

IV

THE OBJECTIVE SELF

1. *Being Someone*

One acute problem of subjectivity remains even after points of view and subjective experiences are admitted to the real world—after the world is conceded to be full of people with minds, having thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that cannot be completely subdued by the physical conception of objectivity. This general admission still leaves us with an unsolved problem of particular subjectivity. The world so conceived, though extremely various in the types of things and perspectives it contains, is still centerless. It contains us all, and none of us occupies a meta-physically privileged position. Yet each of us, reflecting on this centerless world, must admit that one very large fact seems to have been omitted from its description: the fact that a particular person in it is himself.

What kind of fact is that? What kind of fact is it—if it is a fact—that I am Thomas Nagel? How *can* I be a particular person?

The question actually has two halves, which correspond to the two directions from which one can approach the relation between subjective and objective standpoints. First: how can a particular person be *me*? Given a complete description of the world from no particular point of view, including all the people in it, one of whom is Thomas Nagel, it seems on the one hand that something has been left out, something absolutely essential remains to be specified, namely which of them I am. But

on the other hand there seems no room in the centerless world for such a further fact: the world as it is from no point of view seems complete in a way that excludes such additions; it is just the world, and everything true of TN is already in it. So the first half of the question is this: how can it be true of a particular person, a particular individual, TN, who is just one of many persons in an objectively centerless world, that he is *me*?

The second half of the question is perhaps less familiar. It is this: how can I be *merely* a particular person? The problem here is not how it can be the case that I am this one rather than that one, but how I can be anything as specific as a particular person in the world at all—any person. The first question arises from the apparent completeness of a description of TN and the world which does not say whether or not he is *me*. This second question arises from something about the idea of 'I'. It can seem that as far as what I really am is concerned, any relation I may have to TN or any other objectively specified person must be accidental and arbitrary. I may occupy TN or see the world through the eyes of TN, but I can't *be* TN. I can't be a mere *person*. From this point of view it can appear that "I am TN," insofar as it is true, is not an identity but a subject-predicate proposition. Unless you have had this thought yourself it will probably seem obscure, but I hope to make it clearer.

The two halves of the question correspond to two directions in which it can be asked: How can TN be *me*? How can I be TN? They are not just questions about *me* and TN, for any of you can ask them about himself. But I shall speak about the subject in the first person, in the Cartesian style which is intended to be understood by others as applying in the first person to themselves.

It isn't easy to absorb the fact that I am contained in the world at all. It seems outlandish that the centerless universe, in all its spatiotemporal immensity, should have produced *me*, of all people—and produced *me* by producing TN. There was no such thing as *me* for ages, but with the formation of a particular physical organism at a particular place and time, suddenly there *is* *me*, for as long as the organism survives. In the objective flow of the cosmos this subjectively (to *me*) stupendous event produces hardly a ripple. How can the existence of one member of one species have this remarkable consequence?

These questions may strike you as ridiculous even if you ask them about yourself, but I am trying to evoke a sharp intuitive puzzle and to convince you that there is something real in it, even if its verbal expression is faulty. There may be cases where a trick of language produces the illusion of a question where none really exists, but this is not one of them. We can feel the question apart from its verbal expression, and the

difficulty is to pose it without turning it into something superficial, or inviting answers that may seem adequate to its verbal form but that don't really meet the problem beneath the surface. In philosophy the question is never just what we shall say. We can reach that point only after considerable effort has been made to express and deal with inchoate perplexity. Amazement that the universe should have come to contain a being with the unique property of being me is a very primitive feeling.

Let me begin with what I called the first half of the question—How can TN be me?—for its treatment will lead naturally into the second half.

The conception of the world that seems to leave no room for me is a familiar one that people carry around with them most of the time. It is a conception of the world as simply existing, seen from no particular perspective, no privileged point of view—as simply there, and hence apprehensible from various points of view. This centerless world contains everybody, and it contains not only their bodies but their minds. So it includes TN, an individual born at a certain time to certain parents, with a specific physical and mental history, who is at present thinking about metaphysics.

It includes all the individuals in the world, of every kind, and all their mental and physical properties. In fact it is the world, conceived from nowhere within it. But if it is supposed to be this world, there seems to be something about it that cannot be included in such a perspectiveless conception—the fact that one of those persons, TN, is the locus of my consciousness, the point of view from which I observe and act on the world.

This seems undeniably to be a further truth, in addition to the most detailed description of TN's history, experiences, and characteristics. Yet there seems no other way of expressing it than by speaking of me or my consciousness; so it appears to be a truth that can be stated and understood only from my perspective, in the first person. And therefore it seems to be something for which there is no room in the world conceived as simply there, and centerless.

If we suppose 'being me' to be any objective property whatever of the person TN, or any relation of that person to something else, the supposition quickly collapses. We are bound to include that property or that relation in the objective conception of the world that contains TN. But as soon as it has been made an aspect of the objective TN, I can ask again, "Which of these persons am I?" and the answer tells me something further. No further fact expressible without the first person will do the trick: however complete we make the centerless conception of the world, the fact that I am TN will be omitted. There seems to be no room for it in such a conception.

But in that case there seems to be no room for it in the world. For when we conceive of the world as centerless we are conceiving of it as it is. Not being a solipsist, I do not believe that the point of view from which I see the world is *the* perspective of reality. Mine is only one of the many points of view from which the world is seen. The centerless conception of the world must include all the innumerable subjects of consciousness on a roughly equal footing—even if some see the world more clearly than others. So what is left out of the centerless conception—the supposed fact that I am TN—seems to be something for which there is no room in the world, rather than something which cannot be included in a special kind of description or conception of the world. The world cannot contain irreducibly first-person facts. But if that is so, the centerless conception cannot be said to leave something *out*, after all. It includes everything and everyone, and what it does not include is not there to be left out. What is left out must exist, and if the world as a whole really doesn't have a particular point of view, how can one of its inhabitants have the special property of being me? I seem to have on my hands a fact about the world, or about TN, which both must exist (for how things are would be incomplete without it) and cannot exist (for how things are cannot include it).

If this problem has a solution, it must be one which brings the subjective and objective conceptions of the world into harmony. That would require an interpretation of the irreducibly first-person truth that TN is me and some development of the centerless conception of the world to accommodate that interpretation. If it is not a fact about the centerless world that I am TN, then something must be said about what else it is, for it certainly seems not only true but extremely nontrivial. Indeed, it seems to be one of the most fundamental things I can say about the world. I shall argue that it provides a clear example of the ineliminability of indexicals from a complete conception of the world, and that it also reveals something about each of us.¹

2. A Semantic Diagnosis

The problem is to account for the content of the thought, and its truth, without trivializing it. I think this can be done. But first it is necessary to

1. It is worth mentioning that this problem is similar in form to a problem about the reality of time. There is no room in a fully objective description of the world for the identification of a particular time as the present. The temporal order of events can be described from no point of view within the world, but their presence, pastness, or futurity cannot. Yet the fact that it is *now* the particular time that it is seems to be a fundamental truth which we cannot do without. The tenseless description of the temporal order is essentially incomplete, for it leaves out the passage of time. See Dummett (2).

dispose of an objection. It might be held that the statement that I am TN, when posing as the expression of a philosophical thought, is really devoid of significant content—and that the only thought it can be used to express is trivial or at any rate unremarkable: apart from a simple question of semantics, there is no real problem here. I am going to take up this deflationary claim before offering a positive account, because it will help us to locate what is distinctive about the philosophical self-locating thought, and how it transcends the mundane semantics of the first person.²

The objection is this. Only someone who misunderstands the logic of the first person can believe that "I am TN" states an important truth that cannot be stated without the first person. When we look at the actual use of that form of words, we see that although it is a special kind of statement, it states no special kind of truth—for it is governed by truth-conditions that are entirely expressible without indexicals.

The statement "I am TN" is true if and only if uttered by TN. The statement "Today is Tuesday" is true if and only if uttered on Tuesday. To understand the operation of such statements it is necessary only to place them in their context of utterance in an entirely centerless conception of the world; then we see that their significance and truth does not depend on the existence of further "facts," expressible only in the first person (or the present tense), which mysteriously seem to be both essential aspects of the world and completely excluded from it. The sense of these statements requires only that the world contain ordinary people, like TN, who use the first person in the ordinary way. Their sense is not the same as that of the third-person statements that express their truth-conditions, since their truth depends on who makes them. They can't be *replaced* by third-person analyses. But the facts that make them true or false are all expressible by such third-person statements.

On this view the world just is the centerless world, and it can be spoken and thought about from within partly with the help of expressions like "I," which form statements whose truth-conditions depend on the context of utterance, a context which in turn is fully accommodated in the centerless conception of the world. Everything about the use of the first person can be analyzed without using the first person. This completely general point provides a simple answer to our question, what kind of truth is it that one of the people in the world, TN, is me? It is a quite minimal truth: the statement "I am TN" is automatically and uninterestingly true if TN makes it. Once we understand its logic, no further question arises as to what it says.

What makes it appear at first glance to express a mysterious further

2. Here I discuss only one version of the objection. Others are taken up in Nagel (6).

fact about the world is that it can't be translated into any statement which doesn't include "I" or some other indexical. It might be translated approximately as "The person making this statement is TN", but then we are still left with the residual indexical "this statement," and its relation to the centerless world. The point is that indexicals in general are untranslatable into objective terms, because they are used to refer to persons, things, places, and times from a particular position within the world, without depending on the user's objective knowledge of that position. It is elementary that one can't translate a statement whose truth depends on its context of utterance into one whose truth does not.

This cannot be used to manufacture a metaphysical mystery. "I am TN" seems to state a further truth about the world only because I don't have to know who I am in order to use "I" to refer to TN. That is an instance of the general rule that a speaker can refer to himself as "I" without knowing who, objectively, he is. Hardly a profound truth about the universe.

My objection to this semantic diagnosis is that it doesn't make the problem go away.

It should be a sign of something wrong with the argument that the corresponding semantic point about "now" would not defuse someone's puzzlement about what kind of fact it is that a particular time is the present. The truth-conditions of tensed statements can be given in tenseless terms, but that does not remove the sense that a tenseless description of the history of the world (including the description of people's tensed statements and their truth values) is fundamentally incomplete, because it cannot tell us which time is the present. Similarly, the fact that it is possible to give impersonal truth-conditions for first-person statements does not enable one to make those statements without using the first person. The crucial question is whether the elimination of this particular first-person thought in favor of its impersonal truth-conditions leaves a significant gap in our conception of the world. I think it does.

There is nothing wrong with the semantic account of "I" in itself, as one indexical among others, though there is room for disagreement over the details. It tells you how the first person functions in ordinary communication, as when someone asks, "Who owns the blue Ford with the New Jersey license plates that's parked in my driveway?" and you say, "I do," or when someone asks, "Which of you is TN?" and I say "I am." There is no inclination to believe that such statements express anything remarkable: ordinary objective facts about the speaker make them true or false. Nor is the existence of any special kind of fact involved in the *making* of such statements. They are just utterances produced by ordinary individuals like TN.

But none of this either explains or exorcises the quite different

thought that I have when I say to myself, looking at the world full of people saying "I own that car," or "I am his wife," that of all the people in this centerless world, the one I am is TN: this thinking subject regards the world through the person TN. When TN says to someone he meets at a cocktail party, "Hello, I'm TN," that is not the thought he is communicating. Ordinary first-person statements like "Hello, I'm TN" or "I own that car" convey information that others can express in the third person, though they are not synonymous with the corresponding third-person statements. But even when all that public information about the person TN has been included in an objective conception, the additional thought that TN is *me* seems clearly to have further content. And it is important that the content is startling.

While the semantic objection doesn't diagnose the problem out of existence, it suggests that a solution must be general in some sense. The perception that gives rise to the problem can be expressed in the first person by anyone, and not only by me, so the use of "I" here must be governed by semantic conditions general enough to be applicable to any person who can have the thought: my first understanding of it may be in application to my own case, but in some sense I also understand what someone else would mean by it. We should therefore be able to say something about the content of the first-person thought that is also comprehensible to others. We need an analogue of the informational content of ordinary first-person statements if we are to explain why "I am TN" seems to say more about the world than that the person speaking is called TN. This requires a specific account of how the word "I" refers when it is used to express the philosophical thought.

3. *The Centerless View*

To explain the special form of reference of "I" in this case we must turn to what I called the second half of the question, the half that asks not how a particular person, TN, can be me, but rather how I can be anything so specific as a particular person at all (TN as it happens).

How can this possibly be puzzling? What else could I be but a particular person?

As a first explanation we could say it is puzzling because my being TN (or whoever I in fact am) seems accidental, and my identity can't be accidental. So far as what I am essentially is concerned, it seems as if I just *happen* to be the publicly identifiable person TN—as if what I really am, this conscious subject, might just as well view the world from the perspective of a different person. The real me occupies TN, so to speak; or

the publicly identifiable person TN contains the real me. From a purely objective point of view my connection with TN seems arbitrary.

To arrive at this idea I begin by considering the world as a whole, as if from nowhere, and in those oceans of space and time TN is just one person among countless others. Taking up that impersonal standpoint produces in me a sense of complete detachment from TN, who is reduced to a momentary blip on the cosmic TV screen. How can I, who am thinking about the entire, centerless universe, be anything so specific as *this*: this measly, gratuitous creature existing in a tiny morsel of space-time, with a definite and by no means universal mental and physical organization? How can I be anything so *small* and *concrete* and *specific*?

I know this sounds like metaphysical megalomania of an unusually shameless kind. Merely being TN isn't good enough for me: I have to think of myself as the world soul in humble disguise. In mitigation I can plead only that the same thought is available to any of you. You are all subjects of the centerless universe and mere human or Martian identity should seem to you arbitrary. I am not saying that I individually am the subject of the universe: just that I am *a* subject that can have a conception of the centerless universe in which TN is an insignificant speck, who might easily never have existed at all. The self that seems incapable of being anyone in particular is the self that apprehends the world from without rather than from a standpoint within it. But there need not be only one such self.

The picture is this. Essentially I have no particular point of view at all, but apprehend the world as centerless. As it happens, I ordinarily view the world from a certain vantage point, using the eyes, the person, the daily life of TN as a kind of window. But the experiences and the perspective of TN with which I am directly presented are not the point of view of the true self, for the true self has no point of view and includes in its conception of the centerless world TN and his perspective among the contents of that world. It is this aspect of the self which is in question when I look at the world as a whole and ask, "How can TN be me? How can I be TN?" And it is what gives the self-locating philosophical thought its peculiar content.

This first description of the problem has to be modified, however. To evoke the problem I have spoken loosely of the "true" self and its essence, but in the previous chapter it was argued that we cannot discover our essential nature a priori—that it may include features not contained in our conception of ourselves. The fact that I seem able in imagination to detach this perspectiveless or objective self from TN does not show that it is a distinct thing, or that nothing else about TN belongs to me essentially. It does not show, as may at first appear, that the connec-

tion between me and TN is accidental. It does show, however, that something essential about me has nothing to do with my perspective and position in the world. That is what I want to examine.

How do I abstract the objective self from the person TN? By treating the individual experiences of that person as data for the construction of an objective picture. I throw TN into the world as a thing that interacts with the rest of it, and ask what the world must be like from no point of view in order to appear to him as it does from his point of view. For this purpose my special link with TN is irrelevant. Though I receive the information of his point of view directly, I try to deal with it for the purpose of constructing an objective picture just as I would if the information were coming to me indirectly. I do not give it any privileged status by comparison with other points of view.³

This naturally is an idealization. Much of my conception of the world comes directly from what TN delivers to me. I have had to rely heavily on TN's experience, language, and education, and I do not constantly subject each of his pretheoretical beliefs to detached assessment. But in a general way, I try to do with his perspective on the world what I could do if information about it were reaching me thousands of miles away, not pumped directly into my sensorium but known from outside.

The objective self should be able to deal with experiences from any point of view. It in fact receives those of TN directly, but it treats on an equal footing those it receives directly and those others it learns about only indirectly. So far as its essential nature is concerned, it could base its view of the world on a different set of experiences from those of TN, or even none at all coming directly from a perspective within the world, for in itself it has no such perspective. It is the perspectiveless subject that constructs a centerless conception of the world by casting all perspectives into the content of that world.

Suppose all the nerves feeding sensory data to my brain were cut but I were somehow kept breathing and nourished and conscious. And suppose auditory and visual experiences could be produced in me not by sound and light but by direct stimulation of the nerves, so that I could be fed information in words and images about what was going on in the

3. The idea of the objective self has something in common with the "metaphysical subject" of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* 5.641, though I stop short of excluding it from the world entirely. The metaphysical subject is the logical limit that we reach if all the contents of the mind, including its objective thoughts, are thrown into the world as properties of TN. The objective self is the last stage of the detaching subject before it shrinks to an extensionless point. It also has a good deal in common with Husserl's transcendental ego, though I do not share the "transcendental idealism" to which his phenomenology is committed (Husserl, sec. 41). Neither do I accept the solipsism of the *Tractatus*.

world, what other people saw and heard, and so forth. Then I would have a conception of the world without having any perspective on it. Even if I pictured it to myself I would not be viewing it from where I was. It might even be said that in the sense in which I am now TN, I would under those circumstances not be anyone.⁴

As things are, the objective self is only part of the point of view of an ordinary person, and its objectivity is developed to different degrees in different persons and at different stages of life and civilization. I have already discussed some aspects of that development. The basic step which brings it to life is not complicated and does not require advanced scientific theories: it is simply the step of conceiving the world as a place that includes the person I am within it, as just another of its contents—conceiving myself from outside, in other words. So I can step away from the unconsidered perspective of the particular person I thought I was. Next comes the step of conceiving from outside all the points of view and experiences of that person and others of his species, and considering the world as a place in which these phenomena are produced by interaction between these beings and other things. That is the beginning of science. And again it is I who have done this stepping back, not only from an individual viewpoint but from a specific type of viewpoint.

Because a centerless view of the world is one on which different persons can converge, there is a close connection between objectivity and intersubjectivity. By placing TN in a world along with everyone else, I pursue a conception of him and his point of view that others may share. At the first stage the intersubjectivity is still entirely human, and the objectivity is correspondingly limited. The conception is one that only other humans can share. But if the general human perspective is then placed in the same position as part of the world, the point of view from which this is done must be far more abstract, so it requires that we find within ourselves the capacity to view the world in some sense as very different creatures also might view it when abstracting from the specifics of their type of perspective. The pursuit of objectivity requires the cultivation of a rather austere universal objective self. While we can't free it entirely of infection with a particular human view and a particular historical stage, it represents a direction of possible development toward a universal conception and away from a parochial one.

The objective self that I find viewing the world through TN is not unique: each of you has one. Or perhaps I should say each of you is one, for the objective self is not a distinct entity. Each of us, then, in addition

4. For a similar fantasy see "Where Am I?" in Dennett. But more closely related to what I am saying is the fascinating discussion of self-identification in Evans, pp. 249–55.

to being an ordinary person, is a particular objective self, the subject of a perspectiveless conception of reality.

We can account for the content of the philosophical thought "I am TN" if we understand the "I" as referring to me qua subject of the impersonal conception of the world which contains TN. The reference is still essentially indexical, and cannot be eliminated in favor of an objective description, but the thought avoids triviality because it depends on the fact that this impersonal conception of the world, though it accords no special position to TN, is attached to and developed from the perspective of TN.

This also helps to account for the feeling of amazement that is part of the philosophical thought—a strange sense that I both am and am not the hub of the universe. I see myself as its subject or center when I think of the universe, including TN, in purely objective terms, and identify myself simply as the objective self which is the subject of this conception rather than as anything within its range, such as a physical organism, or the occupant of a particular position in space and time, or the subject of an individual perspective within the world. But I am also TN, and the world is not TN's world: he is not its subject. He is just one of the people in it, and none of them is its center or focal point. So I am both the logical focus of an objective conception of the world and a particular being in that world who occupies no central position whatever.

This explains how the thought "I am TN" can have a content that is nontrivial and indeed almost as remarkable as it seems at first. While it does not translate the thought into one about the world objectively conceived, it does identify an objective fact corresponding to the thought, which explains how it can have a content interesting enough to account for its philosophical "flavor". Because TN possesses or is an objective self, I can state a significant identity by referring to myself indexically under that aspect as "I," and again under the objective aspect of the publicly identifiable person TN—and I can make both references from the single standpoint of the possessor of an objective conception of the world that contains TN. This conception does not itself imply anything about who its subject is, or even that he exists at all inside the world being described. So far as the content of the objective view goes, it might be of a world in which I, its subject, never have existed and never will. But since the objective conception *has* a subject, the possibility of its presence in the world is there, and it allows me to bring the subjective and objective views together. Until they are brought together in this way, the purely objective conception will leave something out which is both true and remarkable.

Other forms of self-reference don't have the same impact. I can locate

myself in the world in different ways: for example I can think, "This hangover is TN's hangover." That brings the subjective and objective standpoints together, but it doesn't account for the import and sense of uncanniness that attach to the philosophical realization that I am TN. The "I" must refer in virtue of something larger whose inclusion in the world is not obvious, and the objective self qualifies for the role.

This problem has something in common with others, about informative identity statements that cannot be easily explained in terms of facts about the world. What kind of fact is it, for instance, that Hesperus is Phosphorus, or that water is H_2O ? If these are identities, and their terms are not definite descriptions but rigid designators (See Kripke (1)), they seem to correspond only to the "facts" that Venus is identical with itself or that water is the substance that it is. To explain why the statements are nevertheless not trivial it is necessary to give an account of how the terms refer—an account of our different types of relation to the things we talk about which explains the significance of the statements. There are rival theories about these matters, but they all attempt to put us into an objectively comprehensible relation to the things we are talking about.

The thought "I am TN" presents a similar problem, though the task is not to explain my dual relations of reference to something outside myself, but rather my dual relation to the entire world. In a sense there are two forms of reference to TN here, and we must explain the first-person reference in this philosophical context without trivializing the thought. What happens when I consider the world objectively is that an aspect of my identity comes into prominence which was previously concealed and which produces a sense of detachment from the world. It then comes to seem amazing that I am in fact attached to it at any particular point. The content of the thought that I am TN can be understood once the objective conception closes over itself by locating the subject that forms it at a particular point in the world that it encompasses.

The objective self is the only significant aspect under which I can refer to myself subjectively that is supplied by the objective conception of the world alone—because it is the subject of that conception. And it is the only aspect of myself that can seem at first only accidentally connected with TN's perspective—a self that views the world *through* the perspective of TN. I believe the possibility of this self-locating thought reveals something about us all, and not only about those who find it remarkable.

What it reveals is not just a peculiar form of self-reference but an aspect of what we are. The objective self functions independently enough to have a life of its own. It engages in various forms of detachment from and opposition to the rest of us, and is capable of auto-

mous development. In the following chapters I shall sometimes speak as if it were a distinct part of the mind. While it shouldn't be given a metaphysical interpretation, this way of speaking is not altogether innocent. In some sense I think the same faculty or aspect of us is involved in the various functions of objectivity, and I think it is something real. However we may have come to it, and however incomplete our development of its capacities, it places us both inside and outside the world, and offers us possibilities of transcendence which in turn create problems of reintegration. The reconciliation of these two aspects of ourselves is a primary philosophical task of human life—perhaps of any kind of intelligent life.

The existence of our objective capacity does not seem explicable in terms of something more basic—that is it does not seem reducible to simpler, more reactive, less creative mental operations. It turns out that the human mind is much larger than it needs to be merely to accommodate the perspective of an individual human perceiver and agent within the world. Not only can it form the conception of a more objective reality, but it can fill this out in a progression of objective steps that has already led far beyond the appearances. And it enables different individuals, starting from divergent viewpoints, to converge on conceptions that can be universally shared. In what follows I won't try to account for the existence of the objective self, but will explore its operation in various domains and discuss some of the problems it creates.

V

KNOWLEDGE

1. *Skepticism*

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

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

Objectivity and skepticism are closely related: both develop from the