

AGAINST AGENT-NEUTRAL VALUE

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Both the distinction between personal value and impersonal value and the claim that value of each sort exists are crucial to the argument of Loren Lomasky's *Persons, Rights and the Moral Community*.¹ In the early chapters of the book, the prominence of *personal* value motivates the rejection of utilitarianism and kindred doctrines and the adoption of a conception of rational social rules as mutually profitable accommodations among individuals each of whose profit lies, at least largely, in the fulfillment of his separate projects. The affirmation of *impersonal* value also plays a number of roles. First, within the argument for basic rights, the call of the impersonal value of others' project pursuit is supposed to reenforce purely *modus vivendi* arguments for respect for mutually beneficial interpersonal rules. Second, again within the argument for basic rights, the representation of our moral psychology as somewhat responsive to the impersonal value of others is supposed to assist *modus vivendi* arguments escape from an overly Hobbesian psychological ground. Third, the ascription of impersonal value to project pursuers is supposed to lend support to the inclusion a modest welfare component in the specification of basic rights. And, fourth, the adoption of impersonal value is the form in which Lomasky embraces moral objectivism or realism; thereby distancing himself from the subjectivism which he associates with personal value.

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I have complained elsewhere about Lomasky's identification of the personal/impersonal distinction (for which I will also use the language of agent-relative value vs. agent-neutral value) with the subjective/objective distinction.² And it is my sense that Lomasky would now want to recognize this distinction among distinctions. But it is also my sense that Lomasky wants to affirm not only the existence of objective values (which can, however, still be personal, agent-relative, values) but also agent-neutral values. In this paper I criticize the affirmation of agent-neutral values. Consideration of space and time limit me to two lines of argument. First, and extremely briefly, I assert the mysteriousness of the agent-neutrality of values by comparing agent-neutrality and agent-externality. Second, I consider and reject particular arguments for the agent-neutrality of some values. Three of the arguments I consider appear in Thomas Nagel's *The View from Nowhere*, but are arguments of the sort that are attractive to Lomasky. The fourth specific argument appears in Lomasky albeit with strong Nagelite coloration.

I

Agent-external value is value that would exist even were no agent ever to exist and, hence, were no agent ever to encounter, or relate to the valuable object or property in any way.³ Thomas Nagel believes that "...the objectifying tendency produces a strong impulse to believe that there are [external values]..." Yet Nagel himself seems to think that belief in such values can be plausible only if it,

...avoids the implausible consequence that they retain their practical importance even if no one will *ever* be able to respond to them. (So that if all sentient life is destroyed, it will still be a good thing if the Frick Collection survives.)⁴

Yet, as far as I can see, being good even if no one will ever be able to respond to it is the central necessary feature of any external good. The question is what, if anything, distinguishes such externality of value from neutrality of value? I want to argue that if a value is not conceived of as agent-relative, it must be conceived of as agent-external. Thus the sponsor of agent-neutrality has to choose between the enemy of agent-relativity and the implausibility of agent-externality.

One might imagine a sponsor of agent-neutral value proposing that a necessary condition of any *X* having agent-neutral value is that *someone, sometime, and somewhere* stand in some relation to *X* of the sort through which advocates of agent-relativity think value arises. Given this necessary condition, for any *X* which

qualifies as having agent-neutral value, it will not be the case that the X would have that agent-neutral value even were no agent ever to exist, etc. In this way, the sponsor of agent-neutral values may seem to distance himself from sponsorship of agent-external values. But what justifies the imposition of this necessary condition? We might have here merely a stipulation that a putative value will not be labeled an agent-neutral value unless *someone, sometime, and somewhere* stands in some R relation to it. But such a stipulation leaves open the question of whether that value would exist—would exist as an external value—even were the condition for its being labeled a neutral value not satisfied. It leaves open the possibility that the value which the sponsor of agent-neutral values wants us to affirm (and to label as agent-neutral) is agent-external.

We can be sure that the value we are affirming (under the label of agent-neutral) is not agent-external only if it is *in virtue of* X 's standing in relation R to *someone, sometime, and somewhere* that X 's value arises. The imposition of the *someone/somewhere* condition on X 's having value will be *justified* if it is thought that it is (at least in part) through the satisfaction of this condition that X has its value. But, if this is the way X 's value is conceived, then it appears that X 's value is agent-relative—in particular, relative to the agent who stands in relation R to X . For how, in turn, could the satisfaction of the *someone/somewhere* condition give rise to X 's value? The only way I can imagine is that the value arises *in and through* some particular *someone's* particular relation to X . And if X 's value arises *in and through* this particular relation to agent A —by being, e.g., the object of A 's desire or need or ambition—then it is A who can directly and especially be said to have reason to promote X . That is to say, X 's value will be relative to A . Only if there is a sufficiently robust principle of transmission of reason whereby A 's having reason to promote X by transmission leads to B 's having reason to promote X , will X 's value re-emerge as agent-neutral. We shall shortly examine and dismiss the idea of there being such a principle of transmission. For now we can summarize the present argument as follows: The satisfaction of the *someone/somewhere* condition with respect to X either is not essential to X 's value or it is essential to X 's value. If it is not essential to X 's value, then X 's value (if it exists at all) will be agent-external value. If it is essential to X 's value, then that value will be agent-relative. So the theorist who seeks to avoid the agent-relativity of all values will have to affirm the agent-externality of some of them. This conclusion should be of no surprise in light of Nagel's own characterization of external value as "value which is not reducible to [its]

value for anyone.”⁵ For, if a value is not external in this sense, the value *will* be “reducible” to its value for someone, *i.e.*, it will be agent-relative.⁶

II

Some of these same points, and others, can be made more concretely by examining Nagel’s own specific example of an agent-neutral (dis)value; the purportedly agent-neutral badness of pain. Nagel begins with the claim that,

...primitive pleasures and pains provide at least agent-relative reasons for pursuit and avoidance—reasons that can be affirmed from an objective standpoint [*i.e.*, reasons that “can be recognized...from outside] and that do not merely describe the actual motivation of the agent.⁷

But does pain provide, in addition, an agent-neutral reason for its avoidance? Although he is fully aware of the difficulty of constructing arguments for this conclusion, Nagel does offer three somewhat discreet arguments.⁸ The first we may label “the dissociation argument;” the second we may call “the concern by/for others argument;” and the third we may designate “the impersonal hatefulness argument.”

IIa

Dissociation occurs, according to Nagel, if I do not assign agent-neutral badness to my pain. My objective self would become dissociated from my subjective self because the latter would see that my suffering should stop while the former, as objective spectator, could only and would only acknowledge that *EM*, the observee, has reason to want it to stop.⁹ My subjective self is, as my four year old daughter would say, “really really” against this suffering; but my objective self is...well, objective, disinterested. If only agent-relative badness is assigned to my pain, only the agent whose pain it is can take a substantive, contentful, stand against the pain. If only agent-relative badness is assigned to my pain, the only judgment that the objective self can make is that this person, *EM*, whom the objective spectator is observing, has reason to negate the suffering. My objective self is, then, as distant from my subjective self as other reason-acknowledging agents are.

If I had an objective self, if I were in part an objective self of the sort Nagel is imagining, then I *might* be concerned about being dissociated from my subjective self.¹⁰ On the other hand, the dominant strand within the dualist tradition looks with great favor

upon dissociation. What's the point of having two selves unless the objective, rational, depersonalized, and disembodied self can free itself from, rise above, and *view with detachment* the concerns of the subjective and particularistic self? To assert both the existence of two selves (or two parts or aspects of the self) and a structure for value which allows those two selves to live in harmony may be a matter of wanting both to have and to eat one's metaphysical cake. Furthermore, while in itself belief in the agent-neutral badness of *EM's* suffering will tend to align and associate my objective self with my subjective self, belief in the agent-neutral badness of *others'* suffering will have the opposite effect. The agent-relative badness of suffering tells me (or my subjective self) to focus on the reduction of my suffering while the agent-neutral badness of suffering at large tells me (or my objective self) to focus on the reduction of suffering at large. In almost all circumstances, one of these practices will have to be sacrificed to the other. If I dispose myself to respond to the impersonal values affirmed by my objective self, I will usually have to suppress the counsel of my subjective self. The result may not be Nagelian dissociation of my objective and subjective selves. The result may only (!) be the loss of an integrated (subjective) self. It is, however, precisely because utilitarianism threatens this sort of loss that Lomasky rejects it. One should expect a like reaction to the comparably threatening demand for the unification of one's subjective and objective selves.

IIIb

The second, "concern by/for others," argument suggests that plausible accounts of others being moved by our suffering and our being moved by others' suffering invoke the agent-neutral badness of suffering. Nagel argues that,

If...we limit ourselves to relative reasons, [the sufferer] will have to say that though he has reason to want an analgesic, there is no reason for him to have one, or for anyone else who happens to be around to give him one.¹¹

This is partially correct; but mostly misleading. Clearly, if the badness of suffering is agent-relative, the sufferer cannot say that there is an agent-neutral reason for him to have the analgesic. But that is not to deny the existence (or "objectivity") of an agent-relative reason for him to have it. Nor is it to deny the existence of agent-relative reasons had by some of those who happen to be around him to provide him with an analgesic. A blissful cessation of my screams, or even my feeling better, may be among the states

of affairs that are good for some or all of these agents. Nagel asks us to imagine a fellow sufferer who,

...professes to hope we both will be given morphine, but I [the first-person, agent-relativist, sufferer] fail to understand this. I understand why he has reason to want morphine for himself, but what reason does he have to want *me* to get some? Does my groaning bother him?¹²

That may be it. My groaning may be drowning out the answers on Hollywood Squares. Or it may be that my groaning bothers him because my being in pain, in a way that is vivid and present to him, bothers him. Because I am near to him and he is a person of normal sympathies, his sympathy extends to me and he is discomforted by my suffering. So he has reason to want it to stop—a reason which does not extend to the suffering of those to whom, perhaps simply because of their distance from him, his sympathies do not embrace.

But implicit in Nagel's final rhetorical question is another, more difficult, question. Does the fellow patient's reason for wanting my suffering to cease rest merely on his tastes and distastes, *e.g.*, merely on his distaste for my groaning or on his distaste for my suffering? Nagel, as a "normative realist" wants to hold about reasons for action that "...we have to discover them instead of deriving them from our preexisting motives."¹³ For such a realist the suggestion of the rhetorical question is that it is the badness of suffering that makes the preference for its disappearance rational not the preference for its disappearance that makes the suffering bad. It is this "real" or "objective" badness of my suffering that underlies my fellow patient's discomfort at my groaning. This suggested answer leads to an affirmation of the agent-neutrality of the fellow patient's reasons given a further, implicit, premise, *viz.*, that values which are "real" or "objective" so that the rationality of tastes, desires, preferences, etc., depend on their fit with "real" or "objective" values must be agent-neutral values. But this further premise is clearly contentious and is one which, I take it, Lomasky would not now want to invoke.

One further point needs to be made about the reasons that others might have for relieving my suffering. Even the total absence of *value-based* reasons for others to alleviate my suffering hardly entails the absence of *all* reasons; my doctor may have a duty to do so whether he likes it or not, whether it advances his values or not. To say that all values are agent-relative and that, therefore, all value-based reasons for action are agent-relative, is not to deny the existence of other sorts of reasons for or against action; in particular

of deontic constraints on people's behavior.

IIc

Nagel's third, "impersonal hatefulness," argument urges us to see a component of our rejection of pain as occurring on an impersonal plane where objective self confronts agent-neutral value:

...the pain, though it comes attached to a person and his individual perspective, is just as clearly hateful to the objective self as to the subjective individual. The pain can be detached in thought from the fact that it is mine without losing any of its dreadfulness. It has, so to speak, a life of its own.¹⁴

One response to this passage runs as follows: I understand, of course, that pain which is not my pain can be as dreadful to the sufferer as my pain is dreadful to me. I understand what it is like to be subject to such dreadful stuff. But except for those rare individuals who achieve or succumb to an extraordinary identification with others (and who, therefore, can say, "Their pain is my pain"), the discovery that an impending pain will be suffered by another and not oneself does radically reduce its perceived dreadfulness.

Yet this focus on perceived dreadfulness, *i.e.*, on how fearfully motivating a prospective pain will be, misses the real force of this passage. The force lies in the simple idea that pain is dreadful. It is dreadful in itself so that the *correct* response to prospective pain is dread; pain is the sort of thing that a rational person wants not to exist. This is the claim of the normative realist with respect to pain. But is this force well directed? Does it specifically point to the agent-neutral badness of pain? One can agree that the dreadfulness of pain has "a life of its own"—so that anyone facing the prospect of pain has a reason to avoid it whatever his attitude toward pain—without agreeing that the "real" or "objective" awfulness of pain gives everyone reason to want a specific prospective pain not to exist. In recognizing the dreadfulness of the pain faced by another, I do more than understand his motivation in avoiding it; I also see that he ought to want to escape it. But as a mere objective spectator, I do not, thereby, have reason to prevent his pain.

However other passages within Nagel's "impersonal hatefulness" argument seem designed to block the idea that the awfulness of pain may yet sustain only agent-relative reasons. This is how we may read the argument that:

The [sufferer's] desire to be rid of pain has only the pain as

its object.... [I]f I lacked or lost the conception of myself as distinct from other possible or actual persons, I could still apprehend the badness of pain, immediately.... [T]he fact that it is mine—the concept of myself—doesn't come into my perception of the badness of my pain.¹⁵

It is true that I do not have to *register* the pain as mine in order to apprehend its badness. I don't have to say to myself, "This is the pain that *I* am undergoing," before I can recognize that it merits elimination. I simply indict pain as I immediately experience it. But the pain that I indict is the pain that is immediate to me, which is to say, my pain. "[T]he immediate attitude of the subject" of the pain is simply that this current condition should cease. The subject does not, within that immediate indictment, address the issue of who has reason to eliminate this suffering. But if it is his suffering that he indicts and if he recognizes that others in parallel fashion indict the suffering immediate to them, the natural conclusion is that each has reason, assuming mutual disinterest, to eliminate his own suffering.¹⁶

II d

An argument offered by Lomasky, in the style of Nagel, can be read as challenging this last claim in the name of the "transmissibility of practical reason." Lomasky claims that:

...*A*'s recognition that *B* has end *E*₂ provides *A* at least some reason to act so as to advance *E*₂... [O]ne who recognizes *R* as a reason for *E*₂ is thereby *logically bound* to admit that it is not totally and in every respect indifferent whether *E*₂ obtains. *R* is why *E*₂ should obtain; otherwise *R* could not be conceived to be a reason.¹⁷

Lomasky recognizes the likelihood of being charged with illicitly adopting a neutralist "moral point of view" in the shift to talk about whether "it" is indifferent, whether *E*₂ "should obtain." But Lomasky thinks he has a non-question-begging argument for transmissibility.

...it is being maintained that there are not two radically different ways of understanding reasons for action: understanding a reason as mine, which is suffused with motivational force, and understanding it as thine, which is entirely bereft of motivational force.¹⁸

However, there is no threat of "two radically different ways of understanding reasons for action." If anything is suffused with

motivational force, it is *A's* reason; *not his understanding* of that reason. The reason, not his understanding of the reason, has motivational force for *A*. Similarly, *B's* reason has motivational force for *B*. That *A's understanding* of *B's* reason "is entirely bereft of motivational force" does not, therefore, mark it off as a different type of understanding of reasons than is exemplified in *A's* understanding of his own reasons for action. Understanding does not become agent-relative just because reasons and values are.

Thus, two bases have been offered against the existence of agent-neutral values: (I) Belief in agent-neutral values commits one to belief in agent-external values; and (II) Four positive arguments for the existence of agent-neutral values are deeply flawed.

1. Loren Lomasky, *Persons, Rights and the Moral Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

2. Cf., my review of *Persons, Rights and the Moral Community* in *Reason* (January 1988) and "Moral Individualism: Agent-Relativity and Deontic Restraints" in *Social Philosophy and Policy* (forthcoming).

3. To deny the existence of external values is not to deny the existence of "external reasons" as that term has recently been used by Bernard Williams. An external reason is a reason the having of which need not motivate the agent possessing that reason. External values would provide agents with external reasons. But an agent might have an external reason, e.g., his (recognition of his) objective need for *X*, which was not indicative of an external value. Cf., Williams, "Internal and External Reasons" in *Rational Action: Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, ed. R. Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp.17-28.

4. *The View from Nowhere*, p.153. The survival of the Frick Collection might, of course, fulfill the posthumous interests of various agents and, in this way, be a good thing. But this would not support the collection's external value.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Moreover, it does not seem that *X's* external (and, hence, fully intrinsic and self-contained) goodness as such would provide reasons for action among such agents as might appear on the scene. Property *G* (or whatever it is that purports to be intrinsically good) will provide such agents as appear with reasons for action only insofar as the realization of *G* in some way fulfills or is constitutive of their desires, projects, or selves. But, in that case, the agents' respective reasons for action will correspond to the agent-relative value of diverse realizations of *G* and not to the supposed external goodness of *G*. Even should it exist, the intrinsic good would be too dissociated from the life of flesh and purpose bound agents to provide those agents with reasons for action.

This conclusion may be too quick. Perhaps the perception (veridical or not) of the Form of the Good could itself motivate an agent. In such a case it would be putting the cart before the horse to say that the agent's reason

for action corresponds to the agent-relative value of his participation in the Good. Of course, the agent will not be acting with reason unless his perception of the Good is veridical.

7. *Ibid.*, p.158. In the uncut version of what appears within the brackets, Nagel (p.150) speaks more portentiously of reasons that "can be recognized and *accepted* from the outside."

8. *Ibid.* Nagel precedes his arguments with the claim that he has already argued that "the *possibility* of assigning agent-neutral value to pleasure and pain should be admitted." (p.160) But this, I think, is mistaken. He seems to be referring to arguments made in a section labelled "Antirealism." (pp.143-149) Yet in this section Nagel's target seems to be "disbelief in the reality of values and reasons" and, clearly, this can be rejected without embracing even the possibility of agent-neutral values and reasons. (The situation is further complicated by Nagel's characterizations of "realism" (p.139) which suggest that realism takes one a step beyond reason-acknowledging, objectivity-incorporating, doctrines such as "the position that each person has reason to do what will satisfy his desires or preferences." (p.149)

9. The relevant couple of sentences in Nagel, *Ibid.*, read:

The dissociation here is a split attitude toward my own suffering. As objective spectator, I acknowledge that *TN* has a reason to want it to stop, but I see no reason why it should stop. My evaluation [*i.e.*, the evaluation of the "objective spectator"?] is entirely confined within the framework of a judgment about what it is rational *for this person* to want.(p.160)

10. Perhaps the reason that Nagel thinks that this intra-personal dissociation is worrisome is that, although my objective self acknowledges that *EM* has reason to end his suffering, the inability of my objective self to *share* this reason suggests that its existence is an illusion, *i.e.*, suggests the Humean subjectivism according to which there are motives but not reasons. This suggestion runs counter to Nagel's recognition that even agent-relative reasons count as real reasons. Nevertheless, Nagel does continue to flirt with his earlier view that the only real reasons are agent-neutral ones. *Cf.*, the next passage from Nagel in the text.

11. *Ibid.*, p.160.

12. *Ibid.*, p.160.

13. *Ibid.*, p.139.

14. *Ibid.*, p.160

15. *Ibid.*, p.161.

16. Moreover, it is implausible to imagine, as Nagel does, that an agent who lacked or lost the conception of himself would form the sophisticated judgment, "*This experience* ought not to go on, *whoever* is having it." *Ibid.*, p.161.

17. Lomasky, *Persons, Rights and the Moral Community* p.63 and p.64. Latter emphasis added.

18. *Ibid.*, p.65.