitly endorsing a form of solipsism. This constitutes a denial of the reality of others' subjective experiences, identifying oneself as the only conscious being in the world. Nagel argues that Altruism, or behaviour motivated by genuine, selfless concern for the well-being of others, is made possible by the 'presumably universal'² recognition of oneself as merely one person among others equally real.³

The radical idea at the heart of Nagel's book is found in his argument that all reasons motivating action must be objective, or 'agent-neutral', to use Parfit's more modern terminology,⁴ later adopted by Nagel to denote the same concept.⁵ That is to say a reason

¹ Nagel, Thomas. *The Possibility of Altruism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970: 143.

² Ibid., 145.

³ Sturgeon, Nicholas L. "Altruism, Solipsism and the Objectivity of Reasons", *Philosophical Review*, 83, No. 3 (1974): 374-402 paraphrasing Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, 14.

⁴ Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

⁵ Nagel's use of 'objective' and Parfit's of 'agent-neutral' are not exactly the same, as their formulations differ substantially. They are, however, extensionally equivalent in all possible worlds as pointed out by Ridge in 'Reasons for action: Agent-Neutral vs Agent-Relative' *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition). The difference is largely unimportant for the purposes of this paper.

of this sort “can be given a general form which does not include an essential reference to the person who has it”.⁶ Resisting relativisation to any agent in particular, these are reasons to perform actions that promote (by which Nagel means roughly ‘help bring about’) ends that are universally desirable, and do not depend on an agent *being* a particular individual. Subjective, or agent-relative, reasons, are only reasons *for particular individuals* to act, and do not promote universally desirable ends.

Nagel argued that the acceptance of subjective reasons that do not have universally motivating content is inconsistent with the view that other minds are comparably real. As to be discussed, this was entirely dismantled by Nicholas Sturgeon in his 1974 paper *Altruism, Solipsism, and the Objectivity of Reasons*.⁸ Nagel abandoned this argument in light of these objections, and as far as I can tell, no one has seriously attempted to revisit it since.⁹ That is not to say that the underlying idea was shown to be completely hopeless; Michael Ridge claims the argument is ‘ingenious... [and Nagel] may have abandoned it prematurely.’ If it could be done successfully, ‘the implications would be dramatic’, upending the study of normative philosophy as we know it.¹⁰

In this paper, I argue that Nagel was right to think that accepting any reason for action that prioritises the interests of the self over others conflicts with the belief in the reality of other people’s experiences.

I do not wish to take the normative standpoint that one should never act in a self-interested way. I only claim, like Nagel, that to allow acceptance of reasons to act based in any part on the fact that those reasons concern the self, rather than another, implies a sort of solipsism that denies a certain equality to the reality of experiences of others.

Nagel’s argument is heavily preoccupied with, and I think burdened by, discussion of the language of reasons, and the extent to which propositions concerning reasons can be expressed personally and

⁶ Nagel, Thomas. *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986: 152-153.

⁷ Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, 47.

⁸ Sturgeon, Nicholas. “Altruism, Solipsism and the Objectivity of Reasons”, *Philosophical Review*, 83, No. 3 (1974): 374-402.

⁹ A huge amount of work has been done on similar ideas, most notably by Parfit (1984), but to give due attention to particular examples would require a great deal of care and would be overly ambitious for this paper.

¹⁰ Ridge, Michael. ‘Reasons for action: Agent-Neutral vs Agent-Relative’ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition).

impersonally. Whilst the result is an elegant and impressive framework, the ambition to actually *prove* his conclusion using these notions turned out to be extremely fragile, as Sturgeon clearly demonstrated in his decisive response.

I propose that there is a more direct way to argue Nagel's point, which bypasses many of Sturgeon's objections. It employs certain ideas similar to those Nagel held dear and emphasised passionately at times, but did not manage to apply in a watertight way. This is predominantly his notion of the impersonal standpoint, and some accompanying insights regarding the extent to which self-locating information can rationally change one's attitude towards reasons.

I will not go into great detail about the intricacies of Nagel's argument, as interesting as it is, as he abandoned it after Sturgeon's response, demonstrating that his particular arguments were not viable. Despite this, the conclusions remain fascinating. Though predominant normative ethical theories *sound* similar, to say that one *should* promote actions in the interest of everyone is, despite being *prima facie* more intuitive, far less tangible than Nagel's suggestion that to accept *any reason* to act on the grounds that it promotes your self-interested ends actually conflicts with the belief in the equal reality of other minds.

I will first present a revised way to conceptualise Nagel's impersonal standpoint and then show how this revision entails a similar conclusion to the one Nagel originally contended, though in a more direct and stable way, as it establishes a clearer framework for structuring the facts about the world inspired by Nagel's ideas. It is hoped this avoids the fatal criticisms that Sturgeon brought against the intricate but frail semantic foundations for Nagel's argument in *The Possibility of Altruism*. It will be demonstrated that once the reality of other minds has been accepted, along with the fact that their experiences also include an intrinsic sense of self, there is no additional agent-indexing information concerning the self which could logically be said to have reason-generating weight. I will then explain briefly how this builds positively on certain useful features of Nagel's original argument, whilst avoiding the damning criticisms brought against him by Sturgeon.

§ THE REVISED 'IMPERSONAL' STANDPOINT AND THE ARGUMENT THAT FOLLOWS:

This particular way of thinking about objectivity is not at its core dissimilar to many other, more typical ways that would be familiar to all those who have thought about the matter, but it should bring to light certain fundamental features which, if neglected, will leave an argument discussing objectivity vulnerable to criticism, as seen with Nagel and Sturgeon. As such, it will seem familiar at first, and not particularly groundbreaking, though its merits should reveal themselves shortly. It must be warned that the following section is addressed consistently in the second person, yet makes demands throughout to think about identity in a way that might seem incompatible with this. This is often the case in any discussion of personal identity, but is particularly difficult here. The relevant confusions are clarified afterwards.

To engage with the revised impersonal standpoint, it is helpful to begin with a thought experiment. It asks you to imagine you are an impersonal, omniscient, god-like figure viewing the world and its (for simplicity's sake, human) inhabitants. This may confuse matters slightly to start with, as imagining oneself as an impersonal being is obviously impossible, and to think of it as *you* would be to contradict the entire point of the exercise. However, this kind of difficulty is unavoidable in any thorough discussion of objectivity, and the exercise is ultimately necessary to elucidate key aspects of the concept.

As this impersonal, omniscient being, you are aware of the total set of facts about the world. This includes every detail about the conscious experience of every individual. There is no need to actively try to imagine what it might be like to actually *be* one of those people by piecing together certain facts you know about their mind; your knowledge is exhaustive, and your understanding of the unique intricacies of each subjective experience would be included within it.

Now suppose you had ultimate control over the actions of every person. Intuitively, you would have no reason to prioritise certain individuals over others,¹¹ so it would be natural to assume a framework for decision making in which the people under your control act entirely selflessly and do not reflect any sort of self-centred attitude. There

¹¹ Assuming that you don't judge some individuals to be worthier than others, which might lead you to, say, bring about some kind of karmic cycle. We have not imposed a value system on this being, so this would not make any sense. It would, in fact, be largely inconsequential to the argument, as long as the impersonal aspect is maintained. In fact, the flexibility to accommodate a variety of suggested impositions of objective, impersonal value systems that differ from the utilitarian sentiment passively implied by a neutral standpoint like this could add to the appeal of the argument.

would be no reason for you to have an arbitrary individual, say, person A, do things that benefitted the interests of person A over those of person B, as you would appreciate that there is nothing special about person A's interests.¹² If you were to arbitrarily assign a normative sentiment to this framework it might appear somewhat utilitarian. However, I emphasise that there is a significant difference between having reason to make decisions that promote everyone's interests equally and making decisions that promote everyone's interests equally in the absence of any reason to do otherwise. Though perhaps extensionally equivalent, the two ideas are not to be confused, and it is the latter we are concerned with.¹³

Naturally it would be most reasonable for you to have A frequently focus on certain basic self-directed matters, for example, keeping himself alive. However, this would only be because there is opportunity cost involved in every decision, and there are many things that make much more sense for people to do for themselves purely in the name of efficiency.

In any case, when you make decisions for A, you have no reason to use the affective power of A's body to promote A's own interests over B's precisely because you are aware of the fact that B's conscious experiences are equally real.¹⁴ It must be remembered that the conscious experiences of these people have not changed, and they have not been turned into lifeless puppets by your control.¹⁵ They both still have the same sense of self they had before: the 'I am person

¹² It must be noted at this point that the term 'interests' must be treated with caution, as it will be put under scrutiny in due course. For example, it will be asked in what sense they are A's interests at all. At this stage, this sort of question only confuses things, and I recommend the word is taken at face value.

¹³ They may, of course, converge quite naturally, in that once the general principle that 'decisions should promote interests' is added, without reason at this point to favour any individual's interests over another, the doctrine looks a lot like utilitarianism. However, there is no reason at this stage to adopt this principle.

¹⁴ Assuming that if one were *more* real, or the only real one, this would give reason for the impersonal being to promote their interests; this is the link to solipsism. A more thorough discussion could ask why this might be, but it seems generally reasonable and suits the assumptions of the present argument.

¹⁵ It could be objected that there is no way that you could take over their autonomy without changing their experience of the world. Questions about free will aside, this is probably true, but the relevant part is their sense of self rather than their sense of autonomy. It may be argued that the two are inextricably linked, but their separation is not essential to the argument, only the thought experiment that helps clarify the underlying idea. It is asked therefore that disbelief is suspended on this matter.

A rather than person B' and vice versa, as the subjective element is embedded so deeply in experience.

As such, knowing that A feels like A, and B feels like B, and that each sense of self is equally real, it would no longer make sense, when making decisions using A's affective bodily power, to reason as A perhaps did before you took control; to justify¹⁶ the promotion of his own happiness, for example, by saying 'I have reason to promote my happiness *because it's mine*'. B would likely do the same. Given that as an impersonal being you are neither A nor B, this reason, as stated by either person, would be redundant in your decision making; this is because, to emphasise once again, A's sense that his happiness is his own cannot generate a reason for you¹⁷ to promote that over B's identical feeling, as both are equally real. All that claiming 'it is mine' does is trivially index the feeling back to a particular stream of conscious experience of which that feeling is an intrinsic part. This point will be clarified in much greater detail further on.

There is no use emphasising this point about objective reasons more firmly, as it has been made many times before. It is at this point that a difficult, but crucial, conceptual leap must be taken, which is where this argument begins to stray from Nagel's and other conventional formulations. Two points must be remembered here. Firstly, recall that you have all the facts about every individual's mind, and you know exactly what their conscious experience would be like without *actually being* that person. Secondly, these facts include that each person has an equally real sense of self, which may be crudely captured in the thought, 'I am *me*, rather than anyone else'. Necessarily, person A feels like person A, and person B feels like person B. The *feeling of being* person A rather than person B is intrinsic to person A's experience, and is included within the set of true facts about A (that, as an omniscient being, you already know).

Now imagine that you 'jump' from the impersonal being into a random person's mind, say, either A or B. You will experience their stream of consciousness exactly as it is, and it will be exactly like you knew it would be when you had all the facts about it as an omniscient

¹⁶ Rationally, not necessarily morally.

¹⁷ It is extremely important to add that up to here, 'reason *for you*', is used to in fact make clear that the reasons in question are objective, distinct from A's possible agent-relative reasons. This is confusing as '*for you*' almost always implies agent-relativity, but here the reason is being relativised to an impersonal perspective to represent objectivity in a slightly more tangible way. This is just another example of the unavoidable difficulties conceptualising objective reasons.

being. You will not learn any new information about it, as there is none to be learned—you knew all the facts already.¹⁸

The random jump happens, and you find yourself in person A's mind. You know this because you are experiencing being person A rather than person B. You have A's sense of self: *I am A, I am not B*.

This piece of information, which tells you that you are A rather than B, appears helpful. It seems it could give you reason to start using your bodily autonomy (which is now confined to a single body, A's) to perform actions that promote person A's interests where you did not have reason before. You can now promote A's happiness over B's, and the reason to do so has strengthened greatly; you have learned that you are A, and therefore A's happiness will now be *yours*, giving you, A, reason to promote this outcome where the impersonal being had none.

This reasoning has no logical plausibility whatsoever. To understand why requires some patience, as the explanation, though I think it to be beautifully revealing, is incredibly unintuitive and requires significant backtracking with respect to the linguistic and conceptual habits that have so far been used to get to this point, not just in this paper but in the historical discussion as a whole.

The essence of the point is this: *the fact that you are now A rather than B is not a piece of information*. It has no informative power, once the fact that A already had a sense of self is acknowledged. What exactly is it that you think you have learned? You may say, 'I have learned the fact that I am now A, and not B'. That fact is, of course, true, but the sense in which you have *learned* it is entirely unclear. You may say, 'I used my new intrinsic sense of being A as an evidential basis, from which I learned that I am indeed A, and not B'.

But how can this count as learning information? It was already part of the known set of facts that A experiences the sense of being A. What you are saying here is that 'now I experience being A', even though you are A, so this is just the same as 'A experiences being A';

¹⁸ Of course, in reality, experiencing their mind exactly as it is will involve a great loss of information, and the complete collapse of omniscience. You will have only the memories and knowledge of whichever person's mind you jump into. I have added this as a footnote because at this stage the reminder that your entire cognitive basis is now in the new brain inhibits the usefulness of the idea of the jump from one to the other. It is of course true, and a more accurate view of things, which will prove highly significant.

but this was already part of the known set of facts. Nothing new has been learned at all. No new information has been gained.¹⁹

Before explaining how this entails that there can be no purely subjective reasons for action consistent with the belief in the reality of others' experiences, there are some obvious objections to this that should be covered. Primarily, it may be said that there is a large disconnect between the way certain concepts are discussed in the first, 'pre-jump' section of the thought experiment. This makes the conclusion seem trivially true at face value, uninteresting when considered in isolation, and incoherent and confused when contextualised against the rest of the idea. I think this first impression is unfortunately unavoidable, and to get over it requires the backtracking alluded to earlier, which I shall outline below.

This impression largely stems from the necessity to use pronouns, and to generally refer to 'you', or whoever is reading and takes the pronoun to refer to them, and additionally the fact that this person (you) is *a real person* and not, of course, an impersonal observer (I hope). This is problematic because the way that the thought experiment deals with changing identities is not compatible whatsoever with either normal practical language use or the fact that we are constrained to a subjective viewpoint. This means that it makes no sense at all to say, 'now you are A, where before you were the impersonal observer'. This is further explained by two distinct but connected reasons.

Firstly, as previously stated, there is no way 'you' could be an impersonal observer, as this observer would have no self for the 'you' to refer to. Secondly, there is a significant element of deception in which 'you' is used interchangeably to refer to: a) a real person who is asked to imagine they have a different identity, and b) not one, but a number of distinct imagined counterparts through which this identity is supposed to move. This creates a sort of illusion where it seems it is possible to imagine, and appears to make sense to describe, a single persistent identity moving between distinct imagined entities. This is because the sense of self felt by the real person doing the imagining acts as a surrogate for the imagined persistent personal identity to cling to, and this is able to move from one imagined entity to another with a supposedly different identity, whilst the real point of reference

¹⁹ This may seem like one of Frege's Identity Puzzles, but the sense/reference distinction is not needed here, as 'I' and 'A' will have the same cognitive value for A, so long as the 'I' really does now (as it should) refer to A, and not a persistent metaphysical self. How this may be avoided will be explained in due course.

of 'you', and with it your intrinsic sense of self, stays constant. In reality, this could not possibly make sense, as once the person referred to changes, it is incoherent to use 'you' to refer to a single persistent personal identity.

In light of this, an objection could be raised that the whole project was entirely dishonest, and the conclusion reached utterly trivial. However, it is the very fact that these arguments may be raised, acknowledged, and responded to accordingly that allows this formulation to ultimately avoid the criticisms Sturgeon leveled against Nagel. The arguments will be considered one by one.

Firstly, the impersonal observer is merely a conceptual placeholder for Nagel's 'impersonal standpoint' which, importantly, is not a perspective at all.²⁰ Though this undoubtedly makes full conceptual understanding of the idea impossible, the addition of the quality of omniscience allows us to bypass the idea that objectivity needs to be a perspective at all, rather than just the consideration of the facts as a whole. This, of course, is not a new idea; Nagel was very aware of this at the time of writing. Nagel emphasised the necessity to include the full, unchanging set of facts in the impersonal perspective.²¹ His conception of the full set of facts was somewhat incomplete, as will be discussed in due course. Essentially, what is important here is the available information, and what reasons are coherent in the *presence* of all facts but the *absence* of self-locating information. It has been argued that this cannot serve as relevant information at all, and so the importance of reason consideration without it is obvious. Moreover, the lack of identity in the impersonal observer is helpful in that it makes the jump and adoption of identity less confusing than it might be if, say, the jump were made from one person to another, requiring substitution rather than mere adoption.

The second objection highlights the problem that the conceptualisation demands that you imagine moving from one person with a sense of self to another, without acknowledging the fact that there can be no 'you' to move from one to the other if this move is supposed to take place accurately, but rather by taking advantage of the persistent sense of self in the person conceptualising to stabilise the illusion.

²⁰ His difficulty with the impossibility of engaging with this idea in full is covered in more detail in Nagel, Thomas. *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

²¹ Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, 103-104.

It certainly doesn't take advantage of this deliberately; on the contrary, the natural tendency to subconsciously confuse the persistent sense of self of you, who is doing the imagining, with something real within what is being imagined, is a great hindrance to the point being argued for, and only confuses the matter. If the human brain were better at imagining similar situations without this sense of self, the absence of an imposed persistent entity (the sense of self of the person imagining) that tracks identity-locating information *as it changes* would be much clearer; it would make the point that this appears as information only because of the illusion such an entity could persist²² far more lucid and intuitive. If one could move from imagining being person A to imagining being person B without the unshakeable sense that some sort of memory-preserving faculty moves between the two, then the idea that no new information is gained on the 'discovery' that one is now B *if one truly is B, as B was previously factually described*, would be much less opaque.

It is very confusing to have it suggested that you are *now* person A, whereas you weren't before, whilst also stating as a fact that A had had a persistent, unchanging sense of self before and after A was you, whereas *you* only got this when you jumped into A's consciousness. This does, in a way, unfairly imply a separation between 'you' and 'A' that it would be unreasonable to demand you forget. It does not make sense to speak of things this way.

However, it is this very fact that makes the argument work. It is precisely this failure of language that illuminates the reason it does not make sense to speak as if information is gained upon the discovery that 'I am now A', as this could only be the case if it is assumed that the 'I' and the 'A' could have existed separately before in a way that might render their subsequent conjoining factually significant. This is the error we are psychologically compelled to make, as explained above. But if, as the thought experiment proposes, there is a stable set of facts about A's conscious experience, and when A's brain is merely 'jumped into' this set of facts does not change in any way, the illusion of any sense of personal identity that existed before becoming A should disappear. This is exactly what is intended, as the impersonal observer, accurately imagined, should not have had a sense of self to cling to.

Essentially, once the totality of facts has been established, there is no impersonal or personal perspective from which any information could be gained. Trivially, this is because all information

²² It is assumed here that such an entity could not exist.

is contained within the established totality of facts. Included within this are the facts about your personal experience, including the sense of self that is intrinsic to it. Awareness of the self, and its autonomous capabilities and limitations, informs you of the decisions it is possible to make, and therefore defines the space of possible outcomes which are practically worthwhile for your reason-assessing cognition to consider promoting.

It cannot be emphasised strongly enough that, where agency is concerned, self-locating information is fundamental in this way; this does not by any means imply that self-locating information has any reason-generating power. It is not actually the same form of information at all, and to call awareness of the autonomous capabilities and limitations of oneself as an agent, 'self-locating' is only significant because of the fact that, given that you only have control over your own body, to know exactly what those limitations and capabilities are would give a very accurate indication of who exactly you were in the world.

Briefly returning to the impersonal observer, let's imagine that instead of being in control of all people's actions, you were assigned one at random. You were then given all relevant information about what decisions could and couldn't be made, using the affective bodily autonomy of this particular individual. This would tell you all you need to know about which person you actually had control over; knowing one of your capabilities was to wiggle A's toes, you could safely assume you were in control of A. However, this wouldn't necessarily mean *you are A*. You still don't have the sense of self that A does.

This distinction is extremely helpful in understanding why purely self-locating information is redundant where reason generation is concerned. Upon 'discovering' that you are A, rather than B, the only information that is relevant to reasoned decision making is purely that which defines the space of possible decisions. It is crucial to understand that just because self-locating information *in practice* appears to coincide with the facts that define the bounds of agency for a person, and are thus fundamental to the mechanism of decision making, the sense of self provides no real non-trivial factual information that could affect the reasoning process that ultimately governs that mechanism. The facts that 'I am A' and 'I will feel A's happiness' do not represent any non-redundant differentiating factors where the outcomes of rational decisions are concerned, where belief in the reality of other minds is accepted.

§ NAGEL'S FAILURE AND STURGEON'S CRITICISMS

Nagel's argument was reconstructed by Sturgeon in the following way:

Nagel sought to show that it is contrary to reason not to believe that all reasons are objective. To reject this involves violating two conditions, (C) and C'):

(C) all his *impersonal* considerations must have for him the same motivational content as do his self-regarding considerations;

(C') all his *other regarding* considerations must have for him the same motivational content as do his self-regarding considerations;²³

Where impersonal considerations are those made from the third-person perspective, that involve no reference to the self, where the person with the consideration is barred from regarding it with the additional information that they might in fact be the individual being described impersonally, and could rephrase the statement in the first person.

Self-regarding considerations are, as Sturgeon characterises them, propositions that one could express sincerely²⁴ by a sentence of the form:

I have reason to promote A, or to want A promoted;²⁵

Other regarding considerations:

Someone else has reason to promote A, or want A promoted;²⁶

Which importantly includes the information that this 'someone *else*' is not the person making the consideration, whereas in impersonal considerations, this sort of information is absent.

Violating these conditions, Sturgeon argues, causes 'dissociation', a word Nagel uses to describe the loss or lack of the

²³ Sturgeon, "Altruism, Solipsism and the Objectivity of Reasons", 381.

²⁴ In Sturgeon's words, 'someone expresses a proposition sincerely just in case he means what he says'. Ibid., 377.

²⁵ Ibid., 376.

²⁶ Ibid., 376.

ability to rephrase the same statements made about reasons in the first person, in the third person. Nagel treats this as a serious problem, resulting in a breach of the view that oneself is a person among others equally real. Sturgeon deliberately rejects the commitment of the word ‘dissociation’ to that doctrine and instead explicitly redefines it as a label for the violation of condition (C).²⁷

In Sturgeon’s reconstruction, Nagel’s next move is to posit that this in turn commits one to a denial of the ‘Impersonality Thesis’, which Sturgeon posits covers the following claims:²⁸

- a) Anything that someone can say about himself, using a first-person sentence, can equally well be said about him by the use of an appropriate third-person sentence;
- b) What any first-person sentence says can equally well be said in an impersonal language, and from the impersonal standpoint.²⁹

Finally, the denial of the Impersonality Thesis leads one to solipsism, as to deny that truths stated from the first-person perspective can equally well be said from the impersonal standpoint is to believe that there is something irreducibly special about the self and its subjective truths.³⁰

This is Sturgeon’s rough reconstruction of Nagel’s argument. In his criticism, Sturgeon largely focuses on the invalidation of these successive inferences, after which Nagel’s argument falls apart. I will not spend much time arguing that my argument avoids these particular criticisms, as it does not follow a particularly similar structure, and the inferences that Sturgeon attacks are ones that my argument largely avoids by omission of the relevant concepts.

For example, I largely neglect the notion of motivational content. Nagel mostly uses this concept to explore the relationship between acceptances of reasons from personal and impersonal standpoints and how this affects the power of reasons to not just be a reason for doing something but a reason *to actually do it*, and question whether the impersonal standpoint should make a difference if one is not a solipsist. I am not so concerned with the psychology behind it, as I feel it brings unnecessary considerations that do not adequately

²⁷ Ibid., 394.

²⁸ Ibid., 385.

²⁹ Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, 100-102.

³⁰ Sturgeon, “Altruism, Solipsism and the Objectivity of Reasons”, 385-386.

represent the relevant factors when attempting to move from personal to impersonal standpoints regardless of how this distinction is conceived. By supposing that an impersonal observer in control of all actions would promote everyone's interests equally purely out of the absence of any reason not to, and that a self-locating constraint cannot give any non-redundant reason to counteract this, the need to touch on the psychology of motivation and dissociation is lessened.

Psychology is not what is particularly important to either argument, however, and the most crucial difference between the formulation proposed in this paper and Nagel's original argument is his focus on what propositions can be expressed in different contexts. His lack of success in doing this effectively is, I think, a result of an incomplete representation of the facts that can be reasoned about from the impersonal perspective.

Nagel defines the impersonal standpoint as one which "provides a view of the world without giving one's location in it".³¹ The similarities to our earlier attempt to imagine things from an impersonal perspective should be immediately obvious. However, the differences are apparent when Sturgeon's most devastating criticism of all is considered. Here, he points out that unstated but essential premises of Nagel's commit himself to denying the Impersonality Thesis.

Sturgeon argues that in order for Nagel's point that subjective reasons lose their motivating content when rephrased from the impersonal standpoint to work, he must be assuming that there are two ways a proposition can have motivating content *for him*:

- a) He recognises it as one of his own self-regarding considerations;

Or

- b) He recognises that either by itself or with other of his beliefs it entails, by some nontrivial argument to which it is essential, one of his own self-regarding considerations.³²

Without this assumption, there could be a situation where someone decides from the impersonal standpoint that someone has reason to do something, also knows that that person is in fact him, and yet this reason lacks the motivating content that would be present in the first-

³¹ Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, 101.

³² Sturgeon, "Altruism, Solipsism and the Objectivity of Reasons", 395-396.

person formulation. Outside of avoiding this situation, the assumption is generally needed to explain how a proposition can have motivating content.

Additionally, if I have a subjective reason which *lacks* motivating content when phrased as an impersonal consideration, this must be *without* the knowledge, or at least ignoring the knowledge that the person in consideration is in fact ‘me’. In order to deny that subjective reasons could have motivating content when formulated as impersonal considerations, Nagel must assume that an impersonal consideration requires one to take an impersonal standpoint, completely ignoring any self-locating information.

Sturgeon points out that these two assumptions, when taken together, entail *no impersonal consideration* can have motivating content. That is because in order to fulfil (a) or (b), one must recognise a consideration as one’s own for it to be motivating. However, if impersonal considerations must be viewed from the impersonal standpoint, any self-locating information is barred from use. As such, there is no way to recognise an impersonal consideration as self-regarding, and therefore motivating (by assumption 1), whilst also adopting an impersonal standpoint to properly recognise the statement as impersonal. Without these assumptions, Sturgeon argues, his argument fails to show that belief in subjective principles enforces dissociation.³³

The contradictions involved in trying to make Nagel’s formulation work stem from a deeper failure to accurately represent the impersonal standpoint. A large part of the issue that arises here is the need to demand that certain facts be forgotten, for the impersonal standpoint to be properly adopted. With a full picture of the impersonal standpoint, I do not think any facts need to be forgotten to show that subjective reasons imply solipsism.

Let us take one of Sturgeon’s examples. “Someone may believe, and say in an impersonal language, that the runner on first base has reason to try to steal second; and this proposition which he believes and expresses may have motivational content for him, even if he thinks the reason is merely a subjective one, if in addition he knows or believes that *he* is the runner on first base, and hence that he has reason to promote his goal or want it promoted.”³⁴ Sturgeon argues that when Nagel claims that impersonal considerations lack

³³ Sturgeon, “Altruism, Solipsism and the Objectivity of Reasons”, 399.

³⁴ Sturgeon, “Altruism, Solipsism and the Objectivity of Reasons”, 396-397.

motivational content for a person, he must be assuming that certain personal beliefs like this are absent, or at least ignored; that is, he has adopted the impersonal standpoint.

It is clear where Nagel's impersonal standpoint and its implications differ from our own. Firstly, unlike in Nagel's impersonal standpoint, with our impersonal observer (which, to re-emphasise, is not actually a perspective but a more accurate representation of facts, and the information relevant to decision making) there is no need to *forget* the fact that he is the runner in order for the statement to lose its 'motivating content', as Nagel puts it.³⁵ Once the impersonal standpoint and an acceptance of its accompanying facts have been adopted properly, the belief that the runner on first base has reason to try to steal second would be eliminated immediately, if it is indeed true in either formulation that this reason is subjective. In Nagel's formulation, that would be because motivating content is lost with an impersonal consideration properly based in the impersonal standpoint; for our formulation, it would be because there is, once all the facts are accounted for, no reason whatsoever to promote the interests of this runner over, say, any other competing athlete.

The key difference, which makes this argument more direct and much less vulnerable to criticism, is Nagel still makes multiple distinctions that my formulation doesn't recognise as coherent or non-redundant within the framework. It is fundamental to Nagel's framework that something is *forgotten* when moving to the impersonal standpoint, and a *new fact* is learned when it is discovered that the man in question is, in fact, me. If the impersonal standpoint is to be viewed correctly, what fact has been forgotten by the impersonal observer? That it is me, person A, who is attempting to think this way? I, in my imagined perspective, would have no problem taking that fact into account. If I want to view the world as accurately as possible, it would not do me well to try to start forgetting things, for these may be valuable factors to consider. I do not need to worry about this fact hindering reason once it has been established that the sense or thought represented by the phrase, 'I am me,' is an entirely redundant piece of information with regard to its significance to reason generation. In trying to view things like the impersonal observer, the fact that I might imagine looking down on Earth, and seeing someone thinking about the impersonal observer, reflecting on his own situation and his sense of self, does not significantly change the things I know to be true about the world. It only becomes problematic when it is thought that

³⁵ Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, 64-67.

that self-locating information is substantial enough to even hope to provide a change in reasons.

Nagel seems to get close to this idea. He states the shift from the impersonal standpoint to the personal “makes a great difference in *how* that world is conceived, but no difference in what is conceived to be the case.”³⁶ Sturgeon suggests that Nagel attempts to characterise these standpoints predominantly through the language available for describing the world. Sturgeon suggests he should go further than just restricting the terms one is able to use in the impersonal standpoint, and that the restriction should also apply to terms one *knows how* to use. Anyone using the impersonal standpoint should be barred from using any idea, correct or incorrect, of how to express any proposition using the terms of personal language.³⁷

This is, of course, dramatic. The personal language is needed to express some very important facts about the world from the perspective of the impersonal observer, who, it must be remembered, knows every fact about the conscious experiences of every individual. Of course, once again, it is not necessary to know these to engage in the perspective, just to hold the belief that other minds exist. The only reason one would need to set restrictions in this way is if self-locating information of any sort is presumed to provide a justified interest for acting in a self-interested way *from the personal perspective*. Having established that it cannot serve this purpose, provided that you, the person imagining the impersonal observer, have a good understanding of this concept, there is no fear that any information relating to oneself could reintroduce subjective reasons, as the logical untenability of that possibility has been accepted.

Nagel was clearly on the right track with his claim that the shift from the impersonal standpoint to the personal makes no difference in “what is conceived to be the case”.³⁸ However, if “what is conceived to be the case” is understood accurately enough to unify the two pictures by including known subjective facts within the total set of facts about the world, it is possible to give due attention to the question of *why exactly* this should not change how it is conceived, where Nagel could not.

³⁶ Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, 103.

³⁷ Sturgeon, “Altruism, Solipsism and the Objectivity of Reasons”, 397-398

³⁸ Nagel, Thomas. *The Possibility of Altruism*, 103.

§ CONCLUSION

I have presented a revised way to conceptualise Nagel's impersonal standpoint, which prioritised as cohesive a picture of the facts as possible, aiming to treat others' experiences as utterly real without losing sight of oneself as part of that set of facts. It was argued that once every individual's sense of self has been accounted for, self-locating information is largely redundant as it is bound to only trivially reassert a particular, known example of an individual experiencing a sense of self in a manner no different to that included within the existing facts. This renders the concept of subjective reasons redundant, as the illusion of additional self-locating information inherent within one's sense of self does not represent any real, substantive fact. Therefore, they cannot be used as a basis for reason generation, even for the individual themselves. Solipsism would, on the other hand, provide a factual, reason-generating basis to prioritise the interests of the self over others, as included within the facts would be the knowledge of the absence, or at least dampened existence, of others' experience. As such, revisiting Nagel's conclusion, there must be only objective reasons if solipsism is to be avoided, as to treat self-locating facts as suitable informational bases for generating reasons would be to underestimate, and thus undermine, the reality of others' experiences as having an equally metaphysically privileged sense of self.

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