

## **Nagel on Ethics**

Nagel is first and foremost proposing a methodology for deciding the metaethical question. We need to do first order moral theorizing and see how it goes.

Here are what he takes to be some relevant considerations:

- (1) Our practice of engaging in practical reason requires that we be able to ask, in an objective sense, “what should I do?” So giving up on objectivity is a gigantic cost of a theory.

“We cannot evade our freedom. Once we have developed the capacity to recognize our own desires and motives, we are faced with the choice of whether to act as they incline us to act, and in facing that choice we are inevitably faced with an evaluative question” (118).

“The opposition here is between a theory about how things are and a practice that would be impossible if this was how things were” (116-117).

- (2) Thinking about abstract metaphysics is not the way to decide the matter: The claim to objectivity does not depend on the existence of “a universe of moral facts that impinge on us causally.” (Compare to mathematics). We take there to be objective facts about some subject matter when we have uncontroversial and well-developed methods for answering questions about the subject matter that have a good claim to be reliable. So the way forward is to do some first order moral theorizing and see how it goes:

“Only the effort to reason about morality can show us whether it is possible – whether in thinking about what to do and how to live, we can find methods, reasons and principles whose validity does not have to be subjectively or relativistically qualified” (102).

- (3) Ultimately, claims about lack of objectivity are going to have to compete with first order moral claims – claims like “the oppression of women is wrong.”

“The claim that, at the most objective level, the question of what we should do becomes meaningless has to compete head-to-head with specific claims about what in fact we should do and their ground.” (115).

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<https://ocw.mit.edu/>

24.00 Problems of Philosophy  
Fall 2019

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.