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Reality Unveiled: Exploring Structure Through Nagel's "View From Nowhere"

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Abstract

This thesis investigates whether Thomas Nagel's ideal of a "view from nowhere" can provide an objective account of reality's structure, or whether the subjective standpoint imposes limits that cannot be overcome. The analysis proceeds through philosophy of mind, epistemology, philosophy of language, and metaphysics. It shows that consciousness introduces a structural gap between first-person and third-person access, which no physical or functional description can overcome. Nagel's model of objectivity as a gradual movement away from one's own perspective explains scientific progress, but also reveals conceptual and linguistic limits that prevent a fully perspective-free standpoint. Concerning metaphysics, the thesis argues that structure is mind-independent yet only accessible through conceptual frameworks that shape how it appears. Alternative models, such as a "view from everywhere," expand perspective but do not eliminate standpoint, which turns out to be the crucial point. The thesis concludes that objectivity remains an important ideal, but a complete perspective-free view of reality is unattainable.

Abstract

(deutsche Version)

Diese Arbeit untersucht, ob Thomas Nagels Ideal eines „Blicks von Nirgendwo“ eine objektive Darstellung der Struktur der Wirklichkeit ermöglichen kann oder ob der subjektive Standpunkt unüberwindbare Grenzen setzt. Die Analyse führt durch Philosophie des Geistes, Erkenntnistheorie, Sprachphilosophie und Metaphysik. Sie zeigt, dass Bewusstsein eine grundlegende Differenz zwischen Erst- und Drittpersonperspektive erzeugt, die durch keine physikalische oder funktionale Beschreibung vollständig überbrückt werden kann. Nagels Verständnis von Objektivität als schrittweise Ablösung vom eigenen Blickwinkel macht wissenschaftlichen Fortschritt verständlich, legt jedoch zugleich begriffliche und sprachliche Grenzen offen, die eine vollständig perspektivenfreie Sicht verhindern.

Im metaphysischen Teil wird argumentiert, dass die Struktur der Welt zwar geistunabhängig besteht, jedoch nur durch begriffliche Rahmen zugänglich wird, die ihre Erscheinungsweise mitbestimmen. Alternative Modelle, etwa ein „Blick von überall“, erweitern den Blickwinkel, heben den Standpunkt jedoch nicht auf, was sich als entscheidender Punkt erweist. Die Arbeit kommt zu dem Schluss, dass Objektivität ein wichtiges Ideal bleibt, eine vollkommen perspektivenfreie Sicht auf die Realität jedoch unerreichbar ist.

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Introduction

As human beings, we strive to understand the world in a way that goes beyond our initial perspective. By this I mean that we observe, reflect, compare, and theorize in the hope of arriving at a picture of reality that is not merely tied to our own standpoint. Yet at the same time, every attempt to understand the world necessarily begins from within a particular point of view. Our experiences are shaped by our senses, our concepts, our language, and our position in the world. A simple example illustrates this tension: when two people look at the same object from different angles, they each see something slightly different, and only by combining their perspectives can they form a fuller sense of what the object is like. In a similar way, our broader attempts to understand the world oscillate between transcending our own perspective and being constrained by it. This basic tension lies at the center of many philosophical debates and forms the starting point of this thesis.

Thomas Nagel captures this tension in a striking way when he writes: “We are in a sense trying to climb outside of our minds, an effort that some would regard as insane and that I regard as philosophically fundamental.”¹

The question of whether we can ever escape our own standpoint is therefore not merely a theoretical puzzle but a challenge to the entire project of metaphysics. This leads directly to my guiding question of the present thesis:

Can Nagel’s “view from nowhere” offer a genuinely objective grasp of reality’s structure, or does subjectivity set unavoidable limits to our understanding?

This challenge becomes especially clear when we consider the realist ambition in metaphysics. Very roughly, metaphysical realism is the view that there are facts, properties, and relations that exist independently of us, and that philosophy can describe them. This links back to the issue of standpoints, so that realism assumes that we can, at least to some extent, move beyond our own particular perspective.

Metaphysical inquiry therefore often aims to identify what exists, how these entities relate to one another, and what general principles are in charge of their arrangement. But if our

¹ Nagel, Thomas, *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford University Press. 1986, p.11

access to the world is always shaped by our own conceptual and perceptual standpoint, it becomes unclear how such a perspective-independent description could be achieved. Kit Fine formulates this worry sharply when he asks whether philosophy should “abandon its pretension of presenting us with a higher-order view of how the world really is.”² His question highlights a tension between two ideas: on the one hand, the realist hope to describe reality as it is in itself, and on the other, the thought that any such description may be limited or even distorted by the standpoint from which it is formulated. What may ultimately be illusory is not the desire for a perspective-free view, but the assumption that such an account is attainable.

The idea that reality has a structure is widespread in philosophy. Even if there is no agreement about what this structure consists of, many metaphysical debates start from the thought that the world is not a random collection of facts but has some kind of order or organization. In a very general sense, “structure” can be understood as the arrangement of and relations between the elements of something complex. Applied to metaphysics, this suggests that reality has a basic organization that is not dependent on how we describe or experience it. However, this assumption immediately raises further questions. How can we access such a structure? Do we discover it, or do we impose it through our conceptual schemes? And what role does our subjective standpoint play in shaping what we take to be fundamental? These questions motivate this present thesis.

Nagel’s work provides a particularly helpful framework for approaching these issues. Across several influential texts, hereby most notably *The View from Nowhere* (1986), “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” (1974), and “Physicalism” (1965), he asks how far we can move from our own point of view and what limits we encounter when we try to do so. His basic idea is that we can increase objectivity by gradually leaving out features that depend on our particular perspective, but that this process has limits.³ This becomes especially clear in the case of consciousness. A conscious experience has a first-person character: there is something it is like for the subject to undergo it, and this aspect cannot be captured from an

² Fine, Kit, “The Question of Realism”. In: Bottani, A., Carrara, M., Giaretta, P. (eds) *Individuals, Essence and Identity*. Topoi Library, vol 4. Springer, Dordrecht. 2002, p. 12

³ Cf. Nagel 1986, p. 3 ff

entirely external or third-person standpoint therefore challenges the idea that we can ever achieve a completely detached, perspective-free view of the world.⁴

This challenge has consequences for several areas of philosophy. In the philosophy of mind, it raises questions about the limits of physicalist explanations and the mind-body problem, especially when it comes to accounting for the first-person character of experience. Nagel's work is central here, but recent introductions such as Montero's *Philosophy of Mind* also highlight how difficult it is to explain subjective experience in purely physical terms. In epistemology, the issue connects to debates about the privacy of mental states and the problem of understanding another being's perspective. This theme appears in Wittgenstein's later work and is taken up in contemporary discussions such as Giampieri-Deutsch's analysis of the *Fremdpsychisches* problem. In the philosophy of science, it raises the question of how far scientific theories depend on the conceptual frameworks we use as humans, and how those frameworks shape the way we describe the world. Taken together, these debates show that our aim for objectivity is always influenced by the fact that our thinking starts from a particular standpoint. In what follows, I focus mainly on the issues that arise in the philosophy of mind and in metaphysics, since they most directly concern the relation between subjective perspective and claims to objectivity.

Nagel's work is especially relevant here because he does not simply deny the possibility of objectivity. Instead, he tries to show how far we can move away from our own point of view without losing sight of what we are trying to understand. His idea is that objectivity is something we can achieve step by step, by leaving out features that depend on our particular standpoint, by comparing different perspectives, and by aiming for more general descriptions of the world. But this process has limits. In the case of consciousness, Nagel argues that abstraction does not bring us closer to the phenomenon but actually takes us farther away from it.⁵ The more we try to describe an experience from the outside, the more we lose the very thing we want to understand. This is why no amount of imagining "what it is like" can replace being the subject who has the experience. For Nagel, this shows that the idea of a completely perspective-free "view from nowhere" is not coherent, at least when

⁴ Cf. Nagel, Thomas, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" in *The Philosophical Review*, 83(4), 1974, p.435-436.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 444-445

it comes to subjective experience. Still, he insists that striving for greater objectivity remains important, even if the ideal can never be fully realized.⁶

The challenge of bringing subjective experience together with the aim of objectivity becomes even more apparent once we recognize how deeply perspective is built into human cognition. Our perceptual systems filter information in ways grounded in our biology, our concepts are shaped by language, culture, and history, and our reasoning is guided by background assumptions we often overlook. These aspects of human cognition are not optional additions to our grasp of the world, they are the very conditions that make understanding possible. And because any description of reality depends on what we are able to understand in the first place, these same conditions also shape how we can describe the world. Any attempt to describe reality must therefore begin from within these limits. This raises the question of whether the ideal of a completely perspective-free standpoint is coherent, or whether it rests on a mistaken view of what it means to be a finite, embodied, conscious being.

Nagel's work is particularly valuable because, unlike reductive approaches that treat subjectivity as something to be eliminated in the pursuit of "pure" objectivity, he argues that subjective experience is an essential feature of conscious life. Any account of the world must therefore take it seriously rather than try to remove it. His writings explore how far we can move away from our own standpoint and what happens when we attempt to do so. While Nagel clearly believes that some degree of objectivity is both possible and important, he also stresses that the process of becoming more objective has limits. We can step back from our immediate perspective, consider alternative viewpoints, and develop more general descriptions of the world, and these are precisely the methods by which we increase our level of objectivity. But this does not mean that we can fully detach ourselves from the standpoint that makes such reflection possible in the first place.

The tension, which arises because objectivity aims at a standpoint that is independent of any particular observer, while our access to the world is always shaped by the subjective structures of human cognition, is not limited to the philosophy of mind. Scientific theories as well strive to describe the world in general terms that do not depend on any individual perspective, yet the concepts and models used in science are themselves shaped by our

⁶ Cf. Nagel 1986, p. 4-5

biological perceptual systems, by language, culture, and history, and by background assumptions we rarely notice. These features do not merely influence how we understand the world, they also structure how we can describe it. This does not undermine the value of scientific explanation, but it complicates the question of what science reveals. Perhaps science can uncover some aspects of the world “as they are,” while others are accessible only through the conceptual frameworks available to beings like us. Or perhaps scientific objectivity always involves a balance between independence from particular viewpoints and dependence on the general features of human cognition. Either way, the ideal of a completely perspective-free standpoint becomes difficult to sustain once we recognize how deeply our cognitive capacities shape the ways in which the world can appear to us.

These considerations also connect to broader epistemological questions about the privacy of experience and the limits of understanding others. We often assume that we can grasp another person’s perspective by simply comparing it with our own, but this assumption has limits. The subjective character of experience is not directly accessible from the outside. Even in ordinary interpersonal contexts, we rely on interpretation and imagination to understand others. This raises questions about the extent to which we can ever fully grasp another being’s perspective and whether we can ever fully transcend our own.

All of these issues lead to a central philosophical problem that will guide the present thesis: can we ever achieve a standpoint that is not shaped by our own perspective, or is the very ideal of complete objectivity fundamentally flawed? The crucial concepts involved in this question, which are objectivity, standpoint and structure, will be clarified in detail in the chapters that follow. Nagel’s work suggests that while we can move toward greater objectivity, the subjective standpoint remains an inescapable feature of our cognitive situation. This has important implications for metaphysics. If our understanding of the world is always shaped by our perspective, then the metaphysical project of describing the fundamental structure of reality must take this into account. The question is not simply whether reality has a structure, but whether we can access that structure in a way that is independent of our own standpoint. The aim of this thesis is not to provide a definitive answer to whether a perspective-free view of reality is possible. Rather, it seeks to clarify the nature of the problem, explore the limits of objectivity, and consider what it means for metaphysics to attempt to describe reality independently of any particular perspective. By engaging closely with Nagel’s writings and selected commentaries, the thesis aims to

illuminate the relationship between subjectivity, objectivity, and structure, and to assess whether the desire for a “view from nowhere” can be achieved.

Taken together, these considerations pave the way for the more detailed discussion that follows. To address the problem in a systematic way, the thesis proceeds by examining Nagel’s position from the ground up before turning to its implications for metaphysics and the notion of structure.

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 starts with Nagel’s critique of reductive physicalism and the challenge posed by subjective experience. Beginning with “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” and drawing on his earlier essay “Physicalism,” the chapter clarifies Nagel’s nuanced position, which is not rejecting physicalism, but arguing that it is incomplete because we currently lack the conceptual tools to connect subjective and objective descriptions. It also makes use of contemporary discussions in that area to enhance the debate. This provides the conceptual foundation for the later discussion, which is to understand that subjectivity resisting complete reduction, is essential for assessing how far claims about the structure of reality can reach.

Chapter 3 turns to Nagel’s conception of objectivity and the possibility of a “view from nowhere.” It outlines how Nagel understands objectivity as a gradual process of abstraction and examines the limits of this process, especially in the case of conscious experience. To clarify these limits further, the chapter also considers the role of language and conceptual schemes. Here Wittgenstein becomes relevant, as his reflections on how our linguistic framework shapes what can be expressed and thought, help to illuminate why certain aspects of experience resist against full abstraction.

Chapter 4 builds on this analysis by addressing the metaphysical question of structure. It asks whether the structure of reality is something we discover or whether it is shaped by the conceptual frameworks through which we understand the world. A central issue here is the status of scientific objectivity. Even if scientific theories are objective in a methodological sense, it remains unclear whether they can provide a standpoint that is independent of the human perspective, as scientists are still humans with subjective viewpoints. The chapter also briefly contrasts Nagel’s approach with Descartes’ idea of God as a guarantor of objective truth, highlighting two very different strategies for bridging the gap between subjective understanding and objective structure.

Chapter 5 develops and assesses an alternative ideal, a “view from everywhere,” which integrates multiple situated perspectives without claiming to transcend subjectivity entirely. Although this approach should not offer a definitive solution, it contributes to the discussion as it explores whether such a model can clarify why complete objectivity is inaccessible, while it still captures the importance of striving for greater objectivity. The chapter concludes by considering how this perspective relates to Nagel’s openness to a future, expanded physicalism that might one day incorporate subjective experience into a more comprehensive naturalistic framework.

Chapter 6 builds the conclusion for this thesis. It returns to the central question of whether Nagel’s ideal of a “view from nowhere” can genuinely secure an objective grasp of reality’s structure. The final analysis argues that while the strive toward complete objectivity remains philosophically significant, it cannot be fulfilled by beings whose access to the world is unavoidably shaped by their own standpoint. Structure may be mind-independent, but our encounter with it is always mediated through the conceptual and perceptual tools available to us. Objectivity therefore becomes a gradual, ongoing expansion of perspective rather than a destination situated beyond all perspective. The conclusion reframes these main aspects and shows how Nagel’s ideal can be seen as a guiding direction that illuminates both the limits and the possibilities of human understanding.

2. Subjectivity and the Challenge of Physicalism

2.1 Can We Know “What It Is Like to Be a Bat?”

Nagel’s essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” will now serve as a conceptual starting point for the further arguments of the thesis. In this section, the aim is to show how Nagel uses the example of the bat to argue that subjective experience contains elements that cannot be captured from an external, objective point of view. This is important, because the later parts of the thesis return to this problem when discussing objectivity and the structure of reality. Nagel’s essay therefore lays the foundation of the issue, that the rest of the work tries to understand more deeply.

The choice of using the bat as an example, already points to an essential aspect. As these animals perceive the world mainly through echolocation, a sensory information completely alien to us humans, it is even harder for us to imagine what these experiences are like. Even if we had complete scientific knowledge of a bat’s neurophysiology and behavior, this would not automatically tell us how the world appears from the *bat’s* perspective. Nagel emphasizes this when he writes that he does not want to know what it would be like *for us* to behave like bats, but what it is like *for the bat itself*.⁷ The distinction sounds simple, but it marks the core of his argument.

As Manfred Frank has pointed out, the English phrase “what it is like” can be misleading.⁸ It may suggest that we are looking for a similar experience of our own, as if the task were to find something in our personal history that resembles the bat’s experience. However, Nagel’s point is not about similarity, but about the internal, subjective character of an experience as it is lived by the subject. To use a simple example: the question is not whether I can find something that *resembles* drinking hot chocolate on a sunny balcony, but *how* this experience feels for the person who is actually having it. Frank’s clarification helps to show why Nagel insists that subjective experience is tied to a particular standpoint. Frank’s clarification is important not because it says “it’s not about resemblance,” but because it shows why resemblance is the wrong model in the first place. As soon as we look for something similar in our own experience, we shift into an external, third-person perspective.

⁷ Cf. Nagel 1974, p. 439

⁸ Cf. Frank, Manfred, *Analytische Theorien des Selbstbewusstseins*. Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main. 1994, p. 140

But Nagel's question aims at the first-person perspective itself, the way an experience is present *for the subject* who has it. This is why such experiences cannot be translated into objective terms without losing their fundamental essence.

This aspect leads us directly to a deeper epistemological issue, namely the different kinds of knowledge which are available to us. The problem is not simply that we lack imagination, it is that we lack the right *form* of access. In epistemology, it is common to distinguish between acquaintance knowledge, propositional knowledge ("knowledge that"), and practical knowledge ("knowledge how").⁹ The last category is especially relevant here, as "knowledge how" is not simply a constituted set of facts, but a practical, embodied understanding, that depends on having the exact perspective or ability. We can have extensive propositional knowledge about bats, yet this does not give us the practical, first-person grasp of *how* it is to inhabit the sensory world of a bat. In other words, we possess the "knowledge that", but lack the essential "knowledge how", that would be needed to understand the bat's experience from the inside.

However, this interpretation is not uncontroversial. Nagel himself does not explicitly use the distinction between "knowing that" and "knowing how" for his argument, and his essay does not commit him to any particular epistemological account of phenomenal knowledge.¹⁰

The view that understanding an experience involves a kind of ability has been developed more explicitly by David Lewis and Laurence Nemirow, who argue that phenomenal knowledge consists in imaginative or recognitional capacities rather than in new factual information.¹¹ Following this perspective, our inability to grasp the bat's experience would result from lacking the relevant abilities. But this is only one possible interpretation, and it has been challenged by those who hold that phenomenal knowledge cannot be reduced either to abilities or to propositional facts. For the examination here it is important to mention that Nagel draws attention to a form of subjective access that cannot be captured by objective, third-person descriptions, regardless of how one classifies this epistemic difference.

⁹ Cf. *Knowledge How* (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). (2021).
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-how/>

¹⁰ Cf. Nagel, 1974.

¹¹ Cf. Nida-Rümelin, Martine and Donnchadh O Conaill, 2024.

This broader issue also appears in Frank Jackson's well-known thought experiment "Mary's Room."¹² Mary knows all the physical facts about color vision but has never experienced color herself. When she finally sees red for the first time, she learns something that was not included in her complete set of propositional facts. She gains the first-person experience of what it is like to see red. Lewis and Nemirow interpret this new insight as an ability, but it is essential to mention that this "ability hypothesis" is a response to Jackson's argument rather than its foundation.¹³ Jackson himself claims that Mary learns a new fact, and Nagel as well does not present his argument in terms of abilities. What connects the two cases is therefore not a specific epistemological theory, but a shared conceptual point. Even exhaustive objective knowledge does not automatically provide access to the subjective character of experience.

A similar point becomes clear when we consider the familiar thought experiment of philosophical zombies.¹⁴ These hypothetical beings are physically and functionally identical to us in every respect, yet lack any subjective experience. From the outside, a zombie processes information, reacts and behaves just like a conscious human being. What it lacks is the inner, qualitative dimension, so the "what it is like" aspect, that is essential for our experiences. The zombie case therefore illustrates the same gap highlighted by Nagel and by Jackson's Mary, which is that having all the physical information about an experience is not the same as having the experience itself. This contrast makes the distinction between objective descriptions and the subjective standpoint that characterizes conscious life, especially vivid.

At this point it is interesting to point out that Nagel makes a similar illustration later in his essay when he introduces the example of a Martian scientist who has no understanding of visual perception.¹⁵ Such a being could, in principle, learn everything about the physical processes involved in human vision. It could understand the wavelengths of light, the structure of the retina, and the neural pathways involved in color processing. Yet, as Nagel argues, this would still not give the Martian access to what rainbows, clouds, or lightning *look like* to us. The Martian could grasp the physical phenomena perfectly well, but it would

¹² Cf. Jackson, Frank, "Epiphenomenal Qualia." *The Philosophical Quarterly* (1950-), vol. 32, no. 127, 1982, pp. 127–36.

¹³ Cf. Lewis 1999.

¹⁴ Cf. Chalmers 1996

¹⁵ Cf. Nagel 1974, p.443

lack the standpoint from which these phenomena have their familiar appearance in our experience. The structure of this example is strikingly similar to Jackson's Mary case. In both situations, a subject has complete physical knowledge but still lacks the first-person understanding of *how* the experience presents itself from the inside. This parallel is not accidental, as both arguments point at the same gap between objective description and subjective experience, even though they approach it from different angles.

Nagel uses the Martian case to highlight a more general point about objectivity. He assumes that "it may be more accurate to think of objectivity as a direction in which the understanding can travel."¹⁶ This does not mean that objectivity is necessarily gradual or that there is no fully objective standpoint, rather, Nagel wants to allow that increasing objectivity involves moving away from a specific point of view, without fixating whether such a movement has a final endpoint. In many areas, such as the study of lightning or rainbows, it is legitimate to move as far as possible away from our own perspective in order to gain a more general understanding. However with subjective experience, the situation is different, as increasing objectivity does exactly the opposite. Nagel expresses this clearly when he writes:

"If the subjective character of experience is fully comprehensible only from one point of view, then any shift to greater objectivity - that is, less attachment to a specific viewpoint - does not take us nearer to the real nature of the phenomenon: it takes us farther away from it."¹⁷

This marks one of the central insights of Nagel's essay. This point marks one of the central insights of Nagel's essay and explains why it occupies such an important place in the overall structure of this thesis. It shows that the usual scientific strategy of abstracting from individual perspectives, which is highly effective in many other domains, cannot be applied so easily when we turn to consciousness.

The very feature that makes an experience subjective, which is its dependence on a particular point of view, also makes it resistant to the methods that succeed in explaining ordinary physical phenomena. When Nagel says that the subjective character of an experience is fully comprehensible only from *one point of view*, he means the point of view

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p.443

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.444-445.

of the subject who undergoes the experience. My visual experience is accessible only from my standpoint, just as a bat's echolocation experience is accessible only from the bat's standpoint. Because of this, the usual scientific strategy of increasing objectivity by abstracting away from individual perspectives, which is highly effective in many other domains, moves us further away from the phenomenon we are trying to understand when the phenomenon is subjective experience itself.

To underline this point with one final example from the animal world, research on honeybees has produced similar insights.¹⁸ Studies show that the visual system of honeybees is sensitive to ultraviolet light, a range of wavelengths that humans cannot perceive. As a result, many flowers present a very different appearance to bees than they do to us. Petals that look uniformly yellow to human observers often reflect both yellow and ultraviolet light, producing what biologists call "bee-purple," a color with no direct analogue in human experience. We can describe the relevant wavelengths and measure the reflectance patterns, but this does not tell us how these colors appear from the bee's perspective. The example therefore mirrors Nagel's point, which is that even with detailed scientific knowledge, the subjective character of another species' perceptual world remains beyond our reach.

2.2 The Privacy of Mental States

A central theme in Nagel's critique of reductive physicalism is the idea that subjective experience contains a dimension that cannot be accessed from an external standpoint. This is not only a matter of practical difficulty but follows from the nature of experience itself. For Nagel, the "privacy" of mental states does not mean that they are hidden in a Cartesian sense, rather, it means that the subjective character of an experience is accessible only from the point of view of the subject who undergoes it. Even if two individuals shared the same perceptual capacities, person A could not access what person B's experience is like, because B's experience is tied to B's own standpoint. This conception of privacy, which can be considered as a perspectival limitation, that is inside

¹⁸ Cf. Barth, Friedrich G., "Sensory perception: Adaptation to lifestyle and habitat." In: Barth, F.G., Giampieri-Deutsch, P., Klein, HD. (eds) *Sensory Perception*. Springer, Vienna. 2012, p. 92

the phenomenon itself, is central to Nagel's argument. In this section, I will examine this idea in more detail by drawing on Nagel's insights, selected commentary from the philosophy of mind, and Giampieri-Deutsch's analysis of the "Fremdpsychisches" problem.¹⁹ Together, these perspectives will help clarify why subjective experience resists objectification and why this resistance poses a challenge for physicalist theories of mind.

Nagel's argument in "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" already points toward this direction. When he claims that no amount of objective knowledge about a bat's physiology or behavior can reveal "what it is like" for the bat to experience the world, he is highlighting the above-mentioned asymmetry between first-person and third-person access.²⁰ Ned Block makes a related point when he distinguishes between phenomenal consciousness, that he calls "P-consciousness", from functional or cognitive descriptions. His remark that, when it comes to phenomenal experience, "the best we can do is point to the phenomenon,"²¹ highlights that such experiences are known directly, through undergoing them, rather than through description or inference. Pointing to the phenomenon only works for someone who already has the relevant kind of experience, yet it cannot convey the qualitative character of that experience to someone who lacks it. In this sense, Block's view reinforces Nagel's claim that subjective experience cannot be fully captured from the outside, as its essential character is accessible only from the first-person perspective.

Robert Van Gulick adds another dimension to this point by arguing that phenomenal experience is not a mere sequence of sensory impressions, but an organized way of encountering a world of objects, including ourselves as subjects within it.²² Following this thread, experience has an internal structure which is shaped by our perceptual and cognitive capacities. Therefore third-person descriptions inevitably abstract away from this lived structure. They tell us about the mechanisms that make experience possible, but not about the experience itself. This distinction between mechanism and phenomenology is central for understanding the privacy of mental states.

Wittgenstein's reflections in the *Philosophical Investigations* also shed light on this issue. Although he rejects the idea of private language, he does not deny the privacy of

¹⁹ Cf. Giampieri-Deutsch, "Das Problem des Fremdpsychischen", in *Bollettino Filosofico* 34, 2019, pp. 90-110.

²⁰ Cf. Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", *The Philosophical Review* 83(4), 1974, pp. 435-450.

²¹ Ned Block, "On a Confusion about a Function of Consciousness", *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 18(2), 1995, pp. 531-532.

²² Cf. Robert Van Gulick, "Understanding the Phenomenal Mind", *Philosophical Perspectives* 7, 1993, p. 137.

experience. Instead, Wittgenstein distinguishes between the public criteria for expressing mental states and the experience itself, which is accessible only to the subject.²³ As Giampieri-Deutsch emphasizes, for Wittgenstein this asymmetry is not a flaw in our epistemic practices but a feature of how experience is given.²⁴ When I say “I am in pain,” I do not conclude this from my behavior, but I simply feel it. When I attribute pain to another person, I have to rely on outward signs.

The difference between these two forms of access is fundamental, as it points to the essential divide that is also prominent in the investigation of Nagel. First-person experience is known directly from within, whereas third-person features are always attributed because of behavioural evidence. This distinction helps to show why subjective experience resists a full external description and why it plays such a central role in Nagel’s critique of reductive physicalism.

Giampieri-Deutsch’s analysis of the “Fremdpsychisches” problem further illustrates this point. Even in psychoanalytic treatment, where interpersonal understanding is unusually rich, the analyst does not gain direct access to another patient’s subjective experience.²⁵

The relevance of this example lies precisely in the fact that psychoanalysis represents one of the most intimate and interpretively sophisticated forms of human interaction. If direct access to another person’s experience were possible anywhere, it would be here. Yet, as Giampieri-Deutsch emphasizes, the analyst must still rely on interpretation, empathy, and the reading of verbal and non-verbal cues. These methods can deepen the understanding, but they do not eliminate the gap between first-person and third-person access. The analyst does not *see* the patient’s mental states, they still have to interpret them. This supports Nagel’s claim that subjective experience cannot be captured from an external standpoint. Even the most intimate forms of interpersonal understanding rely on inference rather than direct access.

A similar aspect appears in contemporary philosophy of mind. David Chalmers for example, distinguishes between the “easy problems” of consciousness, so those concerning cognitive functions, behavioral capacities, and neural mechanisms, and the

²³ Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Blackwell 1953.

²⁴ Cf. Patrizia Giampieri-Deutsch, “Das Problem des Fremdpsychischen”, in *Bollettino Filosofico* 34, 2019, pp. 92.

²⁵ Cf. Patrizia Giampieri-Deutsch 2019, pp. 90-110.

“hard problem,” which concerns the subjective character of experience.²⁶ The easy problems can be addressed by cognitive science and neuroscience, but the hard problem resists such approaches. Chalmers argues that no amount of functional or physical explanation can account for why and how subjective experience arises. His distinction echoes Nagel’s claim that physicalism leaves something out. Chalmers’s non-reductive standpoint therefore reinforces the idea that subjective experience has a dimension that cannot be captured by objective descriptions.

The difficulty of accessing another’s subjective experience is also illustrated by Owen Flanagan’s metaphor of “mental detectors.” Flanagan suggests that just as a metal detector detects metal objects beneath the surface, humans are equipped with “mental detectors” that allow us to recognize the mental states of others.²⁷ These detectors are highly sensitive and often reliable, but they do not come with a direct access to another’s experience. Instead, they rely on interpretation, pattern recognition and background knowledge. This metaphor highlights the gap between observing behavior and knowing what an experience is like from the inside.

Peter Bieri makes a similar observation. A third-person perspective allows us to describe behavior, neural processes, and functional capacities, but it does not reveal the inner life of another person. Understanding another’s mental states requires imagination and interpretation rather than observation. Bieri’s point reinforces the idea that subjective experience has a dimension that cannot be reached from the outside.²⁸

Taken together, these considerations support Nagel’s claim that subjective experience has an irreducible first-person character. It reveals that the privacy of mental states is not a temporary limitation that might be overcome with better scientific tools. It really is a structural feature of consciousness. Physicalist theories may succeed in explaining the mechanisms underlying experience, but they do not capture the subjective aspect itself. This gap between mechanism and phenomenology lies at the heart of the mind-body problem, which will be explored in the following section.

²⁶ Cf. Chalmers, David. *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

²⁷ Cf. Owen Flanagan, *Consciousness Reconsidered*, MIT Press 1992.

²⁸ Cf. Peter Bieri, *Analytische Philosophie des Geistes*, Beltz Athenäum 1981.

2.3 The Mind-Body Problem and the Limits of Reduction

The considerations developed so far actually trace back to a philosophical issue, that has existed for ages. The mind-body problem, in its classical form, concerns the relation between mental phenomena, meaning our thoughts, emotions and similar, and the physical world, which consists of matter und measurable processes. Although the historical roots of the problem go back to at least Descartes, the contemporary debate is no longer about the existence of two distinct substances. Instead, it focuses on a more specific difficulty, namely how first-person experience, with its qualitative and subjective character, can be reconciled with third-person explanations.²⁹ Therefore the mind-body problem is not just some outdated philosophical puzzle, but the underlying foundation when we try to understand consciousness. The challenge that arises is not merely to explain the mechanisms that underlie experience, but to account for the experiential aspect itself, the very feature that seems to resist reduction to physical terms.

Nagel's significance for the contemporary mind-body problem lies in the way he reframes it. Rather than treating it as a dispute about substances, he focuses on the tension between two forms of understanding.³⁰ Firstly, the subjective standpoint from which experience is given, and the objective standpoint characteristic of physical explanation. This shift allows him to show why reductive physicalism struggles with consciousness. Mental and physical phenomena differing is only a rather simple issue here. The real difficulty lies in the fact that they are grasped from fundamentally different perspectives. Nagel's analysis highlights this tension and lays the foundation for the explanatory challenges that will be examined in the following sections.

In his essay *Physicalism*, Nagel argues that physicalism, understood as the claim that all mental phenomena are ultimately physical, may be true.³¹ Even though this might sound contradicting to what has just said before, it is essential to notice that Nagel does not claim

²⁹ Cf. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press 1996.

³⁰ Cf. Nagel 1974, pp. 435–450.

³¹ Cf. Thomas Nagel, "Physicalism", *Philosophical Review* 74(3), 1965, pp. 339–356.

that mind and body are different kinds of substances. His point is that they are *accessible* from fundamentally different standpoints.

The difficulty, for him, lies not in the metaphysical aspect itself, but in our current conceptual resources. We lack the concepts that would allow us to understand how subjective experience could arise from physical processes. As Nagel puts it, physicalism is “incomplete” because it cannot yet account for the subjective character of experience.³² This incompleteness is not simply a matter of missing empirical data. It reflects a conceptual limitation. We do not yet possess the form of understanding required to connect the subjective and the objective. As noted earlier, Nagel’s suggestion that a more developed form of physicalism could eventually bridge this gap, shows that he remains optimistic but careful, since he avoids committing himself to any fixed metaphysical view.

This way of framing the mind-body problem aligns with contemporary discussions. Joseph Levine, for example, famously introduced the term “explanatory gap” to describe the difficulty of explaining how physical processes give rise to qualitative experience.³³ David Chalmers later sharpened this point by distinguishing between the “easy problems” of consciousness and the “hard problem,” which was already mentioned before.³⁴ Both Levine and Chalmers echo Nagel’s central claim, namely that the challenge is conceptual, not empirical. More neuroscientific detail does not seem to bring us closer to understanding why physical processes should be accompanied by experience. The mind-body problem therefore persists not because of a lack of scientific progress, but because of the structural features of consciousness itself.

The privacy of mental states, discussed in the previous section, plays an important role in this context. If subjective experience is accessible only from the first-person perspective, then any attempt to explain it from the third-person perspective will inevitably leave something out. This is precisely the point Nagel emphasizes. The subjective character of experience cannot be captured by objective description.³⁵ On this view, the mind-body

³² Cf *ibid.*

³³ Cf. Joseph Levine, “Materialism and Qualia: The Explanatory Gap”, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64, 1983, pp. 354–361.

³⁴ Cf. Chalmers 1996.

³⁵ Cf. Nagel, Thomas, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”, *The Philosophical Review* 83(4), 1974, pp. 437

problem is a question about how to bring together two fundamentally different standpoints within a single coherent picture of the world.

This way of framing the issue leads directly into Nagel's later work, especially *The View From Nowhere*, where he develops a more systematic account of objectivity as a gradual movement away from the subjective standpoint. Seen from this angle, the tension between mind and body becomes one aspect of a broader tension between our own perspective and the attempt to see the world in a more objective way. It shows that the mind-body problem concerns the larger task of explaining how a first-person point of view fits into an objective picture of the world. This idea will guide the next chapter, which examines Nagel's account of objectivity and the "view from nowhere" in more detail.

3. The View from Nowhere - an Impossible Ideal?

3.1 A View is always a View from *Somewhere*

The idea of objectivity plays a central, if not the main role in Nagel's project. Throughout *The View from Nowhere*, he describes objectivity as a gradual process of distancing oneself from one's own perspective. By trying to step back from personal experience, embodiment, and subjective standpoint, we aim to arrive at claims that are more general and intersubjectively accessible. This is what we strive for when talking about the ideal of a "view from nowhere": a standpoint that would represent the world as it is, independent of any particular point of view.

Nagel acknowledges why this ideal is so compelling. When we reflect on our own cognitive capacities, it seems natural to assume that our ability to form beliefs about the world must itself be grounded in features of reality that are not dependent on our individual perspective. As he puts it, "when we use our minds to think about reality, we are not [...] performing an impossible leap from inside ourselves to the world outside. We are developing a relation to the world that is implicit in our mental and physical makeup".³⁶ The pursuit of objectivity therefore appears as a way of uncovering hidden features of the world that make knowledge possible in the first place.

Yet the central question of this chapter is whether such an ideal can be realized in a strong sense. Nagel's answer is a definitive negation, as he mentions several times throughout his investigation.³⁷ While we can extend our view and try to transcend subjective distortions, we cannot eliminate our standpoint altogether. The attempt to do so confronts us with conceptual, linguistic, as well as epistemic limits. What follows is an examination of these limits and of Nagel's reasons for concluding that a completely detached, perspective-free standpoint is impossible.

Before examining the arguments against the view from nowhere, I see it as important to understand why the ideal still persists. As it was mentioned earlier, it is the case that the more we abstract from our particular situation, the more general our claims become. This

³⁶ Nagel 1986, p. 84.

³⁷ Cf. Nagel 1986, p. 68, 85, 88.

movement toward greater objectivity allows us to identify features of the world that do not depend on who we are, where we stand, or how things appear to us at a given moment.

Objectivity, in this sense, is therefore not a “leap” into a metaphysical void but should be seen a method of expanding our understanding. Nagel emphasizes that even if a complete, perspective-free conception of reality is unattainable, the attempt to extend our view remains crucial, as “[t]he pursuit of an objective understanding of reality is the only way to expand our knowledge of what there is beyond the way it appears to us”.³⁸

Relating to our scientific progress, a historical example from astronomy illustrates this gradual expansion of objectivity. For centuries, the geocentric model placed earth at the center of the cosmos. However, this was only because it matched the human standpoint that the world revolved around us, not because certain evidence proved it. When the shift to heliocentrism was made, it was, first of all a scientific progress, but also a step away from the anthropocentrism that was fundamental at this time. It can be assumed that especially this removal from an anthropocentric view makes science more objective.³⁹ Copernicus, Kepler and later Newton each removed another layer of human-centered assumptions, replacing them with models that held from a wider range of standpoints.⁴⁰ Even Einstein’s later revisions of the Newtonian mechanics continued this development by showing that space and time are not absolute, but depend on the observer’s framework. What becomes apparent here can be tied closely to Nagel’s message, namely that at each stage, science became more objective by stepping back from the perspective that initially shaped its understanding. However, none of these models achieved a literal “view from nowhere”, as we, until this day, cannot step completely outside the cosmos and make a final judgment about what actually lies in its center. It mirrors Nagel’s claim that objectivity is not a final position we can reach, but a process of gradually stepping back and therefore freeing our view from the distortions of our initial, subjective perspective.

During his investigation, Nagel makes a related point when he turns to the possibility of progress.⁴¹ He argues that the objectivity achieved by physical science depends on a method that cuts away all subjective character of experience. This method has been enormously

³⁸ Nagel 1986, p.26

³⁹ Cf. Kuhn 1957, Kragh 2007.

⁴⁰ Cf. Weinberg 2015

⁴¹ Cf. Nagel 1986, p. 51-53

successful, but it also means that the concepts of physics cannot account for what it is like to be a conscious organism. For Nagel, this shows that our present scientific framework is incomplete. He claims that we need a theory of conscious beings as physical systems, yet such a theory will require conceptual resources that do not currently exist.⁴² He even states that the mental and the physical may ultimately be the same, but we cannot understand their unity through the forms of objective understanding that have been developed precisely by excluding subjectivity. In that sense, our current standpoint may be as limited as earlier scientific worldviews. These may have been powerful within their domains, but unable to incorporate certain fundamental features of the world. Nagel's main point here is that progress toward greater objectivity will require not just more data, but new forms of understanding which are capable of integrating subjective experience into an expanded conception of the physical.

At this point I believe it is crucial to look at the implications of why a view can be said to always be situated. It should be clear now, that a view is always a view "from somewhere". Even the ordinary meaning of the word *view* already reveals this, as it is "the ability to see something or to be seen from a particular place."⁴³

Any act of perceiving, thinking, or representing presupposes a subject who perceives, thinks, or represents. The idea of a perspective that belongs to no one is therefore conceptually more or less impossible. Even if one imagines a God-like standpoint that encompasses everything, it would still be *someone's* standpoint. The very act of "seeing" already implies a certain situatedness. This point may seem almost trivial, but it has far-reaching consequences. It means that the subject cannot be removed from the picture without eliminating the act of viewing itself. Nagel's own formulation of this problem appears later in the book, when he describes the "blind spot" behind our eyes, so the part of reality that cannot be included in an objective picture because it is the standpoint from which the picture is constructed. No matter how far we extend our view, this blind spot always remains.⁴⁴

⁴² Cf. *ibid.*

⁴³ Cf. Oxford dictionary; <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>

⁴⁴ Cf. Nagel 1986, p. 127

3.2 Trapped in the Linguistic Cage

To deepen the argument, it is essential to look at the role language plays in shaping what can be thought and expressed. Throughout *The View from Nowhere*, Nagel emphasizes that our descriptions of the world are inseparable from the conceptual and linguistic resources which are available to us. He underlines this point elsewhere when he notes that we cannot use language to reach beyond the range of its legitimate application. Attempts to do so either misuse our concepts or end up referring only to what is still conceivable from within our own representational framework.⁴⁵ This becomes clear in his discussion of skepticism and antiskepticism, where he points out that even if reality was very different from how it appears, our linguistic and conceptual apparatus would still determine what we can refer to when we speak about it.⁴⁶ The implication is that our descriptions of the world are always filtered through the conceptual capacities that make reference possible in the first place. This becomes especially clear when he draws on Wittgenstein's reflections on the limits of language. Nagel formulates the problem in a way that captures exactly this difficulty:

“Language reaches beyond itself, whether in the concept of rain or in the concept of what there is, though what it reaches can only be designated by using language or some other form of representation.”⁴⁷

With this statement, Nagel expresses the central issue of us being trapped in some kind of linguistic cage. Even when we attempt to refer to aspects of reality that are outside of our perception or conceptual grasp, we must still do so through language. There is no neutral medium or similar, that would allow us to describe the world from outside our own representational framework. Any attempt to “step outside” our perspective is already constrained by the very tools we use to articulate it.

A simple example to make this point clearer: we can perceive a very specific shade of a greenish blue, yet we cannot describe it without falling back on comparisons or usage of pre-existing terms. The experience is richer than the vocabulary available to express it. The same holds for many emotional states. We can have a feeling that is complex and does not

⁴⁵ Cf. Nagel 1986, p. 94

⁴⁶ Cf. Nagel 1986, p. 71

⁴⁷ Nagel 1986, p. 108

fit the general categories, but our language forces us to compress it into broad categories such as “nostalgic” or “bittersweet.” These cases show that the limits of language are not limits of perception, but limits of articulation. My metaphor of the “linguistic cage” therefore consists of the fact that we can only refer to the world through the conceptual categories our language provides. Therefore, the very tools that allow us to speak about reality also confine to what extent we can be talk about it.

Wittgenstein’s early work in the *Tractatus* reinforces a similar idea.⁴⁸ His claim that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” suggests that what can be thought or said is restricted by the structure of our representational system. We cannot imagine objects outside space and time, nor can we describe facts without relying on our human-made concepts. Even the notion of a “fact” is not perspective-free, but also a human category. This already undermines the idea that we could access a standpoint that mirrors reality independently of our conceptual system.

Wittgenstein’s later view in the *Philosophical Investigations* strengthens the argument further.⁴⁹ He claims that meaning is not fixed by a logical structure but by use within shared practices. Concepts often lack strict boundaries and instead form networks of “family resemblances.” This makes it impossible to construct a perfectly precise, perspective-independent language that could capture reality “as it is.” Our descriptions depend on the forms of life in which they are embedded. Even basic terms which concern experience, such as pain, are accessible only from the first-person standpoint. We can presume others’ sensations, but we cannot take on their perspective. Further, it is essential to notice that, if *language*, so the medium through which we communicate cannot escape its own conditions of application, then neither can the very way we ourselves make conceptual sense of the world, so *thought*. And if thought cannot escape its own conditions, a fully detached, perspective-free standpoint is conceptually impossible. Objectivity becomes a matter of degree. We can extend our view, correct for distortions, and strive for greater generality, but we cannot eliminate the standpoint from which we begin.

This linguistic limitation underlines Nagel’s argument, however only in a restricted sense. Wittgenstein helps to show why we cannot describe a standpoint that lies entirely outside

⁴⁸ Cf. Wittgenstein 1963

⁴⁹ Cf. Wittgenstein 1953

human concepts, as any attempt to do so must still rely on the very language whose limits we are trying to transcend. Even though Nagel accepts this, he does not follow Wittgenstein into the stronger, more idealistic conclusion that what exists is itself bounded by language. Nagel remains in the position of a realist, as for him, reality extends beyond what we can describe, even if our access to it is constrained by our conceptual and linguistic resources. For Nagel, the limits of language restrict our *representation* of the world, not the world itself.⁵⁰ This is why he can acknowledge that there are aspects of reality we cannot fully grasp, while still insisting that our descriptions of them remain being tied to human forms of representation. The impossibility of a view from nowhere therefore arises not because nothing lies beyond language, but because we cannot step outside the framework through which we represent what lies beyond us.

3.3 The Inescapability of Perspective

A further limitation which is essential for the topic arises from the act of observation itself. Even if we set linguistic constraints aside, the process of observing the world is still not neutral. It is shaped by the standpoint of the observer and, in some cases, by the very fact that something is being observed at all.

As a brief excursion, a well-known example from physics can help to illustrate this issue. To put it simply, in the double-slit experiment, particles behave differently depending on whether they are observed.⁵¹ When unobserved, they form an interference pattern, but when a measurement is introduced, the pattern changes. This phenomenon belongs to quantum mechanics and should not be overstated philosophically, yet it highlights the essential idea that observation is not a neutral act. It is shaped by the position and involvement of the observer. This leads to further, interesting questions which concern how an observer from “nowhere” would influence our reality. However, this would carry the examination too far away. What can be concluded after looking at this example from physics is that, parallel to

⁵⁰ Cf. Nagel 1986, p. 106-107

⁵¹ Cf. Coulon and Avery, 2023.

Nagel's claim, we cannot make objective statements concerning the truth about reality, as the very act of seeing influences what we see.

Nagel gives this structural limitation its most explicit formulation in his discussion of what he calls the "blind spot" behind our eyes, which was briefly mentioned prior. Even after we have extended our view as far as possible, there still remains an element that cannot be included in the objective picture, namely the standpoint from which the picture is constructed. This is not simply the familiar point that every view is situated, but a deeper claim about the limits of objectification itself. A complete account of reality would have to incorporate the subject who is forming the account, yet doing so would require a further standpoint from which that incorporation is made, generating a regress that cannot be resolved. As Nagel puts it, the objective view "includes a large blindspot [...] that hides something we cannot take into account in acting, because it is what acts."⁵²

To conclude this chapter, the arguments presented here lead to an essential verdict: a fully detached, perspective-free standpoint is impossible. A view is always situated, language cannot escape its own conditions of application, and observation itself is shaped by the observer. These limitations are not merely practical but structural. They arise from the nature of representation, thought, and perception. Nagel therefore concludes that the view from nowhere can only function as an ideal. It marks the limit point of the objectifying process, not a standpoint that could actually be occupied.

This gradual movement toward objectivity can be illustrated with a simple example. Imagine looking at a city from different heights. Viewing outside of one's own house or from a street, one sees only what lies directly ahead. From a rooftop, more of the surrounding structure becomes visible. Looking from an airplane, almost the entire cityscape appears at once. Each step reduces the influence of one's immediate position and offers a broader, more comprehensive view. Yet none of these perspectives is a "view from nowhere." They are simply wider standpoints, not standpoint-free ones. In the same way, Nagel argues that objectivity is achieved by extending our view, not by escaping it.

This examination raises the question of what this means for our attempt to understand the structure of reality. If a view from nowhere is unattainable, does it still make sense to ask

⁵² Nagel 1986, p. 127.

whether structure can be discovered at all? The question does not disappear with the rejection of complete objectivity. If there is an underlying structure of reality, then it must be something that does not depend on our particular standpoint in the first place. Structure, in this sense, would be more fundamental than the human concepts through which we describe it. Even if our access to it is dependent on those concepts, the idea of structure points beyond them. It refers to features of the world that organize our experience without being reducible to the perspective from which we grasp them. For this reason, the investigation of structure remains essential. Chapter 4 turns to this issue and examines how far we can articulate structural features of reality without presupposing a view from nowhere.

4. Understanding Structure

The previous chapters have shown that Nagel's project of objectivity strives for something profound. He is striving for a standpoint that not only abstracts from individual perspectives, but tries to move beyond the human standpoint altogether. If structure is truly fundamental, then it should in principle be accessible from such a standpoint. Yet this immediately raises a problem, because we can never fully step outside the very standpoint through which we perceive and conceptualize the world.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that the term 'structure' appears in two different senses throughout this chapter. When discussing Nagel, I use 'structure' to refer to the fundamental features of reality that objectivity aims to reveal. Later, when structural realism is briefly introduced, 'structure' will carry a slightly different, more technical meaning from philosophy of science. I will indicate these distinctions later when it becomes relevant again.

This chapter examines whether structure is something we *discover* in the world or something we *invent* through our conceptual apparatus, and whether the idea of structure might overlap with what earlier thinkers called "God." The guiding question of this chapter is therefore, whether we can ever grasp structure as it is, or only as it appears through the lens of our subjective glasses?

4.1 Is Structure Invented or Discovered?

"It is very important to not conflate the language of mathematics which we do invent with the structure of mathematics which we discover."⁵³

This remark by physicist Max Tegmark, although directed at mathematics, perfectly captures the fundamental issue we have in the debate about structure. We invent symbols, notions and conceptual tools we use. However, the relations these tools describe, so the structure, seem to exist independently of us. Tegmark's point therefore extends beyond mathematics. It suggests that reality itself may have a structure that is not of our creation,

⁵³ Closer to Truth, 2020, 0:34-0:44

even though every attempt to articulate it depends on our human concepts. This already hints at a deeper problem. If structure is discovered, then it must exist independently of our conceptual schemes. But if we can only access it *through* those schemes, then any discovery is inevitably mediated. We never encounter structure “raw.” We encounter it as filtered, interpreted and shaped by the cognitive tools that we possess and which also enclose us to some extent.

Nagel’s account of objectivity illustrates this difficulty. His method begins by stripping away the subjective features of experience, so how things taste, feel, or look to us, in order to reveal what remains when these perspective-dependent qualities fall away. What is left are features like shape, size, weight, and motion.⁵⁴ This seems like an absolute essential aspect in the examination of the structure of reality, as these features do not depend on any particular point of view. Yet it creates a paradox in some way, as even these supposedly objective features have to be grasped through human concepts. We cannot describe size without a concept of size, we cannot talk about motion without a concept of motion. The world may have these features regardless of our conceptual apparatus, but our access to them is always conceptual.

This traces back to an underlying aspect, that is also significant for structure, namely that something can exist even if we do not name it. Nagel illustrates this with several examples. Adrenaline existed long before anyone called it “adrenaline.”⁵⁵ Gold existed long before chemistry identified it as a specific element.⁵⁶ Children and animals have mental states even if they lack the concept of “mental state.”⁵⁷ These cases show that the world contains phenomena that are independent of our conceptual schemes and that naming does not bring them into existence, but only changes how we categorize and understand them.

This distinction is crucial for thinking about structure. If structure is fundamental, then it should exist regardless of whether we conceptualize it. Yet the moment we try to describe it, we inevitably frame it within conceptual boundaries. We put the world in brackets, to make it more understandable, but in doing so we also simplify it. We reduce its complexity,

⁵⁴ Cf. Nagel 1986, p. 14

⁵⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 35

⁵⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 39

⁵⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 23

and in that reduction, we lose something of the qualitative, first-person character of experience, the very thing that resists being captured by description.

Seen this way, the tension becomes clearer once again. We discover what exists, but we invent the terms under which we describe it.

4.1.1 The Deeper Layer of Defining vs. Measuring

During the search for the structure of reality, one stumbles upon a deeper, even more fundamental aspect. Many of the qualities like temperature, weight, size and shape are not concepts we impose onto the world, but manifestations of underlying physical processes. They are ways in which a substance expresses itself. Heat and cold, for example, are not two different things, they are expressions of the same substance, just in opposite polarities. The same applies to heaviness and lightness, or largeness and smallness. These are not inventions of our conceptual scheme. They are how the world shows itself to us.

Once we see this, the distinction between *defining* and *measuring* becomes clearer. When we measure, we are responding to something that is already there in a stable and regular way. Measurement presupposes that the phenomenon behaves consistently enough to allow us to track it. This is why, as Nagel notes with Wittgenstein, measurement requires a background of stability, as without that stability, the very idea of measurement would collapse.⁵⁸ Defining, by contrast, is something we do. When we define “gold,” we carve out a conceptual category and fix criteria for what counts as gold. The substance existed long before the definition, but the concept did not. In defining, we draw boundaries around a manifestation and make it graspable, however also less fundamental.

This difference matters for understanding structure. If structure is something like the underlying regularities of the world, then it is not invented, but discovered. However, the moment we try to capture these manifestations conceptually, we inevitably impose boundaries on it. We turn a fluid, underlying reality into a fixed category. In doing so, we make the world more intelligible, but we also make it less fundamental.

⁵⁸ Cf. Nagel 1986, p. 109

Seen this way, structure looks less like a conceptual framework and more like an existing substance that manifests in different forms. Yet the moment we try to describe those manifestations, we create concepts that simplify and constrain them. This is why structure cannot be neatly classified as either invented or discovered. It is something we encounter, but always filtered through our mental faculties.

A debate between Ted Sider and Sally Haslanger also concerns a similar issue. Haslanger criticizes Sider for assuming that inquiry can track the world “as it is in itself,” entirely independent of human thought or social practices. In her view, this assumes a kind of purity in our access to reality that we simply do not have. Sider, however, pushes back by arguing that an objective description of the world should not be distorted by the theorist’s point of view, but it may still include facts about humans if those facts are themselves objective. For him, describing the world “in and of itself” does not mean excluding us from the picture, it just means that our presence should not shape the description in a subjective way.⁵⁹

This exchange captures the core difficulty we are dealing with, that I already tried to make explicit before. Facts about the world are always related to us, because we are the ones formulating them. Our concepts and distinctions inevitably influence how the world appears to us. Yet if structure is truly fundamental, it should not depend on any of these human-made conceptual tools. We want structure to be mind-independent, but we only access it through the interpretive lens built into our way of thinking. We want to describe the world “as it is,” but every description is filtered through a standpoint we cannot step outside of.

4.1.2 Structural Realism

A contemporary position that fits into this discussion as well is about structural realism. Structural realists argue that even if we cannot grasp what the world is “in itself,” we can still grasp its *structure*⁶⁰, so the stable relations, patterns, and regularities that persist across different scientific theories. The idea is that while our concepts and theoretical terms may change over time, the relational structure they describe remains remarkably constant. This

⁵⁹ Cf. Sider 2017, p. 13

⁶⁰ Here the term *structure* is not meant as the underlying arrangement or “fabric” of reality, but more as the composition of things that exist, also in a non-metaphysical way.

makes structure one of the most reliable candidates for what science actually uncovers about reality.⁶¹

Seen this way, structural realism sits somewhere between invention and discovery. It treats structure as something we *find* in the world, but acknowledges that we only ever access it through the conceptual tools available to us at a given moment. We do not discover structure in a raw form, but as filtered through our theories, models and ways of thinking. In this sense, structural realism reinforces the idea that structure is neither fully invented nor fully discovered.

4.2 Whether God Is Equal to Structure

Regarding the essential question of how our conception of the world can be true if we are the ones forming it, there is another compelling approach that Nagel referred to as well. René Descartes wanted to rebuild knowledge from absolute certain foundations. His aim was to arrive at a picture of reality that rooted in the subject and could not possibly be mistaken. The guarantee for this fit between mind and world was, for him, the existence of a non-deceiving God.⁶²

Nagel, however, argues that the pursuit of objectivity does not depend on this kind of certainty. As he writes, “his [Descartes] 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.”⁶³ What Nagel rejects here is not certainty itself, but the idea that objectivity must rest on undisputed foundations. We do not need some “metaphysical guarantor” to assure us that our minds really are in touch with reality. Instead, Nagel thinks that the very possibility of forming thoughts about the world already presupposes an existing relation between ourselves and the world. This bond is not something we must prove from the outside, it is, according to Nagel, implicit in our mental and physical makeup.

⁶¹ Cf. Ladyman 1998, p. 409-424.

⁶² Cf. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* 1996.

⁶³ Nagel 1986, p. 70.

It is important to note at this point that Nagel does not explicitly claim that the relation between mind and world is grounded in some sort of structure. Yet his view that objectivity relies on features of reality that remain accessible from multiple perspectives naturally raises the question of whether these features might be understood structurally. In what follows, I consider whether the role traditionally assigned to Descartes' God, which is securing the correspondence between thought and world, might be reinterpreted in structural terms, without implying that Nagel himself is committed to this view.

Descartes' God becomes, in Nagel's reading, a personification of an unexplained but necessary harmony, the one who makes knowledge possible at all. Nagel keeps this insight, but he lets go of both seeing it as a theological solution and the general demand for absolute certainty that motivated it. Nagel's interpretation of Descartes points to the insight that the connection between our mind and the world is not something we establish, but something we rely on. Even without appealing to God, we assume that the world makes sense to us, that our concepts connect to reality, and that our cognitions as well as perceptions are not misleading. This assumption is not proven by science, but it is what makes science possible in the first place.

What this debate shows is that, for Descartes, God could be understood as the underlying substance of the world, since a non-deceiving God would guarantee that our perceptions are not fundamentally mistaken. But this idea does not hold up with the further features this structure would have. The concept of God usually implies a personal being with intentions and agency, while structure would have to be impersonal and beyond human attributes. For Nagel, the fit between mind and world is real, however it does not require a metaphysical agent to secure it.

Nagel also stresses that we should not think of ourselves as occupying the center of the world. Even though our own minds naturally feel central to us, they are not central in any metaphysical sense. As he puts it, "the world is not our world"⁶⁴. The universe does not revolve around human experience, and nothing about reality gives our standpoint a privileged status. Later he reinforces this point by noting that the world "[...] contains us all, and none of us occupies a metaphysically privileged position"⁶⁵. For Nagel, recognizing

⁶⁴ Cf. Nagel 1986, p. 18

⁶⁵ Nagel 1986, p. 54

that reality is fundamentally centerless, and that the human perspective is only one among countless possible perspectives is an essential aspect for him. Letting go of the idea that we stand at the middle of things is therefore a crucial step toward understanding structure without projecting human traits, purposes, or meanings onto the world.

5. Beyond the “View from Nowhere”? Considering a “View from Everywhere”

The previous chapters have now shown us why Nagel’s ideal of a completely detached standpoint cannot be realized. The limits of human perspective, language that relies on concepts and similar aspects are structural, not merely practical. The appeal of the ideal however remains. If we cannot escape our standpoint, perhaps we can compensate for this limitation by expanding it. This chapter examines whether an alternative ideal, a “view from everywhere”, can offer a more realistic way of approaching objectivity. Instead of attempting to transcend subjectivity entirely, such an approach would combine multiple situated perspectives in order to broaden our understanding of the world.

We have already seen this earlier in a case from science, which made this point clear. Astronomy became more objective by linking observations taken from different standpoints, with different tools and under different assumptions. Similarly, in our everyday life, we often correct our own limited perspective by considering how things appear to others. Each standpoint exposes something the others miss, therefore putting them together might reveal more.

This approach seems especially appealing, considering Nagel’s insistence that objectivity is a matter of degree. If objectivity consists in extending our view beyond the limits of our own standpoint, then expanding the range of perspectives we take into account seems like the natural continuation of this process. A “view from everywhere” would represent the furthest possible extension of this movement, which is a standpoint that incorporates all perspectives, rather than attempting to eliminate them.

Despite it being very appealing, the idea of a “view from everywhere” faces a fundamental difficulty. The main issue is not that perspectives cannot be combined at all, but that combining them does not change their basic nature. What results from such integration is still a standpoint, not a standpoint-free view. The crucial point is that you cannot “add up” subjectivities into objectivity, as this only leads to a more expansive form of subjectivity, however not a perspective-less account of the world.

This becomes clearer when we consider what it would mean to “combine” perspectives. Each perspective is shaped by the conceptual and perceptual capacities of the subject who occupies it, as well as their personal background. Integrating multiple perspectives therefore requires some sort of framework within which they can be related, compared and maybe even synthesized. But this framework is itself a perspective. The result would not be a neutral, all-encompassing view, but a collection of perspectives interpreted from within a particular conceptual scheme.

This is why a “view from everywhere” is not a definitive solution to Nagel’s problem. It does not escape the structural limitations of perspective, as it only adds several subjective views together. The blind spot that Nagel identifies, meaning the standpoint from which the picture is constructed still remains. No matter how many perspectives are integrated, the integration itself does not transcend into some perspective-free realm.

A helpful illustration of this point comes from contemporary discussions about co-consciousness. Cochrane’s analysis of the Hogan twins, which are conjoined twins who share parts of their thalamic structures, shows that distinct streams of experience can, under rare neurological conditions, be partially integrated into a shared field of awareness.⁶⁶ The twins report that they are able to feel aspects of each other’s sensory experiences, which suggests a form of experiential overlap that goes beyond ordinary intersubjective understanding.

This example is philosophically interesting because it demonstrates that perspectives can, in some cases, be merged or coordinated in ways that expand what is accessible to a single subject. However, it is crucial not to overstate what this shows. Even in such extraordinary cases, the result is not objectivity. It is not a view from nowhere nor a perspective-free standpoint. It could be said that it is a collective subjectivity, so a shared experiential field. The Hogan twins therefore do not access the world from nowhere, but from a jointly constituted standpoint. The analogy therefore reinforces that, even when perspectives are merged, the result still remains a perspective.

Even if it cannot replace Nagel’s ideal, the “view from everywhere” still clarifies something important. It shows why full objectivity is out of reach, while also explaining why the

⁶⁶ Cf. Cochrane 2021, p. 1020 ff.

pursuit of greater objectivity is not pointless. Broadening the range of perspectives through new methods, new standpoints, and new forms of understanding does not free us from having a perspective, but it does reduce the distortions that come from relying on a too narrow one. Seen this way, the “view from everywhere” is a great way of showing again where the core problem of Nagel’s project lies. It marks the point where the strive to transcend perspective turns into the more realistic task of working with it. Objectivity becomes a direction of movement rather than a final position. It should be seen as a continuing attempt to stretch our view, test our assumptions and compare what other standpoints reveal.

6. Conclusion

With this thesis I aimed to examine whether Thomas Nagel's ideal of a "view from nowhere" can offer a genuinely objective grasp of reality's structure, or whether the subjective standpoint comes with certain limits that cannot be overcome. The previous chapters approached this question from different angles. Starting with philosophy of mind, as well as epistemology, aspects of philosophy of language and finally metaphysics. The results that these distinct approaches deliver construct a sound picture. While objectivity remains an unattainable ideal, the aspiration to a fully perspective-free standpoint cannot be realized. What emerges instead is a more modest but philosophically richer understanding of objectivity, that can be seen as a gradual expansion of our view, however always shaped by the standpoint from which it begins.

Chapter 2 showed why the problem begins with consciousness. Nagel's analysis of the bat, the Martian scientist, and related thought experiments such as Mary's Room and philosophical zombies revealed a fundamental distinction between first-person and third-person access. No amount of physical or functional information captures what an experience is like from the inside. This is however not a temporary epistemic gap but a structural feature of consciousness. The privacy of mental states, as reinforced by Block, Van Gulick, Wittgenstein, and Giampieri-Deutsch, demonstrated that subjective experience is accessible only from the standpoint of the subject who undergoes it. The mind-body problem, as Nagel's reframes it, can therefore be seen not a discussion about substances, but as a tension between two irreducible standpoints. It may be the case that physicalism could be true, but our current conceptual resources cannot make sense of how subjective experience fits into such an objective picture of the world.

Chapter 3 extended this tension beyond the philosophy of mind. Nagel's account of objectivity as a gradual movement away from one's own perspective showed why the ideal of a "view from nowhere" is compelling. Abstraction allows us to identify features of the world that do not depend on how things appear to us. Scientific progress, as we have seen with the example about the paradigm-shift from geocentrism to heliocentrism illustrates how stepping back from anthropocentric assumptions helps us acquire more general and reliable models.

Yet the chapter also showed why this movement has limits. Language cannot escape its own conditions of application, as our conceptual scheme shapes what can be expressed or even thought. Observation itself is not neutral, and Nagel's "blind spot" metaphor captured the deepest limitation, namely that the standpoint from which we form an, more or less, objective picture cannot be included within that picture. A fully detached standpoint is therefore conceptually impossible. Objectivity therefore becomes a matter of degree, not a final position.

Chapter 4 turned to the metaphysical implications of these limits. The central question was whether structure is something we discover or something we impose. Drawing on Nagel, Tegmark and debates in contemporary metaphysics, the chapter argued that structure cannot be absolutely classified as either invented or discovered. The world contains regularities that exist independently of our concepts, as the example about gold showed that it existed before chemistry named it. But our access to these regularities is always mediated by the conceptual tools we use to describe them. The distinction between defining and measuring clarified this point. While measurement tracks manifestations that are already there, definitions carve conceptual boundaries that make those manifestations understandable.

Structural realism offered an interesting middle position. It treats structure as mind-independent but acknowledges that we only ever grasp it through theories and models shaped by human cognition. The chapter also considered whether the function Descartes assigned to God, which is being a metaphysical guarantor of truth between the mind and world, can be reinterpreted in structural terms, while remaining clear that this interpretive step goes beyond what Nagel himself explicitly claims. One further essential aspect of Nagel was that reality is centerless, and the human standpoint therefore has no privileged metaphysical status.

Chapter 5 examined whether an alternative ideal, a "view from everywhere", could avoid the problems of the "view from nowhere." While integrating multiple perspectives can broaden our understanding, it does not eliminate standpoint. Combining perspectives produces a more expansive subjectivity, but not a perspective-free view. Even extraordinary cases of co-consciousness, such as the Hogan twins, illustrate this point. Perspectives can merge, but the result is still a standpoint and the blind spot remains. The "view from

everywhere” therefore cannot replace Nagel’s ideal, but it clarifies why objectivity is best understood as a direction of movement rather than a destination.

The guiding question of this thesis was whether Nagel’s “view from nowhere” can provide an objective grasp of reality’s structure. The analysis showed us, that this ideal must be rejected, for following reason: a perspective-free standpoint is impossible for beings who cannot leave their own mode of access behind. Yet structure needs to be so fundamental that it is mind-independent, therefore grasping it “as it is” would require precisely such an objective view, so one that does not filter reality through a particular perspective. The resulting tension does not undermine the possibility of structure, but it reveals the limits of our anthropocentric position. We encounter structure only through the conceptual and perceptual tools available to us, tools that do not create structure but shape how it appears. The limitation therefore lies on the side of the subject, not on the side of what is to be known. Nagel’s openness to a future, expanded physicalism reflects this. Our current frameworks may be too narrow to integrate subjective experience, but nothing rules out the possibility that new conceptual resources could bring us closer to a more comprehensive understanding of the world’s underlying order.

It can be concluded that the “view from nowhere” cannot deliver a complete, perspective-free account of reality. But it remains a powerful theoretical ideal that has its reason for being.

The fundamental difference between subjectivity and objectivity is not a flaw to be eliminated but a structural feature of finite, embodied cognition. Recognizing that this is exactly what shapes our human perception of the world helps to clarify its natural limits and further shows us its possibilities. Objectivity becomes the ongoing task of extending our view, comparing perspectives, and refining our conceptual tools, while acknowledging that the standpoint from which we do so can never be left behind.

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