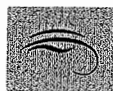


CHAPTER 14

The View from Nowhere

Thomas Nagel



1. SKEPTICISM

The objective self is responsible both for the expansion of our understanding and for doubts about it that cannot be finally laid to rest. The extension of power and the growth of insecurity go hand in hand, once we place ourselves inside the world and try to develop a view that accommodates this recognition fully.

The most familiar scene of conflict is the pursuit of objective knowledge, whose aim is naturally described in terms that, taken literally, are unintelligible: we must get outside of ourselves, and view the world from nowhere within it. Since it is impossible to leave one's own point of view behind entirely without ceasing to exist, the metaphor of getting outside ourselves must have another meaning. We are to rely less and less on certain individual aspects of our point of view, and more and more on something else, less individual, which is also part of us. But if initial appearances are not in themselves reliable guides to reality, why should the products of detached reflection be different? Why aren't they either equally doubtful or else valid only as higher-order impressions? This is an old problem. The same ideas that make the pursuit of objectivity seem necessary for knowledge make both objectivity and knowledge seem, on reflection, unattainable.

Objectivity and skepticism are closely related: both develop from the idea that there is a real world in which we are contained, and that appearances result from our interaction with the rest of it. We cannot accept those appearances uncritically, but must try to understand what our own consti-

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tution contributes to them. To do this we try to develop an idea of the world with ourselves in it, an account of both ourselves and the world that includes an explanation of why it initially appears to us as it does. But this idea, since it is we who develop it, is likewise the product of interaction between us and the world, though the interaction is more complicated and more self-conscious than the original one. If the initial appearances cannot be relied upon because they depend on our constitution in ways that we do not fully understand, this more complex idea should be open to the same doubts, for whatever we use to understand certain interactions between ourselves and the world is not itself the object of that understanding. However often we may try to step outside of ourselves, something will have to stay behind the lens, something in us will determine the resulting picture, and this will give grounds for doubt that we are really getting any closer to reality.

The idea of objectivity thus seems to undermine itself. The aim is to form a conception of reality which includes ourselves and our view of things among its objects, but it seems that whatever forms the conception will not be included by it. It seems to follow that the most objective view we can achieve will have to rest on an unexamined subjective base, and that since we can never abandon our own point of view, but can only alter it, the idea that we are coming closer to the reality outside it with each successive step has no foundation.

All theories of knowledge are responses to this problem. They may be divided into three types: *skeptical*, *reductive*, and *heroic*.

Skeptical theories take the contents of our ordinary or scientific beliefs about the world to go beyond their grounds in ways that make it impossible to defend them against doubt. There are ways we might be wrong that we can't rule out. Once we notice this unclosable gap we cannot, except with conscious irrationality, maintain our confidence in those beliefs.

Reductive theories grow out of skeptical arguments. Assuming that we do know certain things, and acknowledging that we could not know them if the gap between content and grounds were as great as the skeptic thinks it is, the reductionist reinterprets the content of our beliefs about the world so that they claim less. He may interpret them as claims about possible experience or the possible ultimate convergence of experience among rational beings, or as efforts to reduce tension and surprise or to increase order in the system of mental states of the knower, or he may even take some of them, in a Kantian vein, to describe the limits of all possible experience: an inside view of the bars of our mental cage. In any case on a reductive view our beliefs are not about the world as it is in itself—if indeed that means anything. They are about the world as it appears to us. Naturally not all reductive theories succeed in escaping skepticism, for it is difficult to construct a reductive analysis of claims about the world which has any plausibility at all, without leaving gaps between grounds and content—even if both are within the realm of experience.

Heroic theories acknowledge the great gap between the grounds of our

beliefs about the world and the contents of those beliefs under a realist interpretation, and they try to leap across the gap without narrowing it. The chasm below is littered with epistemological corpses. Examples of heroic theories are Plato's theory of Forms together with the theory of recollection, and Descartes' defense of the general reliability of human knowledge through an a priori proof of the existence of a nondeceiving God.¹

I believe, first of all, that the truth must lie with one or both of the two realist positions—skepticism and heroism. My terminology reflects a realistic tendency: from the standpoint of a reductionist, heroic epistemology would be better described as quixotic. But I believe that skeptical problems arise not from a misunderstanding of the meaning of standard knowledge claims, but from their actual content and the attempt to transcend ourselves that is involved in the formation of beliefs about the world. The ambitions of knowledge and some of its achievements are heroic, but a pervasive skepticism or at least provisionality of commitment is suitable in light of our evident limitations.

Though a great deal of effort has been expended on them recently, definitions of knowledge cannot help us here. The central problem of epistemology is the first-person problem of what to believe and how to justify one's beliefs—not the impersonal problem of whether, given my beliefs together with some assumptions about their relation to what is actually the case, I can be said to have knowledge. Answering the question of what knowledge is will not help me decide what to believe. We must decide what our relation to the world actually is and how it can be changed.

Since we can't literally escape ourselves, any improvement in our beliefs has to result from some kind of self-transformation. And the thing we can do which comes closest to getting outside of ourselves is to form a detached idea of the world that includes us, and includes our possession of that conception as part of what it enables us to understand about ourselves. We are then outside ourselves in the sense that we appear inside a conception of the world that we ourselves possess, but that is not tied to our particular point of view. The pursuit of this goal is the essential task of the objective self. I shall argue that it makes sense only in terms of an epistemology that is significantly rationalist.

The question is how limited beings like ourselves can alter their conception of the world so that it is no longer just the view from where they are but in a sense a view from nowhere, which includes and comprehends the fact that the world contains beings which possess it, explains why the world appears to them as it does prior to the formation of that conception, and explains how they can arrive at the conception itself. This idea of objective knowledge has something in common with the program of Descartes, for he attempted to form a conception of the world in which he was contained, which would account for the validity of that conception and for his capacity to arrive at it. But his method was supposed to depend only on propositions and steps that were absolutely certain, and the method of self-transcendence as I have described it does not necessarily have this feature. In fact, such a

conception of the world need not be developed by proofs at all, though it must rely heavily on a priori conjecture.²

In discussing the nature of the process and its pitfalls, I want both to defend the possibility of objective ascent and to understand its limits. We should keep in mind how incredible it is that such a thing is possible at all. We are encouraged these days to think of ourselves as contingent organisms arbitrarily thrown up by evolution. There is no reason in advance to expect a finite creature like that to be able to do more than accumulate information at the perceptual and conceptual level it occupies by nature. But apparently that is not how things are. Not only can we form the pure idea of a world that contains us and of which our impressions are a part, but we can give this idea a content which takes us very far from our original impressions.

The pure idea of realism—the idea that there is a world in which we are contained—implies nothing specific about the relation between the appearances and reality, except that we and our inner lives are part of reality. The recognition that this is so creates pressure on the imagination to recast our picture of the world so that it is no longer the view from here. The two possible forms this can take, skepticism and objective knowledge, are products of one capacity: the capacity to fill out the pure idea of realism with more or less definite conceptions of the world in which we are placed. The two are intimately bound together. The search for objective knowledge, because of its commitment to a realistic picture, is inescapably subject to skepticism and cannot refute it but must proceed under its shadow. Skepticism, in turn, is a problem only because of the realist claims of objectivity.

Skeptical possibilities are those according to which the world is completely different from how it appears to us, and there is no way to detect this. The most familiar from the literature are those in which error is the product of deliberate deception by an evil demon working on the mind, or by a scientist stimulating our brain in vitro to produce hallucinations. Another is the possibility that we are dreaming. In the latter two examples the world is not totally different from what we think, for it contains brains and perhaps persons who sleep, dream, and hallucinate. But this is not essential: we can conceive of the possibility that the world is different from how we believe it to be in ways that we cannot imagine, that our thoughts and impressions are produced in ways that we cannot conceive, and that there is no way of moving from where we are to beliefs about the world that are substantially correct. This is the most abstract form of skeptical possibility, and it remains an option on a realist view no matter what other hypotheses we may construct and embrace.

2. ANTISKEPTICISM

Not everyone would concede either this skepticism or the realism on which it depends. Recently there has been a revival of arguments against the possibility of skepticism, reminiscent of the ordinary language arguments of the fifties which claimed that the meanings of statements about the world are re-