THE VIEW FROM NOWHERE

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I

INTRODUCTION

This book is about a single problem: how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included. It is a problem that faces every creature with the impulse and the capacity to transcend its particular point of view and to conceive of the world as a whole.

Though it is a single problem, it has many aspects. The difficulty of reconciling the two standpoints arises in the conduct of life as well as in thought. It is the most fundamental issue about morality, knowledge, freedom, the self, and the relation of mind to the physical world. Our response or lack of response to it will substantially determine our conception of the world and of ourselves, and our attitude toward our lives, our actions, and our relations with others. By tracing this element through a number of philosophical problems, I hope to offer a way of seeing them that others may also find natural.

If one could say how the internal and external standpoints are related, how each of them can be developed and modified in order to take the other into account, and how in conjunction they are to govern the thought and action of each person, it would amount to a world view. What I have to say about these questions is not unified enough to deserve that title; one of my claims will be that often the pursuit of a highly unified conception of life and the world leads to philosophical mistakes—to false reductions or to the refusal to recognize part of what is real.

Still, I want to describe a way of looking at the world and living in it that is suitable for complex beings without a naturally unified standpoint. It is based on a deliberate effort to juxtapose the internal and external or subjective and objective views at full strength, in order to achieve unification when it is possible and to recognize clearly when it is not. Instead of a unified world view, we get the interplay of these two uneasily related types of conception, and the essentially incompletable effort to reconcile them. The transcendent impulse is both a creative and a destructive force.

I find it natural to regard life and the world in this way—and that includes the conflicts between the standpoints and the discomfort caused by obstacles to their integration. 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 those problems. The perplexities do not result from mistakes about the operation of language or thought, and there is no hope of a Kantian or Wittgensteinian purity, to be attained if we avoid certain tempting missteps in the employment of reason or language.

Objectivity is a method of understanding. It is beliefs and attitudes that are objective in the primary sense. Only derivatively do we call objective the truths that can be arrived at in this way. To acquire a more objective understanding of some aspect of life or the world, we step back from our initial view of it and form a new conception which has that view and its relation to the world as its object. In other words, we place ourselves in the world that is to be understood. The old view then comes to be regarded as an appearance, more subjective than the new view, and correctable or confirmable by reference to it. The process can be repeated, yielding a still more objective conception.

It will not always yield a result, and sometimes it will be thought to yield a result when it really doesn't: then, as Nietzsche warned, one will get a false objectification of an aspect of reality that cannot be better understood from a more objective standpoint. Although there is a connection between objectivity and reality—only the supposition that we and our appearances are parts of a larger reality makes it reasonable to seek understanding by stepping back from the appearances in this way—still not all reality is better understood the more objectively it is viewed. Appearance and perspective are essential parts of what there is, and in some respects they are best understood from a less detached standpoint. Realism underlies the claims of objectivity and detachment, but it supports them only up to a point.

Though I shall for convenience often speak of two standpoints, the subjective and the objective, and though the various places in which this

opposition is found have much in common, the distinction between more subjective and more objective views is really a matter of degree, and it covers a wide spectrum. 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. The wider the range of subjective types to which a form of understanding is accessible—the less it depends on specific subjective capacities—the more objective it is. A standpoint that is objective by comparison with the personal view of one individual may be subjective by comparison with a theoretical standpoint still farther out. The standpoint of morality is more objective than that of private life, but less objective than the standpoint of physics. We may think of reality as a set of concentric spheres, progressively revealed as we detach gradually from the contingencies of the self. This will become clearer when we discuss the interpretation of objectivity in relation to specific areas of life and understanding.

I shall offer a defense and also a critique of objectivity. Both are necessary in the present intellectual climate, for objectivity is both underrated and overrated, sometimes by the same persons. It is underrated by those who don't regard it as a method of understanding the world as it is in itself. It is overrated by those who believe it can provide a complete view of the world on its own, replacing the subjective views from which it has developed. These errors are connected: they both stem from an insufficiently robust sense of reality and of its independence of any particular form of human understanding.

The fundamental idea behind both the validity and the limits of objectivity is that we are small creatures in a big world of which we have only very partial understanding, and that how things seem to us depends both on the world and on our constitution. We can add to our knowledge of the world by accumulating information at a given level—by extensive observation from one standpoint. But we can raise our understanding to a new level only if we examine that relation between the world and ourselves which is responsible for our prior understanding, and form a new conception that includes a more detached understanding of ourselves, of the world, and of the interaction between them. Thus objectivity allows us to transcend our particular viewpoint and develop an expanded consciousness that takes in the world more fully. All this applies to values and attitudes as well as to beliefs and theories.

Every objective advance creates a new conception of the world that includes oneself, and one's former conception, within its scope; so it inevitably poses the problem of what to do with the older, more subjective view, and how to combine it with the new one. A succession of objec-

tive advances may take us to a new conception of reality that leaves the personal or merely human perspective further and further behind. But if what we want is to understand the whole world, we can't forget about those subjective starting points indefinitely; we and our personal perspectives belong to the world. One limit encountered by the pursuit of objectivity appears when it turns back on the self and tries to encompass subjectivity in its conception of the real. The recalcitrance of this material to objective understanding requires both a modification of the form of objectivity and a recognition that it cannot by itself provide a complete picture of the world, or a complete stance toward it.

Both the content of an objective view and its claims to completeness are inevitably affected by the attempt to combine it with the view from where we are. The reverse is also true; that is, the subjective standpoint and its claims are modified in the attempt to coexist with the objective. Much of what I have to say will concern the possibilities of integration; I shall discuss the proper form, and the limits, of objectivity with respect to a range of issues. But I shall also point out ways in which the two 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. Apart from the chance that this kind of tension will generate something new, it is best to be aware of the ways in which life and thought are split, if that is how things are.

The internal-external tension pervades human life, but it is particularly prominent in the generation of philosophical problems. I shall concentrate on four topics: the metaphysics of mind, the theory of knowledge, free will, and ethics. But the problem has equally important manifestations with respect to the metaphysics of space and time, the philosophy of language, and aesthetics. In fact there is probably no area of philosophy in which it doesn't play a significant role.

The ambition to get outside of ourselves has obvious limits, but it is not always easy to know where they are or when they have been transgressed. We rightly think that the pursuit of detachment from our initial standpoint is an indispensable method of advancing our understanding of the world and of ourselves, increasing our freedom in thought and action, and becoming better. But since we are who we are, we can't get outside of ourselves completely. Whatever we do, we remain subparts of the world with limited access to the real nature of the rest of it and of ourselves. There is no way of telling how much of reality lies beyond the reach of present or future objectivity or any other conceivable form of human understanding.

Objectivity itself leads to the recognition that its own capacities are

probably limited, since in us it is a human faculty and we are conspicuously finite beings. The radical form of this recognition is philosophical skepticism, in which the objective standpoint undermines itself by the same procedures it uses to call into question the prereflective standpoint of ordinary life in perception, desire, and action. Skepticism is radical doubt about the possibility of reaching any kind of knowledge, freedom, or ethical truth, given our containment in the world and the impossibility of creating ourselves from scratch.

One of my concerns will be to consider the appropriate attitude to these different forms of skepticism, given that they cannot be ruled out as nonsensical without adopting spurious reductionist analyses of truth, freedom, or value. In general, I believe that skepticism is revealing and not refutable, but that it does not vitiate the pursuit of objectivity. It is worth trying to bring one's beliefs, one's actions, and one's values more under the influence of an impersonal standpoint even without the assurance that this could not be revealed from a still more external standpoint as an illusion. In any case, we seem to have no choice but to make the attempt.

The limit of objectivity with which I shall be most concerned is one that follows directly from the process of gradual detachment by which objectivity is achieved. An objective standpoint is created by leaving a more subjective, individual, or even just human perspective behind; but there are things about the world and life and ourselves that cannot be adequately understood from a maximally objective standpoint, however much it may extend our understanding beyond the point from which we started. A great deal is essentially connected to a particular point of view, or type of point of view, and the attempt to give a complete account of the world in objective terms detached from these perspectives inevitably leads to false reductions or to outright denial that certain patently real phenomena exist at all.

This form of objective blindness is most conspicuous in the philosophy of mind, where one or another external theory of the mental, from physicalism to functionalism, is widely held. What motivates these views is the assumption that what there really is must be understandable in a certain way—that reality is in a narrow sense objective reality. For many philosophers the exemplary case of reality is the world described by physics, the science in which we have achieved our greatest detachment from a specifically human perspective on the world. But for precisely that reason physics is bound to leave undescribed the irreducibly subjective character of conscious mental processes, whatever may be their intimate relation to the physical operation of the brain. The subjectivity of consciousness is an irreducible feature of reality—without which we couldn't

do physics or anything else—and it must occupy as fundamental a place in any credible world view as matter, energy, space, time, and numbers.

The ways in which mental phenomena are related to the brain, and personal identity to the biological persistence of the organism, are matters that cannot now be settled, but the possibilities are appropriate subjects for philosophical speculation. I believe it is already clear that any correct theory of the relation between mind and body would radically transform our overall conception of the world and would require a new understanding of the phenomena now thought of as physical. Even though the manifestations of mind evident to us are local—they depend on our brains and similar organic structures—the general basis of this aspect of reality is not local, but must be presumed to inhere in the general constituents of the universe and the laws that govern them.

There is a problem of excess objectivity also in ethics. Objectivity is the driving force of ethics as it is of science: it enables us to develop new motives when we occupy a standpoint detached from that of our purely personal desires and interests, just as in the realm of thought it enables us to develop new beliefs. Morality gives systematic form to the objective will. But escaping from oneself is as delicate a matter with respect to motives as it is with respect to belief. By going too far one may arrive at skepticism or nihilism; short of this there is also a temptation to deprive the subjective standpoint of any independent role in the justification of action.

Some impersonal moral theories embrace this conclusion, holding that we should try so far as possible to transform ourselves into instruments for the pursuit of the general good, objectively conceived (though our own interests play their part along with everyone else's in defining that good). But while transcendence of one's own point of view in action is the most important creative force in ethics, I believe that its results cannot completely subordinate the personal standpoint and its prereflective motives. The good, like the true, includes irreducibly subjective elements.

The question is how to combine objective and subjective values in the control of a single life. They cannot simply exist side by side without interference, and it seems impossible to give the authority to either in deciding conflicts between them. This problem is the analogue in ethics to the problem in metaphysics of combining into some conception of a single world those features of reality that are revealed to different perspectives at different levels of subjectivity or objectivity. A realist, antireductionist theory of anything is bound to be faced with a problem of this form. The mind-body problem is one example and the problem of how to design ethics for individual human life is another. A third is the problem of the meaning of life, which arises because we are capable of

occupying a standpoint from which our most compelling personal concerns appear insignificant.

What really happens in the pursuit of objectivity is that a certain element of oneself, the impersonal or objective self, which can escape from the specific contingencies of one's creaturely point of view, is allowed to predominate. Withdrawing into this element one detaches from the rest and develops an impersonal conception of the world and, so far as possible, of the elements of self from which one has detached. That creates the new problem of reintegration, the problem of how to incorporate these results into the life and self-knowlege of an ordinary human being. One has to *be* the creature whom one has subjected to detached examination, and one has in one's entirety to *live* in the world that has been revealed to an extremely distilled fraction of oneself.

It is necessary to combine the recognition of our contingency, our finitude, and our containment in the world with an ambition of transcendence, however limited may be our success in achieving it. The right attitude in philosophy is to accept aims that we can achieve only fractionally and imperfectly, and cannot be sure of achieving even to that extent. It means in particular not abandoning the pursuit of truth, even though if you want the truth rather than merely something to say, you will have a good deal less to say. Pursuit of the truth requires more than imagination: it requires the generation and decisive elimination of alternative possibilities until, ideally, only one remains, and it requires a habitual readiness to attack one's own convictions. That is the only way real belief can be arrived at.

This is in some respects a deliberately reactionary work. There is a 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. This view inherits the crude appeal of logical positivism even though that particular version of idealism is out of date. Philosophy seems regularly to generate announcements that what past philosophers were trying to do was impossible or nonsensical, and that a proper appreciation of the conditions of thought will lead us to see that all those deep questions about its relation to reality are unreal.

Philosophy is also infected by a broader tendency of contemporary intellectual life: scientism. Scientism is actually a special form of idealism, for it puts one type of human understanding in charge of the universe and what can be said about it. At its most myopic it assumes that everything there is must be understandable by the employment of scientific theories like those we have developed to date—physics and evolutionary biology are the current paradigms—as if the present age were not just another in the series.

Precisely because of their dominance, these attitudes are ripe for

attack. Of course, some of the opposition is foolish: antiscientism can degenerate into a rejection of science—whereas in reality it is essential to the defense of science against misappropriation. But these excesses shouldn't deter us from an overdue downward revision of the prevailing intellectual self-esteem. Too much time is wasted because of the assumption that methods already in existence will solve problems for which they were not designed; too many hypotheses and systems of thought in philosophy and elsewhere are based on the bizarre view that we, at this point in history, are in possession of the basic forms of understanding needed to comprehend absolutely anything.

I believe that the methods needed to understand ourselves do not yet exist. So this book contains a great deal of speculation about the world and how we fit into it. Some of it will seem wild, but the world is a strange place, and nothing but radical speculation gives us a hope of coming up with any candidates for the truth. That, of course, is not the same as coming up with the truth: if truth is our aim, we must be resigned to achieving it to a very limited extent, and without certainty. To redefine the aim so that its achievement is largely guaranteed, through various forms of reductionism, relativism, or historicism, is a form of cognitive wish-fulfillment. Philosophy cannot take refuge in reduced ambitions. It is after eternal and nonlocal truth, even though we know that is not what we are going to get.

The question of how to combine the external view of this embarrassing but unavoidable activity with the view from inside is just another instance of our ubiquitous problem. Even those who regard philosophy as real and important know that they are at a particular and, we may hope, early stage of its development, limited by their own primitive intellectual capacities and relying on the partial insights of a few great figures from the past. As we judge their results to be mistaken in fundamental ways, so we must assume that even the best efforts of our own time will come to seem blind eventually. This lack of confidence should be an integral part of the enterprise, not something that it needs a historical argument to produce. We also have to recognize that philosophical ideas are acutely sensitive to individual temperament, and to wishes. Where the evidence and the arguments are too meager to determine a result, the slack tends to be taken up by other factors. The personal flavor and motivation of each great philosopher's version of reality is unmistakable, and the same is true of many lesser efforts.

But we can't let this standpoint take over: we can't either engage in the subject or understand the work of others if we look at it only from outside, in a historicist or clinical mood. It is one thing to recognize the limitations that inevitably come from occupying a particular position in

the history of a culture; it is another to convert these into nonlimitations by embracing a historicism which says there is no truth except what is internal to a particular historical standpoint. I think that here, as elsewhere, we are stuck with the clash of standpoints. Absurdity comes with the territory, and what we need is the will to put up with it.

Even if philosophical problems were mere manifestations of our particular historical situation or of the accidental forms of our language, we probably wouldn't be able to free ourselves of them. If you are inside something like a language, the external view doesn't supplant the internal view or make it any less serious. (I can't read the words "is comprised of" without disgust even though I fully expect that in another hundred years the tide of misuse will have raised them to grammatical respectability and a place in the best dictionaries.) Recognition of the objective contingency of a language does nothing to diminish its normative reality for those who live in it. But philosophy is not like a particular language. Its sources are preverbal and often precultural, and one of its most difficult tasks is to express unformed but intuitively felt problems in language without losing them.

The history of the subject is a continual discovery of problems that baffle existing concepts and existing methods of solution. At every point it faces us with the question of how far beyond the relative safety of our present language we can afford to go without risking complete loss of touch with reality. We are in a sense trying to climb outside of our own minds, an effort that some would regard as insane and that I regard as philosophically fundamental. Historicist interpretation doesn't make philosophical problems go away, any more than the earlier diagnoses of the logical positivists or the linguistic analysts did. To the extent that such no-nonsense theories have an effect, they merely threaten to impoverish the intellectual landscape for a while by inhibiting the serious expression of certain questions. In the name of liberation, these movements have offered us intellectual repression.

But that leaves a question. If the theories of historical captivity or grammatical delusion are not true, why have some philosophers felt themselves cured of their metaphysical problems by these forms of therapy? My counterdiagnosis is that a lot of philosophers are sick of the subject and glad to be rid of its problems. Most of us find it hopeless some of the time, but some react to its intractability by welcoming the suggestion that the enterprise is misconceived and the problems unreal. This makes them receptive not only to scientism but to deflationary metaphilosophical theories like positivism and pragmatism, which offer to raise us above the old battles.

This is more than the usual wish to transcend one's predecessors, for

it includes a rebellion against the philosophical impulse itself, which is felt as humiliating and unrealistic. It is natural to feel victimized by philosophy, but this particular defensive reaction goes too far. It is like the hatred of childhood and results in a vain effort to grow up too early, before one has gone through the essential formative confusions and exaggerated hopes that have to be experienced on the way to understanding anything. Philosophy is the childhood of the intellect, and a culture that tries to skip it will never grow up.

There is a persistent temptation to turn philosophy into something less difficult and more shallow than it is. It is an extremely difficult subject, and no exception to the general rule that creative efforts are rarely successful. I do not feel equal to the problems treated in this book. They seem to me to require an order of intelligence wholly different from mine. Others who have tried to address the central questions of philosophy will recognize the feeling.

II

MIND

1. Physical Objectivity

The natural place to begin is with our own position in the world. One of the strongest philosophical motives is the desire for a comprehensive picture of objective reality, since it is easy to assume that that is all there really is. But the very idea of objective reality guarantees that such a picture will not comprehend everything; we ourselves are the first obstacles to such an ambition.

To the extent that the world is objectively comprehensible—comprehensible from a standpoint independent of the constitution of this or that sentient being or type of sentient being—how do sentient beings fit into it? The question can be divided into three parts. First, does the mind itself have an objective character? Second, what is its relation to those physical aspects of reality whose objective status is less doubtful? Third, how can it be the case that one of the people in the world is *me*?

I shall take up these questions in order, in this chapter and the two following. The second question is the mind-body problem. The third question, how it is possible to be anyone in particular, expresses in purest form the difficulty of finding room in the world for oneself. How can it be? Am I, or are you, really the sort of thing that could be one of the particular creatures in the world? But I shall begin with the first question—whether the mind itself can be objectively understood. It under-