A View from Anywhere: Prospects for an Objective Understanding of Consciousness

Ronald L. Chrisley
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One very compelling idea of objectivity is captured in the title of Thomas Nagel's book *The View from Nowhere*. According to this idea, since subjectivity is being bound to a single perspective, objectivity must be an escape from all perspectives, a detached view, a view of a centreless world. An obvious question then presents itself: can there be an objective understanding of subjectivity itself? In particular, can there be an objective understanding of conscious experience? Or does the essentially perspectival, subjective nature of experience prevent its full inclusion in a truly objective, non-perspectival world view?

1 Physical vs. Mental Objectivity

Nagel's answer is: it depends. It depends on what kind of objective understanding is in question. He distinguishes Physical Objectivity from Mental Objectivity. The former is a reductionistic enterprise which seeks to explain everything, and thus experience, in terms of objective – specifically, physical – facts. Yet this conflicts with the nature of experience, since

> ...every subjective phenomenon is connected with a single point of view, and it seems inevitable that an objective, physical theory will abandon that point of view [Nagel, 1980, p 160].

Nagel states the conflict again when he writes:

> For if the facts of experience – facts about what it is like *for* the experiencing organism – are accessible from only one point of view, then it is a mystery how the true character of experiences could be revealed in the physical operation of that organism. The latter is a domain of objective facts *par excellence* – the kind that can be observed and understood from many points of view ... [Nagel, 1980, p 162].

For this kind of objectivity, then, the answer to our question is "no" – a Physically Objective understanding of consciousness is impossible.

However, Mental Objectivity (or "objective phenomenology", as he calls it in his well-known paper "What is it like to be a Bat?" [Nagel, 1980]) is intended to fare better. It is not a reductionistic enterprise, but it is objective nonetheless in that it is

> ... not dependent on empathy or the imagination. Though presumably it would not capture everything, its goal would be to describe, at least in part, the subjective character of experiences in a form comprehensible to beings incapable of having those experiences [Nagel, 1980, p 166].
>
> The aim of such understanding, the deeper aim it shares with the reductionist views I reject, is to go beyond the distinction between appearance and reality by including the existence of appearances in an elaborated reality. Nothing will then be left outside. But this expanded reality, like physical reality, is centerless. Though the subjective features of our own minds are at the center of *our* world, we must try to conceive of them as just one manifestation of the mental

> in a world that is not given especially to the human point of view [Nagel, 1986, p18].

Nagel sees this objective phenomenology as the only way forward in an attempt to achieve an objective understanding of consciousness, but it appears to me that it falls afoul of the very arguments Nagel makes against Physical Objectivity. That is, there is a direct conflict between the essentially perspectival nature of experience and the "centerlessness", which Nagel takes to be essential to Mental Objectivity as much as Physical Objectivity.

Nagel admits as much in the sentence that follows the passage just quoted:

> This is, I recognize, a paradoxical enterprise, but the attempt seems to me worth making [Nagel, 1986, p18].

On its own, this might seem puzzling. But in the introduction to *The View From Nowhere*, Nagel acknowledges the existence of "the conflicts between the [objective and subjective] standpoints and the discomfort caused by obstacles to their integration" and says of them:

> Certain forms of perplexity – for example, about freedom, knowledge, and the meaning of life – seem to me to embody more insight than any of the supposed solutions to these problems [Nagel, 1986, p 4].

And a few pages later:

> I shall also point out ways in which the two [objective and subjective] standpoints cannot be satisfactorily integrated, and in these cases I believe the correct course is not to assign victory to either standpoint, but to hold the opposition clearly in one's mind without suppressing either element [Nagel, 1986, p 6].

But if this is all that Nagel has in mind for his objective phenomenology, one wonders in what way it is an advance on reductionist, Physical Objectivity. Indeed, doesn't the latter paint the opposition of subjective and objective, of perspectival and centerless, in starker colours of greater contrast?

I would like to defend the possibility of an objective understanding of consciousness, in all its subjective glory. The problems that Nagel encounters stem, I believe, from his "view from nowhere" conception of objectivity. I will argue that this conception of objectivity is problematic, and will therefore employ a different notion of objectivity, one which is not precluded by Nagel's arguments from applying to an account of experience, yet which nevertheless merits being called a notion of objectivity.

2 Objectivity as coordination

The problem with the "view from nowhere" conception of objectivity, be it Physical or Mental, is that it takes objectivity to be a particular kind of view. Once this is done, the conflict Nagel documents is unavoidable. How can one take an objective perspective, which contains no privileged points of view, on experience, without eradicating the subjectivity at its heart?

Note that even the phrase "the view from nowhere" has an air of the paradoxical; indeed, that is its attraction. All views, even the Physical, are from *somewhere*.

This raises an important constraint on any notion of objectivity relevant to the question I am considering: "Can there be an objective understanding of consciousness?" The constraint is this: we can require no more of objectivity than what we require of physical theories concerning physical facts. That is, the question is really asking "Can there be an understanding of consciousness which is as objective as physics is about the physical world?" If, as seems likely, physics has some limitation to its objectivity, then it cannot be an argument against the objectivity of an account of consciousness that it has the same limitation. My account of consciousness as subjective as my account of physical phenomena? I should be so lucky.

So I am proposing that objectivity is not the view from nowhere. On the other hand, objectivity does involve views on the world. So perhaps objectivity is not itself a particular view, but a virtuous way of negotiating perspectival, subjective views. Brian Cantwell Smith has referred to this notion of objectivity as "a view from somewhere" or "a view from anywhere".

> ...one of the most important facts about the inherently participatory picture of registration being painted here is that the form of objectivity available to it cannot be achieved by mistakenly trying more and more to completely disconnect from the world, in a vain attempt to achieve the infamous view from nowhere. On the contrary, the ability to register – *the ability to make the world present, and to be present in the world*, which is after all what this is a theory of – requires that one inhabit one's particular place in the deictic flux, and participate appropriately in the enmeshing web of practices, so as to sustain the kinds of coordination that make the world come into focus with at least a degree of stability and clarity [Smith, 1996, pp 305-306].

Thus, Smith is forced into this view of objectivity as perspective coordination by his constructivist, participatory metaphysics. But even if one is not forced into such a notion of objectivity by one's metaphysics, there is much to commend it, not least the fact that it can allow for an objective understanding of subjectivity.

Smith's idea is that the fundamental nature of objectivity is the creation, stabilization, and maintenance of objects in the face of the underlying non-objectual nature of reality. And such an active role in objectivity requires one to have exquisitely perspectival views on and actions in the world, and to juggle these in a way which preserves one's intentional connection with the object. Thus objectivity not only tolerates, but downright demands, subjectivity.

Smith illustrates this point with an analogy: (*Show figure*)

> Imagine an acrobat leaping and jumping about on a somewhat darkened stage, putting their body through all kinds of fantastic gyrations, and yet throughout this crazed dance keeping a flashlight pointing absolutely reliably towards some fixed point – a point about four feet off the ground, say, towards the left front center of the stage. What the acrobat would need to do, through a complex series of hand and arm motions – handing the light back and forth from hand to hand, reaching it around behind themself, and so forth as appropriate – would be to do the opposite with one part of their body (arm and hand, plus flashlight) of what the rest of their body was doing (leaping and dancing), in such a way that the two, when added up together, nullified each other, leaving the focal point of illumination unchanged [Smith, 1996, p 237].

At this point in the analogy, we have already have enough, perhaps, to provide an alternative to the view from nowhere, and to overcome Nagel's problems with objective accounts of subjectivity, since acknowledging the perspectival stances of the acrobat are not inconsistent with also acknowledging that the acrobat is maintaining a perspective-independent link with a particular location. But Smith goes on to show how the objectivity is not just consistent with the juggling of perspectives, but requires it:

> Except of course the word 'opposite' is not right. If the acrobat were to leap up four feet, it would not be necessary for them to do the exact opposite – i.e., to drop their arm down four feet, if that were even possible – in order to hold constant the full six-coordinate position and orientation of the flashlight. In fact not a single one of the flashlight's six coordinates needs to remain fixed. It is not the *flashlight* that needs to be stabilized, after all. To freeze the position of the flashlight outright might seem to be overkill, and would anyway be impossible, for example if the acrobat were to rush to the other side of the stage. Ironically, moreover, there is a sense in which keeping the light itself locked into position, as if it were epoxied to a particular point in space, would be underkill, *since there would then be no way to be sure where it was pointing.* For a fixed moving flashlight, that is, no single point along its path of illumination is uniquely singled out; all you have is a long gradually dissipating path of light. Fortunately for the acrobat ... there is a better way: it is only necessary to rotate the wrist in just the appropriate manner. The normative requirement is that there be a fixed point at the "end" of (i.e., at some point along) the line along which the flashlight is pointing – a point that remains stably located in exocentric 3-space. So the dance does not merely compensate for the acrobats movements; as a method for stabilizing the object, it is superior. ... All told, the focal point is much more stably and redundantly identifiable through the acrobat's motion than it would have been had the acrobat stayed put [Smith, 1996, p 237-239].

It is the notion of maintaining an invariant in the face of changing conditions that allows us to make sense not only of what it is for a subject to think of something objectively, but also of what it is for something to be an objective particular: to be, or at the very least to be able to be, so singled out by an acrobatic dance of coordinated intentionality.

Despite its rejection of the "view from nowhere" notion of objectivity, Smith's "a view from anywhere" notion conforms with another conception of objectivity found in Nagel's writings:

> A view or form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of the individual's makeup and position in the world, or on the character of the particular type of creature he is [Nagel, 1986, p 5].

If one reads this passage with an emphasis on the relations between individuals, then it yields the view from nowhere notion of objectivity: facts are objective facts inasmuch as they can be known by other, different individuals. However, if one reads it emphasizing intra-individual relations, Smith's notion is the result: an individual's interactions with a subject matter are objective inasmuch as they don't rely on the particular, perspectival views the individual in fact took; if the details of the interaction had been different, the individual would have compensated accordingly, employing alternative, yet just as perspectival, views of the subject matter. So the independence required is not (thank heavens) of one's own constitution, but of one's particular subjective engagement at any one time.

This conception of objectivity has its clearest application, perhaps, in the case of spatial thought [1]. One way that one might might have an objective conception of a territory is through the possession of a map, and possession of the capacity to interpret and use the map. One who espouses the "view from nowhere" notion of objectivity could stop here, since presumably a map is a paradigmatic instance

[1] See [Cussins, 1990] for a similar attempt to illustrate the differences between Nagel's and Smith's conceptions of objectivity

of such a view (with all the attendant difficulties of that view: a bird's eye view is not a view from nowhere, it is hard to imagine a map with *no* point of view, etc.). But the conception of objectivity I am recommending has it that the objectivity of the map user lies not in the map, but in the abilities that the map affords: an ability to know the egocentric direction and distance of arbitrary landmarks in the territory from one's current position. This objectivity is a view from anywhere: no matter where I move in the territory, I have the appropriate intentional relations to any other location [2]. And the important point is that I can have this ability without a map, in any conventional sense of the word, any sense in which possessing a maps is more than just having the right kind of perspective-juggling capabilities. That is, objectivity consists in being able to adopt the right perspective-bound view at the right time, not in having a single, perspectiveless view – an incoherence which, fortunately, is not necessary.

On this account then, objectivity is a kind of ability, and capacity to negotiate points of view. But this does not mean that this account is a behaviouristic one. The abilities underlying objectivity are not *mere* abilities; rather, they are abilities which are constitutive of having certain kinds of concepts, and thus thoughts, about experience. In his critical notice of *The View From Nowhere* Peacocke writes:

> The concepts *pain* and *experience of red* ... can be possessed only by those who stand in certain relations to their instances. The physicalist must hold that this relation is physically specifiable; but that is no bar to his acknowledging this distinctive type of concept. A physicalist who takes this line does not need to say that knowing what it is like is a mere ability, or does not require propositional knowledge. Just the opposite: he will agree that there is propositional knowl-

[2] Compare Peacocke's "Pure Realigner" [Peacocke, 1983].

> edge available only to those capable of adopting a certain standpoint, while denying this has any impact at the level of reference, the level of objects, events and properties [Peacocke, 1989, p 71]

One further question, though, is this: is the reason why the knowledge is unavailable in some perspectives to be explained in terms of a more general inability in those perspectives to entertain the propositional content in question? If so, and if we agree (as seems plausible) that one's conceptual repertoire is not altered by the perspectives one adopts, then it seems that we might have a violation of Evans' Generality Constraint on conceptual thought. This constraint requires that if a subject can think the conceptual thoughts F(a) and G(b), then that subject must be capable of having the conceptual thoughts G(a) and F(b). Yet in the case of experience we have, it seems, a situation in which a subject might be capable of thinking "Fido is large", and "Gertrude is in pain", yet not be able to think "Fido is in pain", because of an inability to take the appropriate perspective on Fido. Rather than see this as a reductio ad absurdum of the perspective-dependent nature of our thoughts about consciousness, or indeed of the possibility of thought about experience at all, I prefer to see this as evidence for the non-conceptual nature of the bulk of our thoughts about experience: they are thoughts which are not composed of Evansian concepts, and therefore are ones to which the Generality Constraint does not apply. There is, then, no requirement that we be able to redeploy our content abilities in all semantically relevant contexts; there is no requirement on experiential thought which we cannot fulfil.

3 A view of experience from anywhere

So much for stage-setting. It's high time to apply this notion of objectivity to consciousness. The idea is that we can have an objective understanding of consciousness through the skilled adoption of the appropriate subjective viewpoint on the experience of the person in question, just as the acrobat keeps their perspectivally-oriented torch focused on the same location. Of course. And like the case of navigating a territory, we have an objective understanding of consciousness just in case we are able to adjust our dispositions toward the experience in an appropriate way, as the context changes. But there are disanalogies as well. In both the acrobat and the navigational cases, the change that was being compensated for that of the understander, whereas it is equally important to compensate for changes in the subject matter. Also, the changes in both illustrations were entirely spatial, whereas that is unlikely to be the flux against which objectivity arises for the case of experience – it will rather be changes in the physiology, psychology, and experience of the subject we are attempting to understand, as well as in ourselves.

Of course, I don't have an objective understanding of experience, so I don't know how the story will go. But the point is that Nagel has not given any a priori reasons for thinking that this kind of objective understanding of experience is impossible. Objectivity as a view from somewhere doesn't encounter the problems the view from nowhere encounters when tries to apply it to the case of consciousness.

Recall that the defining strength of the view from nowhere is that it does not contain any privileged, subjective points of view. But this is also its limitation, since it *cannot* contain any such points of view, even if the task – understanding experience objectively – demands it. However, as we saw, Smith's notion of objectivity not only allows but exploits the perspectival in order to bring forth the objective as objective. At no point is the understander required to adopt anything other than a perspectival, subjective point of view. So there need be no conflict between the perspective of the understander and the perspective of who is being understood.

But there is a concomitant limitation to this form of objectivity. The whole upshot of Nagel's famous discussion of the impossibility for us to know what it's like to be a bat, was this:

> [The] ascription of experience is possible only for someone sufficiently similar to the object of ascription to be able to adopt his point of view – to understand the ascription in the first person as well as in the third, so to speak [Nagel, 1980, p ??]

That is, to have a view from anywhere on the experience of some organism, it won't be enough to just have some perspectival view or other. One will, if Nagel is right, have to have the very same perspective as the organism being understood. This is only possible if understander and understood are sufficiently similar – although Nagel emphasizes the sensory system, it seems that there will have to be much else that is similar besides. And many would-be understanders, it can be assumed, will not be similar enough.

The consequence is that we must shed one of our intuitions about objectivity: an objective view of experience, while independent of any particular perspective I happen to be taking, is not independent of my capacities and constitution as a whole. Thus, there are objective views which are not available to all subjects. This is not as problematic as it may at first seem. Why should an objective understanding be available to others? Why should we expect that what allows me to compensate for my own particularities in order to make available an objective reality should also do the same for you, given our differential situatedness and embodiment? If I'm standing, facing north, tracking an airplane landing from east to west across the sky, the movements I have to make with my arm to track the plane with my index finger have little in common with the adjustments you, facing west and lying on your side, have to make in order to track the plane's descent with your – or worse, your tentacle, or sonar, or whatever. If objectivity is a way of factoring out the subjectivity of both oneself and one's subject matter in order to yield an objective invariant, it should not count against a conception of objectivity that it imply that not every subject can achieve this for the same subject matters. Nagel himself seems to admit as much when he says that objective facts are "the kind that can be observed and understood from many points of view ... [Nagel, 1980, p 162]". That's "many", not "every", and as such, it allows for an objective understanding of experiential facts, once we see that objectivity is, or can be, a view from anywhere.

Even if we grant that not everyone will be able to understand objectively a given experiential state, due to them not being sufficiently similar to the subject enjoying that state, why should we think that those who *can* understand that state must be unable to do so objectively? Consider the difference between two subjects: one who can be in a particular experiential state, and one who can be in that same state, but also possesses the ability to go into that state in all and only theoretically appropriate contexts for the understanding of the experience of some organism. Why is this difference not a difference in objectivity?

The constraint, stated earlier, on conceptions of objectivity, can be invoked here. I stipulated that a conception of objectivity should not be so stringent as to rule out physics as an objective account of the physical world, since I would be happy with any account of consciousness that is at least as objective with respect to its subject matter as physics is to its. But any opposition to an objective understanding of experience of the kind I am proposing that is based on the unavailability of such understanding to all subjects violates the aforementioned constraint. That is, it is demanding more of an objective account of experience than is demanded of physics. Is it really the case that our physical conception of the world can be had by *any* subject? Of course, those of an anti-realist bent could make such a capacity a requirement for us making sense of someone as a subject, and therefore a requirement for them being a subject. But Nagel's strong realism prevents him from making this move; he attacks the "significant strain of idealism in contemporary philosophy according to which what there is and how things are cannot go beyond what we could in principle think about [Nagel, 1986, p 9]". Although this realism worked against the view from nowhere account of subjectivity, because it prevented Nagel from dismissing that which we cannot understand as non-existent, it supports the claim that the view from anywhere understanding of experience is an objective understanding. Strong realism prevents us from moving from the impossibility (if there is such) of our conceiving of subjects who cannot access our physical understanding of the world to the actual impossibility of such. Thus, it destroys the view of objectivity as a view which is accessible by everyone. The view from anywhere conception of objectivity, on the other hand, explains this limitation.

There is another way to defend the kind of objective understanding of consciousness that I am favouring. The foregoing attack on the objectivity of "a view from somewhere" understandings of consciousness assumed that the task was to have an objective understanding of a particular experiential state of a particular individual. That individual's particularity, combined with the particularity of the understander, yielded the possibility of failure to have an objective understanding, since the understander may be unable to adopt the necessary subjective perspectives. But there is another sense in which an objective understanding of consciousness may be available to all conscious subjects. Although not every subject will be able to have an objective understanding of all instances of experience, there is no reason to believe that there will be any subject who cannot have an objective understanding of at least some instances of conscious experience. At a minimum, there is no barrier, on the account I am offering, to a subject having an objective understanding of its own experiential states. Or, if that does not allow for the kind of variation of viewpoints required for objectivity: the experiential states of organisms like itself. The problem of consciousness is not that we don't have an objective understanding of this or that token instance of experience, but that we don't know how we could have an objective understanding at all. The person who requires an objective understanding of all particular cases of experience in order to solve the riddle of consciousness reminds me of the scientist who, upon hearing that philosophers had been struggling for millennia with the question "if a tree falls in a forest and there is no one around to hear, does it make a sound", went away with a look of concentration and determination on her face, only to come back a few days later saying "I've solved it for elm and birch, but I'm still working on the general case." The kind of solution to the problem of consciousness we want isn't one that would still be missing if we were able to have an objective understanding of a few cases of conscious experience. Once we have one case (or a few cases) of an objective understanding of experience, the in principle objections, puzzles, doubts and worries are gone – all that is left is the steady acquisition of further instances of objective understanding where it can be had, and an acknowledgement of our limitations where it cannot.

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