Other Minds: Critical Essays, 1969-1994. THOMAS NAGEL. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. 229 p. Cloth $24.95.

The institution of book reviews, flawed though it may be, still performs a crucial service of resource enhancement for a discipline, funneling informed attention to at least some of the best among a superfluity of publications. During the last quarter century, Thomas Nagel's book reviews and critical essays have played a major role, shaping opinion, and thereby shaping the field. Now he has gathered his favorites in a collection, ten in philosophy of mind and a dozen in ethics and political philosophy, supplemented by the view from today: brief reactions to the individual pieces, and a fascinating introduction, part intellectual autobiography and part reflection on the state of the discipline. The other minds of the title are those of Sigmund Freud (and Richard Wollheim and Adolf Grünbaum), Ludwig Wittgenstein (and David Pears), Noam Chomsky, Jerry Fodor, David Armstrong, Brian O'Shaughnessy, John Searle, and myself in the philosophy of mind; and Aristotle (and John Cooper), John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Richard Hare, Bernard Williams, Thomas Schelling, Ronald Dworkin, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Leszek Kolakowski in ethics and political philosophy. Do not be misled by the dust jacket. The picture of brains is as inappropriate as it is ugly; Nagel's interest in the mind has always been driven more by his interest in the mind's role in ethics than by a fascination with neuroscience. He is a "moral psychologist," not a "cognitive scientist."

The essays themselves are deservedly familiar; only two of the essays in the philosophy of mind were new to me, and only half of those in ethics. I expect that specialists in ethics would report a similar recognition rate biased toward their primary field. I wonder if a similar bias would emerge in what we might call persuasion rate; I have always found his work in ethics to contain more convincing points than his work in philosophy of mind. In both areas Nagel hits hard, defending large, interesting claims in no uncertain terms. And in every case I can properly judge (the essays that review books I have carefully read—or written—myself), he passes the most important test of a good reviewer: he gives a fair expression of the author's message and its motivation, even when he utterly disagrees with it, even when he goes on to scold the author for dereliction of one duty or another, as he occasionally does. Several of his essays strike him today as "aggressive" enough to warrant comment in his introduc-

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tions, and indeed one of the most salient patterns that emerges from these essays is his readiness to pronounce uncompromising verdicts: "This last is a bizarre claim" (89). "Vague as his suggestions are..., they all suffer from an error of focus..." (144). "This mistake drains the argument of its force" (148).

These negative judgments are overbalanced, however, by a variety of forthright endorsements in the course of exposition and, more importantly, by many original supporting observations and clarifications. His candidates for promotion to philosophers' attention—O'Shaughnessy and Schelling—are not equally convincing to this reviewer, but at least they are equally explicative. Rawls needs no promotion, but Nagel's exposition of *A Theory of Justice* makes one eager to return again to the text, and his review of Nozick's first book is packed with good ideas, well developed. Yes, Nozick seems to have made just the mistakes Nagel says he did, and even to have corrected them as best he could in his later work. Nagel often—not always—goes right to the heart of matter.

Does he present a globally identifiable philosophical position, the view from Mt. Nagel, as it were? I think he does, and his introductory essay shows where it is and how he got there. Nagel is the product of his education—as we all are, to one degree or another (he describes my view as "Gilbert Ryle crossed with *Scientific American*"—ouch, but close enough). And what a glorious education he got, first at Cornell University with Norman Malcolm, Rawls, and Rogers Albritton, and then in 1958 at Oxford University on a Fulbright Fellowship, where John Austin was his B.Phil. supervisor, and Paul Grice his utterly transforming tutor. This early experience at Cornell and Oxford inoculated him against what he sees as the scientistic influences of W. V. Quine and Chomsky when he continued his graduate education at Harvard University (with biweekly trips down Massachusetts Avenue to hear Chomsky at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with fellow graduate students Gilbert Harman and Robert Swartz). Nagel is above all else a philosophical traditionalist, someone who sees philosophy as *dis*continuous with science, a method of inquiry that is deeper and purer, a bulwark against superficial enthusiasms engendered by the latest buzzwords. Saul Kripke, another fellow student in the philosophy department at Harvard, helped him secure this toehold in tradition, I am sure, as did Thompson Clarke when Nagel joined him at Berkeley, where Searle and Barry Stroud were among his colleagues.

I find myself wondering how important temporal order might be: I followed a similar path, in the opposite direction. As an undergrad-

uate at Harvard at the time, I was quite appropriately in awe of the graduate students (add David Lewis, David Lyons, Michael Slote, and Margaret Wilson to the aforementioned—it was an impressive gang), and went on to Oxford, which by 1963 was already showing—to me—signs of decadence, in spite of its worldwide reputation. Beware, aspiring graduate students! Reputations of graduate programs almost always lag several years behind reality. In any event, Quine's message stuck with me, and all Ryle could do is add his own to it. There is a straightforward symmetry, then. Nagel is just as sure that we Quinians are missing the big, deep problems, providing only superficial "solutions" to them, as we are sure that he is enamored of a false profundity, the comforting *frisson* of midnight bull sessions, perhaps. As he observes, "the disagreement between us will presumably end only in the grave, if then."

Wittgenstein makes a particularly good pivot point for this seesaw. I want to ask: How can Nagel do such a fine job explaining Wittgenstein's view and not see that he is right (for example, about the inverted spectrum, 50-51)? Wittgenstein raises "enormously difficult" questions for traditionalists like Kripke and Nagel, since Wittgenstein—in spite of his own almost pathological traditionalism—is challenging some of their traditions, most effectively. For some of us, on the other hand, Wittgenstein does not seem so enormously difficult on these topics at all; we see him as having glided into calm waters, having said a few things that are, simply, the surprising, countertraditional truth.

Nagel closes his introductory essay with some reflections on an awkward question once raised by Williams: "What is the point of doing philosophy if you're not extraordinarily good at it?" In the "Epistle to the Reader" of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke modestly compared himself to "the incomparable Mr. Newton" and the other great scientists of his day, and said "it is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge," but Williams's implication is that yeoman philosophy, unlike yeoman science, is a net contributor of rubbish. Nagel responds to Williams's question with an elaborative one of his own: "So isn't there something absurd about paying thousands of people to think about these fundamental questions" (10)?

He does not attempt to answer these questions definitively, and the reviews that follow, what with their frequent pronouncements of flat-footed error by major figures, heighten their urgency. Is this the best we can do? In an informal survey, I have been asking philoso-

phers a slightly different question recently, and shall be pleased to field further answers in response to this review: Which would you choose, if Mephistopheles offered you the following options?

(1) Simply solving an outstanding philosophical problem so definitively that, after a few years, only historians ever mentioned it (or your work) again.
(2) Writing a book that was so tantalizingly equivocal and problematic that it would be required reading for philosophy students for centuries to come.

The history of science offers many instances of the first sort and none, really, of the second, but I find that many of my philosophical colleagues admit to being at least torn by the choice. They would rather be read than right. Perhaps it is of the "essence" of philosophical problems to admit of no permanent solutions, though I doubt it, but in either case it is no wonder we make so little progress.

Sometimes, I think that Nagel is telling us what the limits of philosophy are, and giving the very best reaction to the issues he discusses. Other times, I think he is stopping too short, settling for urbane and plausible "doubts" where a more hard-bitten, fish-or-cut-bait attitude toward these looming implausibilities would better serve the field. On these occasions, I think he is trapped in what is obvious-to-a-traditional-philosopher, unable to take seriously enough the counterintuitive prospects on offer.

His succinct defense of reason as the final, best arbiter, however, is so good, so worth keeping to hand like a fire extinguisher, that I want to make sure it gets spread around:

> Reason is universal because no attempted challenge to its results can avoid appealing to reason in the end—by claiming, for example, that what was presented as an argument is really a rationalization. This can undermine our confidence in the original method or practice only by giving us reasons to believe something else, so that finally we have to think about the arguments to make up our minds (213).

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