

24.231 Ethics – Handout 17 Nagel, “Ethics” (or “Autonomy and Deontology”)

The “central problem of ethics”: “how the lives, interests, and welfare of others make claims on us and how these claims, of various forms, are to be reconciled with the aim of living our own lives” (p. 164)

Agent-relative vs. Agent-Neutral Reasons

“If a reason can be given a general form which does not include an essential reference to the person who has it, it is an *agent-neutral* reason. For example, if it is a reason for anyone to do or want something that it would reduce the amount of wretchedness in the world, then that is a neutral reason. If on the other hand the general form of a reason does include an essential reference to the person who has it, it is an *agent-relative* reason. For example, if it is a reason for anyone to do or want something that it would be in *his* interest, then that is a relative reason.” (pp. 152-3)

On the relevance of agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons:

“Ethics is concerned not only with what should happen, but also independently with what people should or may *do*. Neutral reasons underlie the former; but relative reasons can affect the latter.” (p. 165)

Three kinds of agent-relative reasons:

- **Reasons of autonomy:** these are reasons we have because of our (optional) interests and projects – interests and projects whose value to us may be recognizable from the objective perspective, but which don’t thereby have value for anyone. Reasons of autonomy limit what we are *required* to do in the service of impersonal value.
- **Deontological reasons:** these are reasons not to maltreat others in certain ways, which are not just reasons to bring it about that no one is maltreated. Deontological reasons limit what we are *permitted* to do in the service of impersonal value.
- **Reasons of obligation:** these are reasons that stem from the special obligations we have towards those to whom we are closely related; whether these reasons set limits on what we are *required* or *permitted* to do is less straightforward (are we permitted or required to give preference to our children’s well-being?). Nagel says he’s less confident that these reasons can’t be accommodated by a purely agent-neutral conception of value.

Reasons of autonomy

Nagel suggests the markers of agent-relative reasons of autonomy are:

- They are generated by things we value *by choice*
- They are (generally?) not generated by universally-shared values

- They are not “close to home” – they aren’t generated by experiential or subjective states, or attached to things that “determine the character of life from the inside”

Paradigm cases of values (and disvalues) that generate agent-neutral reasons: pleasure and pain; but also very general human goods whose value to us is evident before we consider our particular or optional preferences and projects: freedom, self-respect, access to opportunities and resources.

Paradigm cases of values that generate agent-relative reasons: the value of the end-goals of our adopted preferences and projects – e.g., climbing Mt. Kilimajaro, building a monument to our God, learning to play all of Beethoven’s piano sonatas. These things, Nagel claims, are things we can recognize others as having a reason to pursue – we can recognize as valuable *to them* – without thereby concluding that they are valuable from the objective standpoint, or give us reasons.

Questions:

- What about the more general value of *getting to do what you want*? That seems plausibly something that is universally valued, and not exactly by choice. If climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro helps you achieve something you want, does that give me agent-neutral reasons to help you do it?
 - Nagel thinks not; this has something to do with his third marker for agent-relative values – he thinks neutral value at most attaches to the pleasure you get from success, or the frustration you’d get from not getting what you want. But the actual achievement (as opposed to the mere experience – which, after all, is not what you want) can’t get agent-neutral value just from your wanting it. But this seems to require an independent argument against the value of preference-satisfaction *per se*. And I’m not sure Nagel supplies it.
- Nagel’s distinction allows us to defend a kind of protection from the impingement of the projects and goals of others on our own lives: I’m not always required to sacrifice my own goals for those of others, just because those goals matter more in some sense to others than mine matter to me. But how exactly are my agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons associated with my good to be balanced against the agent-neutral reasons generated by someone else’s good?
 - One possibility is that when deciding what to do, I simply sum the a-n and a-r reasons provided by my needs and the a-n reasons provided by the needs of others; but this may not reflect the requirement to weigh my preferences differently when they compete with my a-n needs than when they compete with yours: it’s reasonable for me to endure pain and hunger for the sake of climbing Mt. K, but perhaps not for me to let you endure pain and hunger so that I can climb Mt. K.
- Why is acting on agent-relative reasons of autonomy optional?
 - Is it because we can voluntarily abandon the relevant projects for the sake of other people’s good? This thought may help us draw the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative values... The former, but not the latter, can be “given up”

Deontological Reasons

Characteristics of such reasons:

- They are personal demands governing *our relations* with others
- Exemplified by such deontological requirements as not lying or breaking promises or killing or violating people's rights, and not treating others as mere means to the promotion of the greater good (car accident example)
- Cannot be understood in terms of the agent-neutral badness of such acts: they are *particularly* reasons against *your* doing something (e.g., I have strong reasons not to twist the kid's arm in Nagel's example, although doing so may help me get my friends to the hospital but if I were given the option of getting my friends to the hospital or preventing an arm-twisting, it would be completely clear that I ought to help my friends)
- Strange sort of reason: cannot have its source in the value to others of not having their rights violated (for that wouldn't explain why I have a reason not to twist arms that's not just a reason to prevent arms from being twisted); and can't have its source in *my* personal projects, such as a project not to be an arm-twister (that couldn't explain the mandatory nature of the requirement, since a-r reasons stemming from my personal projects are, as we saw, optional)
- Loose thesis: deontological reasons are reasons not to *intentionally do or permit a harm* – not to *aim* at it; they are not reasons not to *do* harm, as *opposed to permitting* it. (Doctrine of Double Effect)

Questions:

- Can our intuitions about these cases perhaps be explained away by the agent-neutral value of having such general rules and practices?
 - Nagel says this cannot quite explain why we find it almost impossible to regard such deontological restrictions as merely useful inhibitions (as the examples in which they are clearly *not* useful show). We take ourselves to have deontological *reasons*, not just deontological instincts or habits
- Is it permissible for me to commit a murder now to prevent *my* committing two murders later?
- Deontological reasons tell us not to pursue valuable ends by evil means (although we might pursue such ends by means which have (unintended) evil side-effects; but they do not tell us to pursue valuable ends by good means (with neutral side-effects) as opposed to neutral means (with good side-effects). The fact that a good effect of my action would be intended, rather than merely a side-effect, does not give me additional reasons to perform that action. Why the asymmetry?
 - Nagel: to aim at evil, even as a means, is to have one's action guided by evil: pursuing a good goal by an (intended) evil means requires you to push directly and essentially against the intrinsic normative force of your goal – to strive headlong against the value that is internal to your aim.

- This may explain the intuitive aversion to such actions; but it may not establish that they should not be performed.
- What differentiates these cases from cases in which we must hurt someone to benefit them – as when, for example, a parent punishes her child for the sake of building character? We don't have as strong intuitions against these actions. Perhaps the punishment bad even in isolation?

General Remarks

Nagel argues that the force of agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons is visible from two different perspectives we can take on the world, the objective “view from nowhere” or the subjective perspective of the agent (or victim), from his own position. The latter perspective allows us to see the particular force of reasons of autonomy, deontology, and special obligation. The former tends to obscure at least the first two kinds of reasons. But which perspective is the right one for the ethical person to take?

Nagel says that a fully agent-neutral morality is “not a plausible human goal” – but that is different from saying it wouldn't be better if it were. *To what extent is the right perspective for us to take dependent on the kind of creatures we are?*

Nagel: “it would be a mistake to try to eliminate perspective from our conception of ethics entirely”... but “It is not always easy to tell ... whether a morality that leaves extensive free space in each individual life for the pursuit of personal interests is not just a disguise for the simplest form of badness: selfishness in the face of the legitimate claims of others.” (p. 187)

One feature of Nagel's way of accommodating our intuitions about the limits on the demands neutral ethics can make of us is that it accommodates those intuitions within a broadly-speaking value-based perspective. Because it takes agent-relativity to be built into the structure of value, it may leave untouched the consequentialist claim that what we ought to do is bring about as much of what is valuable as possible.

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