

One or Two Dogmas of Objectivism

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I

Thomas Nagel needs no plaudits from me. His crisp, forceful, rigorous treatment of matters that are both deep and important has long been a familiar feature of analytic philosophy. This book is sure to add to his well-deserved reputation. It is an engaging onslaught on that highly pernicious abnegation of critical thinking which, under the cover of various unlovely “isms”, is, as Nagel puts it, “epidemic in the weaker regions of our culture” (p. 4). Nagel himself tends to designate his target by some of its less barbarous titles, if not perhaps the ones by which it is most likely to style itself: “relativism”, “scepticism”, “subjectivism”, “irrationalism”. We all know the kind of thing he has in mind. No doubt we must share Nagel’s pessimism about whether such a book will make what he is opposing any the less fashionable. But, like work directed at other forms of philosophical scepticism, it can at least add to our own self-conscious grasp of the basic principles on which we rely in our thinking about the world.

Nagel’s fundamental idea is that it is impossible to question the objectivity of certain ways of thinking without, sooner or later, betraying a commitment to that very objectivity. Thus his opponents, who claim that these ways of thinking are not objective, because of anthropocentrism or because of some hidden cultural bias, say, find that they have no suitable vantage point from which to press their claim.

I find myself very much in sympathy with the spirit of Nagel’s book, very much out of sympathy with the letter of it. Much of this review will take the form of criticism. But I trust that I have already said enough to forestall any misunderstanding. I see this book as a thoroughly welcome recoil from an all too seductive and all too pervasive misology.

II

Suppose we reflect critically on some of our beliefs. Then all sorts of things may happen. We may modify the beliefs. We may achieve insights into our own psychology. It will depend on the nature of the beliefs, the nature of the reflection, the nature of the enquiry, and much else besides. Even if the reflection is of a distinctively philosophical character, there are many different things that may happen. Here is a sample.

First, we may find that we surrender the beliefs, or at least that we cast doubt on them. The methods by which we have arrived at the beliefs may come to seem suspect or unreliable; or we may notice a conflict between these beliefs and other things we think.

Secondly, and conversely, we may find that the beliefs are reinforced, say because the best explanation of why we have them is that they are true, or because there is reason to think that, in having them, we make them true.

Thirdly, we may find that we stop even thinking in those terms. This is importantly different from surrendering the beliefs. Theists, reflecting on their beliefs about God, and in particular on their belief that God exists, may end up deciding that after all God does not exist. If they do, then this will be an example of their surrendering their beliefs about God. But the kind of thing that I am envisaging now would be exemplified by their surrendering something else: their very concept of God. Arguably, this is the kind of thing that is going on in certain anti-realist retreats from classical logic. To be sure, there are anti-realists who think that classical logic is just wrong. But there are also anti-realists who regard classical logic as a perfectly serviceable piece of machinery which, however, for various reasons, we do well to put aside in favour of an equally serviceable alternative (cf. George 1993, pp. 71–2, and Williams 1985, p. 167).

The three things that I have mentioned so far have a bearing on whether or not we retain our beliefs. But critical reflection may also lead us to draw conclusions about our beliefs that have no such bearing. Thus, for example—and this is the fourth thing that may happen—we may draw conclusions about whether or not certain of our beliefs are contingent. In particular, we may change our minds about this. Philosophers have a special knack for highlighting contingency in what seems necessary and necessity in what seems contingent. There is, however, something else that they sometimes try to do, something more subtle and more radical. They try to highlight contingency in what seems necessary *whilst* continuing to acknowledge the necessity. Typically they are motivated by a desire to alleviate the apparent mystery of our having epistemic access to all possibilities. They hope to find some unproblematically accessible fea-

ture of how things actually are that serves to explain why they must be the way they must be. Patently, if this can be done, then it can be done only with great care. A blatant example of how not to do it is provided by a popular reading of Descartes, whereby he attributes the necessity of twice four's being eight to our (humans') being unable to grasp any of the other possibilities. This is clearly self-stultifying. *What other possibilities?*¹

The fifth thing that may happen—the one that is Nagel's chief concern—is that we draw conclusions about whether certain of our beliefs are objective or subjective. By an “objective” belief, Nagel means a belief that is universal and detached, one that is not from any point of view. A “subjective” belief is the opposite. Alternatively, a “subjective” belief is one that contains, however deep down and however well concealed, an “I” or a “we”. It ought to be almost as obvious that recognizing a belief as subjective, in this sense, is no immediate impediment to retaining it as it is that recognizing a belief as contingent is no immediate impediment to retaining it. The subjectivity of a belief does not, in itself, impugn its truth. (There are familiar arguments to the effect that even our belief that grass is green is subjective.) Nevertheless, it is a bold view and, in its own way, a sceptical view that all our beliefs are subjective. And Nagel's target obviously includes anyone who thinks that. At one point he makes the standard but to my mind facile objection to this view: either the claim that all our beliefs are subjective is objective, in which case it is self-refuting, or it is subjective, in which case we have no reason to accept it because it does not rule out any objective claim, including the claim that it is objectively false (pp. 14–5). But the second limb of this dilemma contains a confusion. If the claim is subjective, there can still be reason to accept it, if only subjective reason. It does not need to rule out any objective claim. At least, it does not need to rule out any objective claim if there are no such things. It need only rule out other subjective claims, which it certainly does: it rules out the claim, from the same point of view, that some of our beliefs are objective. As regards what reason there is to accept it, that may be a matter, in part, of our coming to recognize the point of view which it is from as “ours”, something over which we may have no more control, at least while we are thinking about these issues, than we have over our position in time—our temporal point of view. But still, Nagel might say, what about alternative points of view from which some of our beliefs are objective? What can advocates of this view say about these? There are many things they might say. They might say that there *are* no such points of view, since what makes their own claim subjective is the

¹ I am not, however, persuaded that this reading of Descartes is correct. See the excellent Bennett 1994. For Nagel's discussion of Descartes on modality (itself, I think, based on a suspect reading), see Ch. 4, §II.

fact that the very concepts of objectivity and subjectivity are only available to be exercised from that particular point of view.

The sixth thing that may happen is that we turn our attention to the genesis of our beliefs and to the conditions which, either as a matter of necessity or as a matter of contingency, make or have made it possible for us to form and sustain them. At this point philosophy, though it still has its own distinctive contribution to make, is liable to shade off into anthropology, sociology, history or psychology.

Clearly these six things, which by no means constitute an exhaustive list, have all sorts of bearing on one another. Nevertheless, we must be careful not to exaggerate the bearing. There are very few direct routes from any one of them to any other. They raise quite different issues, and the issues must not be conflated.

III

Is my charge that Nagel is guilty of conflating them? Not exactly, though we shall see later that there is cause for concern on this score. I have listed these six things in order to highlight some problematic features of Nagel's fundamental idea.

That idea, to repeat, is that it is impossible to question the objectivity of certain ways of thinking without eventually betraying a commitment to that very objectivity. But what form is this betrayal supposed to take? Is the idea simply that, in addressing the question whether certain ways of thinking are objective, we cannot help assuming that they are? No, not directly. The idea is rather that, in addressing the question whether certain ways of thinking are objective, we cannot help *adopting those very ways of thinking*. Thus if what is at issue is the objectivity of our belief that *p*, the proposition that Nagel says we cannot help assuming is not that our belief that *p* is objective, but simply *that p*.

This idea can also be put in terms of the eponymous metaphor of *the last word*. Nagel nowhere explicitly says what he intends by this metaphor, but it is clear enough. In particular, we can take for granted that when the last word on an issue is that *p*, then two things at least must be true: first, we cannot help but think that *p* if the question arises; and second, the question does arise. (These two things are independent. The second indicates why the last word is always the last word *on an issue*. Something that is the last word on one issue might be totally irrelevant to another.) Nagel's idea is that the last word on whether certain beliefs are objective is given over to those very beliefs.

The fact that Nagel takes this somewhat oblique approach means that he faces two special difficulties. The first difficulty is simply that of showing that any given belief is the last word on the issue of its own objectivity. This is not just a matter of how irresistible the belief is. It is also a matter, as I put it just now, of whether “the question arises”. Given that the belief and the issue are not aligned, it may be non-trivial to show that the question does arise. The second difficulty is that of showing why, in exercising the belief, we are committed to its objectivity.

By drawing attention to some of the things that may happen when we reflect on our beliefs, I hope to have made it easier to assess these two difficulties. It is very important, in evaluating Nagel’s idea, to retain a suitably variegated conception of what reflection can do and of how its effects can depend on what questions, and what range of subsidiary questions, are being addressed.

IV

To begin with the first difficulty, then: how is Nagel able to show that any given belief is the last word on the issue of its own objectivity? In particular, how is he able to show that “the question arises”? Are we not always at liberty, when considering whether or not a given belief of ours is objective, to “bracket” the first-order issue with which the belief itself is concerned? True, if the belief is irresistible, then we cannot go any further than that. We cannot accede, even provisionally, to its negation, nor to any proposition that is manifestly incompatible with it. But we do not need to. We just need to be circumspect about how we proceed. To take a trivial example: if the belief in question is our belief that modus tollens is valid, what is to stop us from carefully ensuring that we come to a view on the matter without exercising any conditional thoughts?

There are many things that Nagel is liable to say in response to this challenge, but one of the first is that a surreptitious and damaging slide has taken place, in the previous section and the present one, from talk about ways of thinking to talk about individual beliefs. He does think that there are individual beliefs that are immune to the challenge, including, as it happens, our belief that modus tollens is valid (p. 56). But he also takes this to be of secondary importance. His fundamental idea has rather to do with whole frameworks of belief: methods of reasoning, modes of argument, and the like. Thus even if it were possible to consider the objectivity of our belief that modus tollens is valid without actually implementing modus tollens, it would not be possible to consider this issue, or indeed any other issue, without using *logic* (p. 69).

But there is a serious problem with this response, concerning the breadth of the notion of a “way of thinking”. This notion has to be (a) broad enough to meet the challenge, but (b) not so broad as to exacerbate the second difficulty that Nagel faces (the difficulty of showing why, in exercising a given way of thinking, we are committed to its objectivity).

Let us consider (b) first. If a “way of thinking” is guaranteed to include whatever we use in addressing a given issue, then it may be utterly vacuous to say that that way of thinking has the last word on that issue. Certainly it may be too vacuous to guarantee the objectivity of anything. For on such a broad conception, two instances of the same way of thinking need not even involve exercise of the same concepts—in which case a way of thinking is not even a candidate for objectivity. The candidates are rather the instances.² The mere fact that we have to operate with some instance in thinking about an issue does nothing to foreclose the prospect that they are all subjective. This is a prospect that is serious enough in the case of logic. Its seriousness is greatly magnified in the case of ethics. Maybe, in Nagel’s words, “moral reasoning is ... fundamental and inescapable” (p. 101). But this manifestly allows for the possibility that what count as objective or as subjective are the particular *forms* that moral reasoning takes, and that these are, without exception, subjective.

Turning next to (a): the problem this time is to make the notion of a “way of thinking” broad enough to meet the original challenge. The danger is that, even given some relatively large battery of conceptual apparatus, we might, with sufficient ingenuity, find ways of addressing an issue without using that apparatus. It was with this in mind that I drew attention to the third thing that may happen when we reflect critically on our beliefs, or on a particular range of our beliefs: we may stop thinking in those terms. Thus suppose that what I said in §II about anti-realism is correct. Then even unregenerate classical logicians could, in principle, use non-classical resources to discuss the objectivity of their favoured logic. And to echo a point that I made in the previous paragraph, if something like this could happen in the case of logical reasoning, then it could certainly happen in the case of moral reasoning.

² Nagel seems to miss this distinction in his discussion of tea-leaf reading on p. 24, where there is more than a hint of the danger that I am talking about. He contrasts tea-leaf reading with reasoning, on the grounds that, whereas a challenge to tea-leaf reading does not itself imply the authority of tea-leaf reading, a challenge to reasoning does imply the authority of reasoning. But this is an unfair comparison. Tea-leaf reading and reasoning belong to different categories. Tea-leaf reading is a *kind* of reasoning, or an *instance* of reasoning, albeit a poor one. Challenges to other (better) instances need not imply their authority either.

V

There is another obvious line for Nagel to take on the first difficulty—the difficulty of showing that a given belief is the last word on the issue of its own objectivity—which is this. In raising the question whether a given belief of ours is objective, we are raising a question about what would make the belief true. In particular, we are asking what our own involvement in this would be. In the case of an objective belief, we would not be involved at all, except in so far as the belief overtly concerns us. But in the case of a subjective belief, whose truth would depend on how things stood at the point of view that the belief was from, we would be involved. For instance, consider our belief that a certain gesture is insulting. The truth of this would depend on a complex web of social practices that we ourselves had spun, a web that served to define the point of view that our belief was from. There might even be a case for saying that having beliefs of that kind was part of spinning the web, so that what we believed was true, in part, because we believed it. But there could never be a case for saying anything like this with respect to an objective belief. Indeed in the case of an irresistible belief of the sort that Nagel is concerned with—a belief that counts as knowledge—the order of explanation must rather be the reverse. In other words, when a belief is both irresistible and objective, the best explanation of our having it must conform, in outline, to the schema: “We believe that *p* because *p*”. That is why the question whether or not *p* arises.³

There are several hints of this line of thought in Nagel (e.g. pp. 56–7). There are also several problems with it.

Among the objective beliefs that Nagel is concerned with are certain necessary beliefs, such as our most rudimentary beliefs in logic and arithmetic (see e.g. Ch. 4 *passim*). But there would be formidable and familiar obstacles to extending this line of thought to them. Take our belief that twice four is eight. It is not immediately clear what might be meant by “the best explanation” of our having this belief. (It is something of a philosophical artefact to talk about our “having this belief” at all.) But whatever the explanatory project might be, only confusion would accrue from thinking that there was any serious contribution to be made by the fact that twice four is eight. As soon as any appeal to this fact was understood as any more than an endorsement of something already implicit in the *expli-candum*, we would be involved in all the epistemological and metaphysical problems of Platonism. Nagel, to be sure, thinks that we *are* involved in these problems. In a striking final chapter he argues that only a natu-

³ Cf. Crispin Wright’s (1992, Ch. 5) superb discussion of these issues.

realistic fear of religion, to which he confesses his own strong susceptibility, keeps us from acknowledging that such problems arise. But we do not need to follow Nagel in this. Again, whatever it is that we are trying to explain, there is no need for us to appeal to anything other than ordinary secular facts about ourselves: our physiology, our techniques of teaching and inculcation, the ways in which we exploit our methods of calculation when describing our environment, and so forth. It was with this in mind that I drew attention to the sixth thing that may happen when we reflect critically on our beliefs: we may turn our attention to their genesis and to the conditions of our being able to form and sustain them. Where an elementary arithmetical belief such as our belief that twice four is eight is concerned, the demand for an explanation for our having the belief cannot be heard as anything other than a demand to indulge in just such reflection and to locate the contingencies that have made it possible for us to arrive at this stage in our intellectual development. But this, despite worries that Nagel voices (e.g. pp. 55 ff.), poses absolutely no threat to the necessity of the belief. We must be careful, as I warned in §II, not to presuppose any simple direct links between the different things that may happen when we reflect on our beliefs—the fourth of these being precisely that we may draw conclusions about whether our beliefs are necessary or contingent. Our belief that twice four is eight is indeed necessary. It is necessary because, in “having this belief”, we are effectively laying down a rule of representation: nothing is to count as a disjoint pair of quartets unless it collectively counts as an octet. But this is not in any conflict with the observation that there are all sorts of identifiable contingencies that make it possible for us to have the rule, nor therefore with the observation that we might not have had the rule. If we had not, twice four would not have failed to be eight. Rather, the question of what twice four is would not so much as have arisen for us. We would not have thought in those terms. Twice four would not have *failed* to be eight, because it *must* be eight. This “must” is as hard as it either can or need be. (Cf. Wittgenstein 1978, Pt. VI, §49 and McDowell 1984, pp. 282ff.)

We have a way of highlighting contingency in necessity, then, that helps us to achieve a naturalistic understanding of our knowledge of the latter. (This is the project I mentioned in connection with the fourth thing that may happen when we reflect on our beliefs.) But Nagel is uncomfortable with this idea, at least where certain fundamental concepts are concerned. He thinks, where these are concerned, that the position I have been defending does flout the necessity I claim to be respecting. At one point he writes, “No ‘language’ in which modus ponens was not a valid inference ... could be used to express thoughts at all” (p. 39). As it stands, this slurs the distinction between a language in which there is no such infer-

ence as modus ponens, because the relevant concepts do not occur, and a language in which there is such an inference but it is not valid. On my view, the second of these is indeed impossible. It is part of our understanding of modus ponens that nothing is to count as such a language. But Nagel thinks the first is impossible too, at least if the language is to be capable of expressing rational thought (cf. p. 38). And with this I disagree. In fact, on the standard way of construing modus ponens, as an inference concerning material implication, I am inclined to think that English is a counterexample. At any rate, it seems to me that we have, in the necessity of the validity of the inference from a conditional plus its antecedent to its consequent, all the necessity we need. And I do not think that I have said anything that stands in violation of it.

Of course, necessity can be divorced from objectivity. It is open to someone broadly sympathetic to Nagel to concede what I have been arguing in the case of necessity but to try to resist it in the case of (genuine) objectivity. But I think a good deal of what I have been arguing still applies. Whatever features of our point of view may have been involved in the formation of one of our beliefs and may still be involved in sustaining it, whatever concerns, interests, sensibilities or social practices may be needed for anyone to have the concepts necessary to share this belief, the belief itself may still be objective. We may be able to say as much as we need to say, in explaining why we have the belief, without putting any explanatory weight on what makes the belief true, if it is. Of course, as Nagel insists, time and again, we shall not thereby have given the *whole story* concerning our belief. In particular, we may not have done enough to indicate whether it *is* true. But that is precisely my point.⁴

To be sure, the *best* explanation of why we have the belief may have to indicate that it is true, on some reasonable interpretation of that still undefined phrase “best explanation”. It may have to conform, in outline, to the schema “We believe that *p* because *p*”. If so, this helps Nagel to address the first difficulty—in particular, it helps him to show that the question whether *p* arises—which is all that was strictly being maintained in the line of thought above. However, unless it marks a *peculiarity* of objective beliefs, it simply gives further weight to the second difficulty, the difficulty of showing that, in exercising the belief, we are committed to its objectivity. For maybe the best explanation of why we have some of our subjective beliefs must also conform, in outline, to the schema “We

⁴ I am not denying—indeed I think it is of the first importance—that we are under a persistent temptation, when discussing either the necessity or the objectivity of our beliefs, to go further than we are licensed to go and to say things that not only fail to entail the beliefs but are in tension with them. This requires diagnosis. It should not hinder us from saying what we are entitled to say. See Moore, 1997, esp. Chs. 6–9.

believe that *p* because *p*". The subjectivity of the beliefs does not preclude this, since the explanation, in any given case, can be from the same point of view as the belief itself. Or at least, it can unless the notion of a best explanation itself precludes this, say by requiring maximum possible objectivity. This presages issues that we shall be addressing in §VI below. Note, however, that if "maximum possible objectivity" just means "maximum possible objectivity attainable by us in this context", then even this does not prevent subjective beliefs from satisfying the condition. It allows for the possibility that there is a point of view which we are forced to adopt simply by engaging in this kind of explanatory project. Imagine, for instance, that the very concept of a belief can only be exercised from a certain point of view, say from a certain interpretative point of view. It is then once again open to us to envisage a subjective belief of ours, such that the best explanation of our having it, understood now as requiring maximum possible objectivity, conforms, in outline, to the schema: "We believe that *p* because *p*".

VI

There seems to be a third (and obvious) way for Nagel to address the first difficulty, namely in tandem with the second. For if he can show that simply exercising a given belief commits us to its objectivity, then will he not have done enough to show that the belief is relevant to the issue of its own objectivity; or more precisely, that, by denying the objectivity of the belief, we are committed to rejecting the belief itself?

Strictly speaking, no: he will have shown only that, by denying the objectivity of the belief, we prevent ourselves from exercising it. It does, however, follow that the belief cannot be both subjective and true unless its truth involves an illusion, an illusion that makes it impossible for us to acknowledge the belief's subjectivity without somehow detaching ourselves from it. This possibility may seem remote enough for solving the second difficulty directly to be tantamount to solving the first.⁵ Certainly Nagel gives the impression, on numerous occasions throughout the book, that he recognizes only a single problematic here. Again and again he claims that there are beliefs which are irresistible, which we cannot exercise without at the same time regarding them as objective, and whose objectivity we therefore cannot deny (e.g. pp. 64–6 and 125).

⁵ Bernard Williams (1985, pp. 199–200) does however suggest that something like this possibility holds in the case of various ethical beliefs.

But I confess that Nagel's repeated direct assaults on the second difficulty leave me unmoved. No matter how often he insists that certain beliefs are a presupposition of coherent thought, or that they dominate anything we might want to say about them, or that we have no choice but to think them "straight" (p. 19), or any of the other countless variations on this theme, I cannot hear his arguments as anything other than arguments for the unassailable *truth* of these beliefs: the question of their objectivity seems to me to remain completely untouched. Admittedly, if the arguments are successful, then they answer not only sceptics who doubt whether these beliefs really are true, but also sceptics who doubt whether these beliefs really are beliefs "about how things are". But again, that has nothing to do with the objectivity of the beliefs. It has to do with whether they are beliefs at all. For any belief is a belief "about how things are". When Nagel says, as he frequently does, that we cannot think of the beliefs as mere dispositions of ours, that too is a variation on the same theme. We cannot think of any belief as a *mere* disposition of ours, if this is meant to foreclose the question of whether the belief is true—whether it answers to reality. But this does not prevent us from thinking that the belief *is* a disposition of ours, nor that the way in which it answers to reality has something specially to do with the ground of the disposition. (My belief that today is Friday is a disposition of mine; the way in which it answers to reality has to do with the time at which I have it.) There is still scope for regarding the belief as subjective. A last resort, to which Nagel occasionally seems to be drawn, is to say that certain beliefs are *self-evidently* objective. But really that is hopeless. The objectivity or subjectivity of a belief is a recondite matter that can be settled only after hard work. Anyone claiming that a belief is self-evidently objective is straightway vulnerable to the standard objections—of parochialism, lack of imagination, historical insensitivity, and the like—beloved of Nagel's opponents.

These considerations combine to show, I suggest, that Nagel's best strategy, and the one that he should on the whole be interpreted as adopting, is not to address the second difficulty directly (thereby trying to address the first at the same time), but to address the second difficulty in the light of an antecedent solution to the first. That is, he must begin by showing that the beliefs he is interested in are relevant to the question of their own objectivity, then show why exercising the beliefs, *in the course of addressing that question*, commits us to their objectivity. This takes us back to ideas adumbrated in the previous section (§V). Nagel will have done this if, in solving the first difficulty, he manages to establish that the question whether or not any given belief is objective can only be properly addressed in objective terms. Solving the second difficulty will then be a simple corollary. In so far as this *is* what Nagel is about (see e.g. p. 16),

then, patently, he is on to something of considerable philosophical importance.

There is, however, an obvious problem of circularity. How do we tell that we are properly addressing one of these questions—that we are thinking about the issue in objective terms? In fact the circularity is even more alarming than this suggests. For if we began by asking whether a particular belief was objective, then what we shall have been driven to ask is whether a particular account of it *that includes that very same belief* is objective. At first blush, this circularity seems to constitute a fundamental theoretical objection to the strategy.

But I do not think it does. The second question arises in a context of enquiry that did not exist at the outset. This leaves open the possibility that there are, in the new context, resources to assess the objectivity of our belief that were not previously available. On the other hand, neither is the circularity just the circularity that is destined to afflict any anti-sceptical argument, the circularity which means that the most hardened sceptic will always remain unsatisfied. Rather it signals a genuine practical problem: we need to be acutely sensitive, and we need to know that we are being acutely sensitive, both to what exactly is at issue, and to what exactly is demanded of us, at any given stage in our enquiry. Quite simply, to determine that a given belief, or a given account of something, or a given way of thinking, does not contain some tacit reference to “me” or to “us” is *never easy*. Even if Nagel is right in most of the conclusions he draws, he too often draws them with a facility which leaves the reader feeling a need for greater reassurance.

That brings me to what is in many ways my most serious complaint about the book. The obvious way to have supplied such reassurance would have been by pitting the strategy against beliefs and ways of thinking to which it ultimately could *not* be applied, thereby removing any sense that Nagel was indulging in a simple mechanical exercise. What the book cries out for is an additional detailed critique of beliefs and ways of thinking which are not objective, for instance in the area of humour or chromatics, and which cannot be seen as providing the last word on the question of their own objectivity. Nagel might protest that he has already done enough to remove any sense that he is indulging in a simple mechanical exercise, by emphasizing that there is no single way of applying his strategy even in cases where it can be applied (see pp. 26–7). But without the contrast that would be created by failed attempts to apply the strategy, we have no real safeguard against a threat that is liable to worry many of Nagel’s opponents: namely, that his arguments can too readily be adapted and marshalled in support of an unacceptable bigotry, defending the objectivity of beliefs that are in fact subjective and whose false dignification as the

last word may even sometimes be a matter, quite literally, of life and death. Nagel's own quasi-religious defence of his position, in the last chapter, adds obvious piquancy to this threat. The fact is, his position is a kind of dogmatism. Like other kinds of dogmatism, and in full spite of the book's title, it leaves us anxious to hear more.⁶

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⁶ I discuss these issues in greater depth in my Moore 1997, the first four chapters of which are devoted to arguing that objective beliefs, or more generally what I call "absolute representations", are possible. But "possible" is the operative word. Unlike Nagel, I am unwilling to commit myself either to their being actual or to their being recognizable.

