

Husserl and Nagel on Subjectivity and the Limits of Physical Objectivity

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Abstract. Thomas Nagel argues that the subjective character of mind inevitably eludes philosophical efforts to incorporate the mental into a single, complete, ‘physically objective’ view of the world. Nagel sees contemporary philosophy as caught on the horns of a dilemma – one either follows phenomenology in making all objective phenomena subjective, or one follows physicalism in making all subjective phenomena objective. He contends that both approaches lead to different but equally untenable forms of idealism and suggests that we currently lack the forms of understanding required to tackle the question of how to relate the subjective and objective aspects of experience. This paper draws a number of positive comparisons between Nagel’s position on subjectivity and that of the later Husserl. It is argued that Nagel is wrong to dismiss phenomenology as ‘idealist’, thus clearing the way for a plausible Husserlian interpretation of his position. Husserl’s more developed treatment of the relationships between subjectivity and objectivity can be employed to clarify, strengthen and elaborate Nagel’s claims in a number of ways. However, the comparison also serves to show that Nagel does not go far enough in his critique of physical objectivism. The paper concludes by remarking on the continuing relevance of some central Husserlian themes as a critique of and positive alternative to deeply sedimented objectivist assumptions currently prevalent in Anglo-American philosophy.

Introduction¹

Much of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy is shaped by the conviction that philosophy should aspire to formulate a wholly *naturalistic* account of the mind. In other words, it is assumed that, in order to be ontologically acceptable, a mental entity or property must be capable of being integrated into a unified, wholly objective account of the world driven by the empirical sciences. As Petitot, Varela, Pachoud and Roy explain, to be “naturalized” is to be “integrated into an explanatory framework where every acceptable property is made continuous with the properties admitted by the natural sciences”.²

Despite Husserl’s explicit resistance to such naturalism, Petitot, Varela, Pachoud and Roy set out to unite the two by integrating a number of Husserl’s key insights into a naturalistic view of the world and assessing the extent to which Husserlian phenomenology can “contribute to progress in specific

contemporary theories, by complementing them in some crucial aspects and calling them into question in others” (1999, p. xiii). Their core thesis is that “when provided with adequate characterizations such as those conducted along the lines of Husserlian phenomenology, phenomenological data can be adequately reconstructed on the basis of the main tenets of Cognitive Science, and then reintegrated into the natural sciences” (1999, p. 48). The aim of integrating Husserlian phenomenology into this current scientific picture is defended on the basis that Husserl’s anti-naturalism only applied to the sciences of his time, whose contingent limitations have now been surpassed, thus rendering contemporary naturalism a far more palatable option than anything available to Husserl:

We believe that Husserl’s position is the result of having mistaken certain contingent limitations of the mathematical and material sciences of his time for absolute ones. In our opinion it is indeed arguable that scientific progress has made Husserl’s position on this point largely obsolete. (1999, pp. 42–43)³

Although Petitot, Varela, Pachoud and Roy should not be regarded as belonging exclusively to any one philosophical tradition, it is readily apparent that they privilege naturalism over Husserlian phenomenology, by treating the former as a taken-for-granted ontological framework into which some of Husserl’s phenomenological claims are to be integrated. Whatever aspects of Husserlian phenomenology such a project might accommodate, it must reject Husserl’s account of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, which is irrevocably anti-naturalistic (as will become clear in what follows) and also central to Husserl’s phenomenology as a whole. In other words, it must reject the philosophical framework into which Husserl integrates his phenomenological insights, whilst co-opting some of those insights to serve scientific objectivism.

In this paper, I venture a Husserlian interpretation of Thomas Nagel’s various objections to objectivism in contemporary philosophy of mind, focussing on his charge that any objectivist philosophy fails to adequately grasp the nature of subjectivity and its relationship to objectivity. I will show how interpreting Nagel’s concerns in the light of Husserl’s better developed position allows one to construe his various objections as amounting to a cohesive, positive alternative to objectivism, as opposed to a series of vague protests whose content borders on mysticism.⁴ Importantly, the commonalities between these central Husserlian themes and the concerns of a *contemporary* critic of objectivism illustrate the continuing relevance of Husserlian phenomenology as a coherent and plausible *alternative* to naturalism, rather than something

to be broken down and partially *assimilated* into an objectivist view of things. Hence Nagel's work, couched as it is in the language of mainstream Anglo-American philosophy, can be employed as a conceptual bridge between the very different traditions of Husserlian phenomenology and contemporary objectivism, illustrating how Husserl's objections to a totalising naturalism⁵ are as pertinent as ever, in addressing, not so much the contingent limitations of the science of his day but, rather, the assumption of objectivism that was and still is constitutive of empirical science and scientifically-minded philosophy.

Nagel on subjective and objective

In his famous essay 'What is it like to be a bat?',⁶ Nagel argues that any wholly objective account of the world will fail to accommodate the essentially subjective quality of mental states. A conscious organism has a point of view, a subjective perspective upon the world. There is 'something it is like' to be that organism, which can never be explained away in terms of a perspectiveless view of the world; "the fact that an organism has conscious experiences *at all* means, basically, that there is 'something it is like to *be* that organism'" (1979, p. 166).

Nagel's appeal to 'what it is like' has perplexed some philosophers, who charge him with vagueness, in coining an expression whose meaning is exceptionally difficult to pin down.⁷ However, I think the source of Nagel's hostility to wholly objective accounts is fairly easy to identify, even though his positive alternative to such accounts remains, I will suggest, unclear. Nagel is drawing attention to the manner in which every perspective on the world presupposes a subject, whose perspective it is. The world appears a certain unique way for a subject of experience, and this 'appearing' cannot be expressed in objectivist terms. Hence, as Nagel explains in a footnote, 'what it is like to be a subject' should be understood as "how it is for the subject himself" (1979, p. 170, fn. 6); 'what it is like' for you is synonymous with 'how the world appears from your point of view'. Hence the essential feature of subjectivity is the dependence of a perspective upon a 'point of view', and it is Nagel's contention that subjective points of view are not reducible to objective, viewer-free descriptions of the world:

... there are things about the world and life and ourselves that cannot be adequately understood from a maximally objective standpoint (. . .) 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 objec-

tive terms detached from these perspectives inevitably leads to false reductions or to outright denial that certain patently real phenomena exist at all.⁸

Nagel is not making a metaphysical claim to the effect that there are more *things* in the world than those that a physicalist/objectivist account might list. Hence he is not arguing for some form of dualism. In fact, in 'Subjective and Objective',⁹ he notes that the problem of assimilating subjectivity into an objective view is just as troublesome for the dualist:

The broader issue between personal and impersonal, or subjective and objective, arises also for a dualist theory of mind. The question of how one can include in the objective world a mental substance having subjective properties is as acute as the question how a physical substance can have subjective properties. (1979, p. 201)¹⁰

In conceiving of the mind as a mental *substance*, the dualist inadvertently commits herself to an objectivist ontology. The mind becomes an objective *thing* – albeit an objective mental thing – and, when characterised as such, it is just as unclear how an objective mental substance could have subjective states as it is how an objective physical substance could have subjective states. The issue for Nagel does not hinge on how the *mental* relates to the *physical* but on how the *subjective* relates to the *objective*.¹¹ To formulate the question in terms of substances is to miss the point. As Nagel notes, “the physical is a substitute for objectivity in posing the mind-body problem” (1979, p. 202). He thus moves the goalposts of the debate to take us away from the traditional opposition between mental and physical substances to the real heart of the puzzle; the question of whether and how subjective and objective perspectives might be reconciled.

Why does Nagel suppose that we are unable to accommodate the subjective into an objective perspective? His position has its source in a sort of conceptual claim. It is not that an objective perspective is merely *incomplete* in failing to take in subjectivity. Instead the very *idea* of any kind of perspective seems to presuppose a subject whose perspective it is. Every view, however objective, by its very nature incorporates a viewer. So a fully objective, physical, viewerless view is just plain inconceivable. Subjectivity and objectivity are somehow dependent on each other for their sense and neither can be reduced to the other.

This sentiment is conveyed in Nagel's accounts of 'objectivisation' and the 'objective self'. Nagel observes that perspectives can be more or less objective and outlines the generally held assumption that understanding proceeds by moving along the continuum from subjectivity to objectivity, our perspec-

tives becoming less and less subjective as we go: “we may think of reality as a set of concentric spheres, progressively revealed as we detach gradually from the contingencies of the self” (1986, p. 5). Movement from a subjective to an objective point of view is a process and “there is probably no end-point to this process, but its aim is to regard the world as centerless, with the viewer as just one of its contents” (1979, p. 206). But as we progress in the direction of objectivity, we seem to move unavoidably further away from an understanding of subjectivity (1979, p. 174). As one becomes more objective, one comes to see oneself as just one of many subjects, inhabiting a centerless world that does not depend for its existence on the perspective of any one subject. However, no such objective perspective can escape subjectivity altogether, as an objective perspective in which the subject is construed as one objective being amongst others itself presupposes a subject. Objective perspectives *have* subjects; there is ‘something it is like’ to have an objective perspective. Nagel introduces the term ‘objective self’ to describe “the subject of a perspectiveless conception of reality” (1986, p. 63) and notes that, though a process of objectivisation will move us further and further away from the subject, it cannot dispense with it altogether.

Nagel is quite explicit in rejecting all attempts to reduce subjectivity to objectivity or, conversely, to make objectivity wholly dependent on subjectivity, both of which he regards as forms of idealism. Physicalism, though it might at first appear the antithesis of idealism, simply assumes that one form of human understanding, which Nagel calls ‘physical objectivity’, maps neatly onto the structure of reality. It has no grounds whatsoever for assuming this, other than an act of scientific faith¹² and, in naively presupposing a perfect match between reality and a certain human way of thinking, it is indistinguishable from idealism:

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. (1986, p. 9) [T]oo many hypotheses and systems of thought in philosophy 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. (1986, p. 10) [P]hysicalism is based ultimately on a form of idealism: an idealism of restricted objectivity. Objectivity of whatever kind is not the test of reality. It is just one way of understanding reality. (1986, p. 26)

Nagel regards alternative approaches like phenomenology as equally unpalatable. Phenomenology, Nagel maintains, reduces the objective to the subjective. But objectivity is as irreducible and essential a feature of perspectives as subjectivity, and just as ill-suited to reduction. So the subjective idealism

of phenomenology is as unsatisfactory as the objective idealism of physicalism/scientism:

The idealist tradition, including contemporary phenomenology, has of course admitted subjective points of view as basic, and has gone to the opposite length of denying an irreducible objective reality (. . .) [O]bjective reality cannot be analyzed or shut off out of existence any more than subjective reality can. (1979, p. 212)

So, according to Nagel, philosophers have perched themselves on the horns of a dilemma. The intuition that we need some account of how the world can incorporate both irreducibly subjective and irreducibly objective aspects is a powerful one. Yet, in giving priority to one or the other, we end up with distinct but equally untenable forms of idealism. Nagel's way out of the dilemma is to maintain that it is arrogant and indefensible to assume that we currently have the mental tools required to understand absolutely everything and that this is a case in point. We are just not equipped to understand the relationship between subjective and objective: "I believe that the methods needed to understand ourselves do not yet exist" (1986, p. 10). Nagel's pessimism is tempered by the hope that such understanding is not constitutionally beyond us but something that we may come to acquire some day. A necessary step en route to this goal is the realisation that what Nagel calls "physical objectivity" (1986, p. 16) is only one contingent form of understanding, as ill-adapted for tackling problems of subjectivity as a sponge is for cutting metal. Once we grasp the limitations of physical objectivity, there is reason to hope that we might eventually develop new kinds of objective understanding that will be more suited to such problems.

A deficit in Nagel's position is that, though he argues that objectivism fails to accommodate the sense in which any objective perspective incorporates a viewer, his own account also fails to clarify the nature of this dependence relation. It cannot be a relation of physical or mental causation; this would entail that the subject is already integrated into the objective world in which causal relations are situated and his position would consequently slide into objectivism. However, construing the relationship as conceptual also fails to communicate any substantive objection to objectivism. If 'views' imply 'viewers' in an analogous manner to that in which 'bachelor' implies 'unmarried', then it seems that Nagel's objections are irrelevant to the concerns of naturalism. Our naturalist will simply retort that conceptual relationships have nothing to do with the way in which entities in the physical world actually relate to each other. Conceptual questions are distinct from questions concerning how the world is independent of our concepts. So views may well pre-

suppose viewers but this is not enough to imply that viewers aren't just another part of the objective world. It is therefore apparent that Nagel is in need of a way in which to communicate the relationship between subjective and objective that neither tacitly presupposes objectivism nor slides into irrelevance. In other words, he needs a way of describing the nature of the *meta-physical* relationship between subject and object that is both plausible and obviously incompatible with an objectivist metaphysic. I will suggest that this can be found in the later Husserl. In the next two sections, I will sketch the bare bones of Husserl's account of subjectivity and objectivity, and draw out a number of ways in which a Husserlian interpretation of Nagel's position appears compelling. Then, in the concluding section, I will address Nagel's objection that phenomenology slides into an unpalatable idealism. Contra Nagel, I will argue that this is not the case at all and that, in order to understand why, we need to focus on what Husserl means by the term 'constitution'. In so doing, I will suggest that the concept of 'constitution' could equip Nagel with just the kind of tool he needs in order to express his account of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity. Adopting this Husserlian move would require a more general shift in philosophical reorientation on Nagel's part, pushing him to further undermine the epistemological primacy of an objectivist stance and acknowledge a very different philosophical perspective from which to approach subjectivity and world-experience. However, without the spectre of idealism, the grounds for resisting such a move are not readily apparent. Hence Husserlian phenomenology, I will suggest, is able to provide an illuminating framework through which to interpret Nagel's claims.

The transcendental ego and the objective world

In *Cartesian Meditations*,¹³ Husserl takes Descartes' goal of an indubitable foundation for philosophy as his starting point: "Let the idea guiding our meditations be at first the Cartesian idea of a science that shall be established as radically genuine, ultimately an all-embracing science" (CM, §3, p. 7). He claims that Descartes is right to dismiss the objective world as a first basis for science and philosophy; the existence of such a world is by no means apodictic (beyond conceivable doubt) and, as the "non-being of the world" is at least "conceivable", we should include it in the "*Cartesian overthrow*" (CM, §7, p. 17). However, in so doing, Husserl maintains that we should not simply *jettison* all our conceptions of the world. We can and should still study the structure of our world-experience but we must, in so doing, dump "the natural believing in existence involved in experiencing the world" (CM, §8, p. 19).

We must practice “abstention” from this “natural attitude” of belief in the objective existence of things, whilst retaining the uncorrupted meaning of such thoughts. To do this, Husserl introduces his “phenomenological epoché” as a bracketing, “putting out of play” or “inhibiting” of the natural attitude of believing in the existence of the external world (CM, §8, p. 20). He thus departs from Descartes’ total rejection of all non-apodictic experiential contents, instead ‘neutralising’ them of their existential import and stepping back to consider their essential structure. In other words, rather than contemplating how the world *is*, Husserl proposes to address the *manner in which it appears to us as what it is*, something that requires a radical perspectival reorientation.

If commitment to the existence of an objective world cannot provide us with a sound basis for philosophy, what can? Like Descartes, Husserl notes that any experience we have of the world¹⁴ – in fact any experience we have of anything – necessarily presupposes a subject. Every perspective, every thought, has an owner. Without this presupposition of a subject, we could not experience anything, as the subject is a necessary constituent of all intentionalities, however ‘subjective’ or ‘objective’ the objects disclosed by those intentionalities might be. So, like Descartes, Husserl discovers the subject as the apodictic source of all intentionalities. However, Husserl’s conception of the subject as ‘transcendental ego’ differs markedly from that of Descartes. Contra Descartes, Husserl observes of the subject that it “must by no means be accepted as a matter of course that, with our apodictic pure ego, we have rescued a *little tag-end of the world*, as the sole unquestionable part of it” (CM, §10, p. 24). By this he means that we should not assume that our subject is itself some kind of *thing* in the world. Instead, we stumble upon the subject as an ultimate condition of sense that underlies all conceivable world-experience. It would be a mistake to take the further Cartesian step of construing the subject in its sense-giving role as a *thing in the world*; to do so, we would have to presuppose an already intelligible objective world within which the subject resides, which would be incompatible with the subject’s being a precondition for that world’s intelligibility. Descartes’ error, according to Husserl, is to construe the ego as a “*substantia cogitans*” (CM, §10, p. 24), a thinking *thing* that tacitly takes on objective characteristics. Yet in so doing, Descartes goes beyond the legitimate conclusions that his method yields and fundamentally misdescribes what he has discovered. To turn a condition of sense into an objective entity is to advocate “transcendental realism”, which is, according to Husserl, “an absurd position” (CM, §10, p. 24):

(Descartes) stands at the threshold of the greatest of all discoveries – in a certain manner, has already made it – yet he does not grasp its proper sense,

the sense of transcendental subjectivity, and so he does not pass through the gateway that leads to genuine transcendental philosophy. (CM, §10, pp. 24–25)

The transcendental ego is neither a mental *thing* nor a physical *thing*. It is a condition of sense for all experience of an objective world, the “*acceptance basis* of all Objective acceptances” (CM, §11, p. 26) and no more: “This world, with all its Objects, I said, derives its whole sense and its existential status, which it has from me, from me myself, *from me as the transcendental Ego*” (CM, §11, p. 26). Hence the subject, as transcendental ego, cannot be construed as a part of the world but remains as a necessary counterpart or correlate of the world, with a wholly different kind of being to that of an objective worldly thing. It is also important to emphasise that the transcendental ego is not simply a *conceptual* requirement that can somehow be *inferred* by examining the structure of intentional states from an objectivist stance. As will become clearer in the concluding section, the ego’s role, brought to light through the epoché, is that of determining the manner in which things appear to us with the ordinarily taken for granted sense that they have, a sense that is inextricable from the manner of their appearing. This is clearly distinct from mere conceptual implication. Thus an appreciation of the ego’s role as a ground for the disclosure of all appearances, as the ‘acceptance-basis’ for all ‘Objective acceptances’ requires both a radical departure from objectivist thinking (adoption of the epoché) and the acknowledgement of a sense-giving experiential disclosure of things that cannot be conveyed in more familiar terms.

Having construed subjectivity in such a way, one might then ask “what can I do with the transcendental ego philosophically?” (CM, §12, p. 27). Husserl again departs from Descartes and argues that the transcendental ego is not merely some unstructured point but is instead a massively complex sense-giving structure, the meaning-source presupposed by all of the vast and systematically ordered framework of worldly experience. Phenomenology becomes the task of explicating this “*universally apodictically experienceable structure* of the Ego” (CM, §12, p. 28). It is various aspects of this phenomenologically explicated structure that Petitot, Varela, Pachoud and Roy (1999) propose to integrate into a naturalistic account of the mind, whilst rejecting the pivotal and anti-objectivist Husserlian claim that the structure of the transcendental ego, and thus all that is revealed from within the phenomenological epoché, is not part of the objective world but is somehow taken for granted by it. It is this central Husserlian claim that complements Nagel’s position. Like Nagel, Husserl argues that dualism’s *res cogitans* is an irrelevant detour from the problem of understanding the relationship between subject and object. Once the subject is construed as a *thing* in the world, whether a *physical*

thing or a *mental thing*, we lose sight of the very sense of subjectivity that we set out to explicate. We abandon the essential role of the subject, the way in which it is somehow presupposed by the sense of the objective world whose existence we ordinarily take as a given. Nagel and Husserl both maintain that the subject is not something within the world but a condition for the intelligibility of any perspective upon the world, however objective that perspective might be.¹⁵ Husserl's account of transcendental ego thus shares much with Nagel's account of the subject. It is something that resists objectification and cannot be properly understood as part of the world. Instead it is a precondition for any perspective on the world, an unavoidable correlate of the objective as opposed to something that can ever be made fully objective. Every objective perspective presupposes a subject for its sense and once we take away that subject, the very idea of any kind of perspective on the world breaks down.

Neither Nagel nor Husserl think that an understanding of ourselves as subjects should reside exclusively in an account of a pre-objective self or transcendental ego. As Nagel explains, "I do not deny that conscious mental states and events cause behavior, nor that they may be given functional characterizations. I deny only that this kind of thing exhausts their analysis" (1979, p. 167). Husserl notes similarly that "among the Objective sciences there is indeed a science of subjectivity; but it is precisely the science of Objective subjectivity, the subjectivity of men and other animals, a subjectivity that is part of the world" (CM, §13, p. 30). Hence the claim is not that the subject totally eludes objectification. Aspects of our self-understanding do involve objective, worldly conceptions of ourselves, which are quite legitimate. However, both philosophers maintain that there remains a certain essential feature of our subjective life that cannot be made objective. As Nagel observes, "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 whatsoever" (1986, p. 64), a sentiment that also flows from Husserl's account.

This leads to a problem that is common to both philosophers and further serves to make clear the commonalities between them. This is the so-called 'paradox of subjectivity', the seemingly intractable problem of reconciling the subject as the ultimate condition of worldly experience with the subject as a part of that experienced world. As Husserl puts it:

... all possible sciences, including all their various areas of objects, are transcendently to be subjected to an epoché. So also psychology, and the entirety of what is considered the psychical in its sense. It would therefore be circular, a transcendental circle, to base the answer to the transcendental

question on psychology, be it empirical or eidetic-phenomenological, we face at this point the paradoxical ambiguity: the subjectivity and consciousness to which the transcendental question recurs can thus really not be the subjectivity and consciousness with which psychology deals.¹⁶

David Carr argues that this paradox is central to Husserlian phenomenology. What's more, it is both inevitable and irresolvable; "on my interpretation the practice of transcendental phenomenology results in the recognition that the two views of the subject, transcendental and empirical, can be neither avoided nor reconciled. Thus, in my view it concludes in paradox".¹⁷ Rather than attempt to resolve this paradox here, I want merely to point out that it occurs in more or less the same form in Nagel's writings. Indeed the whole of Nagel's *View From Nowhere* is a prolonged meditation on its unavoidability and intractability. For example, Nagel observes how "the uneasy relation between inner and outer perspectives, neither of which we can escape, makes it hard to maintain a coherent attitude toward the fact that we exist at all, toward our deaths, and toward the meaning or point of our lives, because a detached view of our existence, once achieved, is not easily made part of the standpoint from which it is lived" (1986, p. 209). Whether Husserl solves the paradox or not, his work provides a clearer account of it and why it occurs, given his more explicit account of the difference between the subject as part of the objective world and subject as transcendental ego. Hence a Husserlian interpretation of Nagel facilitates a clearer focus on the nature of the somewhat vague philosophical bemusement that forms the motivation for Nagel's *View From Nowhere*. Whether the paradox actually constitutes an objection to Husserl's account of the relationship between subject and world (and also to Husserl's and Nagel's anti-naturalism) is debatable. That the paradox does not befall naturalism is arguably symptomatic of its refusal to address it, rather than its ability to transcend it.

Objectivism, method and sedimentation

In addition to serving as a plausible interpretive framework with which to illuminate Nagel's claims concerning the irreducibility of the subjective, the later Husserl's phenomenology also provides a possible means of clarifying and elaborating Nagel's discussion of the nature of objectivity. Nagel is adamant that objectivity not only comes in varying degrees as we "detach gradually from the contingencies of the self" (1986, p. 5) but also takes on qualitatively different forms. He maintains that 'physical objectivity', the stance taken for granted by objective science as a privileged epistemological

backdrop for elucidating the nature of things, should by no means be viewed as *the* epistemologically privileged perspective, a single, best way to reveal the way the world is. So to restrict oneself exclusively to this perspective and to the entities that it discloses is to restrict oneself in a manner that is both epistemologically and ontologically unwarranted:

The reductionist program that dominates current work in the philosophy of mind is completely misguided, because it is based on the groundless assumption that a particular conception of objective reality is exhaustive of what there is. (1986, p. 16)

Nagel maintains that there may be “less impoverished” senses of objectivity than “physical objectivity” and adds “I want not to abandon the idea of objectivity entirely but rather to suggest that the physical is not its only possible interpretation” (1986, p. 17). He is not very specific on how objectivity in its different forms is actually achieved but does point out on a number of occasions that there are strong links between intersubjectivity and the achievement of objective perspectives: “In both cases we must conceive of ourselves as instances of something more general in order to place ourselves in a centerless world” (1986, p. 19). Nagel appears to suggest that the similarity between the two is not merely coincidental but conceptual, the ideas of objectivity and intersubjectivity pointing to each other: “[B]ecause a centerless view of the world is one in which different persons can converge, there is a close connection between objectivity and intersubjectivity” (1986, p. 63).

Again we find a comparable but better developed position in Husserl, who is more decisive on the nature of the relationship between intersubjectivity and objectivity. In his *Fifth Cartesian Meditation*, Husserl claims that the very sense of an objective world is inextricably tied to intersubjectivity. The sense of detachment from one’s own totally subjective perspective that is essential to any experience of an *objective* world is drawn from a sense of the other Ego – an objective world is precisely a ‘world for *others*’, a ‘world for *everyone*’. As Husserl puts it, “the existence-sense [. . .] of the world and of nature in particular, as Objective Nature, includes [. . .] thereness-for-everyone” (CM, §43, p. 92) and “the other Ego makes constitutionally possible a new infinite domain of what is ‘other’: an *Objective Nature* and a whole Objective world, to which all other Egos and I myself belong” (CM, §49, p. 107).

Husserl, like Nagel,¹⁸ maintains that the sense we have of the world is ultimately of a single, unified, shared world, rather than a set of discrete cultural or subjective universes.¹⁹ However, he does not equate this unified world with the objective world that empirical science takes for granted as its object of study. Rather, the world of empirical science, Husserl claims, is a deriva-

tive conceptualisation, which is by no means inevitable or absolutely privileged over all other possible conceptualisations. This view is expressed most decisively in the *Crisis*, where Husserl introduces the life-world [*Lebenswelt*] as a pre-conceptual experiential realm of purposes and practices in which we always already find ourselves and invariably take for granted when indulging in objective science. In the *Crisis*, Husserl discusses the origins of what he, rather like Nagel, terms “physicalistic objectivism” [*physikalistischer Objektivismus*] (*Crisis*, Part II). Husserl maintains that physicalist, objectivist thinking is not a cognitive inevitability but a form of understanding which historically came to totalise, primarily as a result of the efforts of Galileo and Descartes (*Crisis*, Part II). Like Nagel, Husserl argues that physical objectivity is not a single privileged road to truth but a “positivistic restriction of the idea of science” (*Crisis*, §3, p. 7). It is not the absolute gateway to “true being” but “a method” (*Crisis*, §9h, p. 51), one form of understanding amongst many; there are “many types of praxis, and among them is this peculiar and historically late one, theoretical praxis” (*Crisis*, §28, p. 111). According to Husserl, physicalistic objectivism (the naturalistic stance) emerged through cumulative historical conceptualisations of the pre-given life-world. It rests on a sedimented historical bedrock of conceptual accomplishments, that have been quietly overlooked and forgotten. To explain further, certain life-world practices, purposes and concerns motivate the development of methods, which conceptualise the life-world in various ways in order to achieve their goals. These methods gradually become implicit and are ‘forgotten’. The conceptualisations they impose are then misconstrued as “true being”, their dependence on contingent methodological innovations being overlooked (*Crisis*, II, §9h, p. 51). Later methodological innovations are built upon these conceptualisations, resulting in further conceptualisations, whose derivative nature is, as before, forgotten. Thus, a conceptual abstraction is gradually and unwittingly substituted for a more basic sense of world that it implicitly takes as given. For example, Husserl claims that we have, as early as Galileo, “the surreptitious substitution of the mathematically substructured world of idealities for the only real world, the one that is actually given through perception, that is ever experienced and experienceable – our everyday life-world. This substitution was promptly passed on to his successors, the physicists of the succeeding centuries” (*Crisis*, §9h, pp. 48–49). So what Nagel calls ‘physical objectivity’ is, for Husserl, but one amongst many ways of conceptualising the world, incorporating a tacit, historically sedimented methodological and conceptual framework that is far from exclusive. It follows that the totalising ideal of scientific objectification is no more than an unwarranted apotheosis of one form of understanding.

Husserl's discussion of the life-world is a far more detailed explication of parallel concerns expressed by Nagel. For example, Nagel complains that the perspective of 'physical objectivity' is restrictive and draws attention away from the possibility of different or more general forms of objective understanding that are equally legitimate. What's more, he also appears to regard physical objectivity as a 'method' that is mistaken for 'true being', in arguing that "physicalism is based ultimately on a form of idealism: an idealism of restricted objectivity. Objectivity of whatever kind is not the test of reality. It is just one way of understanding reality" (1986, p. 26). Objectivism comprises a sort of tacit method, which discloses the world in a certain way that is taken by objectivists as an absolute. One form of thought is put on a pedestal above all others and assumed to mirror the way the world really is, when the world it discloses actually reflects a contingent mode of conceptualisation, *one way of thinking about things* rather than *the one way that things are*. We need not apply all the intricacies of Husserl's account of the life-world in order to illuminate and elucidate Nagel's concerns. However, Husserl's discussion of progressive conceptual sedimentation and the manner in which forgotten methodological innovations structure contemporary scientific views surely adds up to a plausible framework with which to organise some of Nagel's curiously unsubstantiated remarks. At the very least, Husserl provides potentially plausible *illustrations* of something that Nagel merely *asserts*.

The point on which Husserl and Nagel both crucially agree then is that objectivity is not some kind of *given* but instead a form of understanding that we achieve. Physical objectivity is one specific subspecies of that general form and the idea that it should totalise in our understanding of all phenomena is plain perverse.²⁰ As Nagel puts it:

I believe that physics²¹ is only one form of understanding, appropriate to a broader but still limited subject matter. To insist on trying to explain the mind in terms of concepts and theories that have been devised exclusively to explain nonmental phenomena is, in view of the radically distinguishing characteristics of the mental, both intellectually backward and scientifically suicidal. (1986, p. 52)

If such claims can indeed be fortified into a convincing argument, the prize is a big one. If one concedes that objectivity is a complex form of understanding, with different variants suited to different tasks and none of them adequate to our total sense of reality, exclusive advocacy of the ideals of physical/scientific objectivity would have to be regarded as amounting to no more than an irrational gesture of faith. Views such as Churchland's 'eliminativism' in respect of 'folk psychological' concepts,²² to take an extreme case, appear

absurd. In the absence of a universally privileged form of detached objectivity, the idea of a future neuroscience – or any other discipline for that matter – rising up to toss away and usurp all other conceptual frameworks and forms of understanding is utterly untenable. In bothering to ask the question ‘how is objectivity possible?; what must be the case for an objective world to be even intelligible?’, Husserl and Nagel question the very foundations of scientific naturalism and its presupposition of ‘physical objectivity’. The common position that emerges suggests that naturalism suffers from a profound lack of philosophical questioning. Instead of simply taking objectivity for granted, both thinkers maintain that the nature and intelligibility of ‘objectivity’ is itself the source of a wealth of philosophical problems, problems which undermine any doctrine that relies blindly on unqualified acceptance of a privileged objective framework.

Phenomenology, idealism and transcendental constitution

Despite the commonalities between Husserlian phenomenology and Nagel’s position, Nagel is adamant that phenomenology’s idealism renders it unacceptable as an alternative to physicalism. However, in this section, I shall argue that phenomenology is not a form of idealism. In fact, idealist interpretations of phenomenology rest on the very same ‘Cartesian’ misconstrual of the transcendental ego that Husserl seeks to dispel.²³ In so doing, I will show how Husserl’s phenomenology incorporates concepts and methods with which to express the nature of the relationship between the subject and the objective world that Nagel appears to lack.

Husserlian phenomenology is often taken to be a form of idealism. For instance, Lübbke has argued recently that though “Husserl’s position differs radically from for example Berkeley’s idealism [. . .] the older Husserl’s position is still a kind of ontological idealism”.²⁴ Of course, Husserl himself adds ammunition to the charge of idealism by naming his view ‘transcendental idealism’! However, he also states that phenomenology is transcendental idealism in “a fundamentally and essentially new sense” (CM, §41, p. 86). In what follows, I will outline Husserl’s ‘new sense’ of transcendental idealism and suggest that it is not in fact a form of idealism at all.

Moran singles out some passages in *Cartesian Meditations* where “Husserl says that the transcendental ego is responsible, not just for the meaning or sense, but for the being of the world”.²⁵ Such passages do seem to suggest that Husserl is committed to some form of idealism:

That the being of the world “transcends” consciousness [. . .] and that it necessarily remains transcendent, in no wise alters the fact that it is conscious life alone, wherein everything transcendent becomes constituted, as something inseparable from consciousness. [The world is] inseparable from transcendental subjectivity, which constitutes actuality of being and sense. (CM, §28, p. 62)

Every imaginable sense, every imaginable being, whether the latter is called immanent or transcendent, falls within the domain of transcendental subjectivity, as the subjectivity that constitutes sense and being. (CM, §41, p. 84)

However, Husserl is not saying here that the transcendental ego or consciousness is the source of being but the source of the constitution [*Konstitution*] of being. It is his use of this term that must be understood in order both to dispel the charge of idealism and to express the nature of the relationship between the transcendental ego and its world. Put crudely, ‘constitution’ is a term that Husserl uses to describe a form of ‘giving sense’ to things: *x* constitutes *y* if *x* is presuppositionally required to render *y* intelligible, where *y* can be our sense of an objective being or itself a constitutive condition for the sense of such a being. Hence in ‘constituting’ being, the transcendental ego is not literally holding being within itself or reducing objective being to its subjective source but is instead enabling its intelligibility. Husserl is concerned, not with the actual existence of being but with its existence-sense: How is it that being is intelligible to us? However, it is important to note that ‘constitution’ as ‘sense-giving’ is very different from the sort of conceptual dependence that holds between terms such as ‘bachelor’ and ‘unmarried’, and is not reducible to more familiar notions of conceptual ‘presupposing’. Husserl uses the term to capture the way in which sense is conferred upon things by the ego *in and through their experiential appearing*. Experience does not simply ‘reveal’ a world but also confers upon the world its implicit meaningfulness, enabling things to appear as what they are, with the sense that they have. Sense bestowal is inextricable from the experiential disclosure of things and is therefore not reducible to a mere conceptual relation that strips it of its ties with experience. Hence ‘constitution’ does not simply acknowledge *that* experience of an objective world incorporates presuppositions. It singles out a certain *kind* of *experiential meaning-giving*, whose comprehension requires adoption of the epoché, an epistemological stance that departs radically from the implicit acceptance of things that is partly constitutive of everyday experience and also of objectivist epistemologies. As Husserl remarks, phenomenology involves “a new way of looking at things [that] contrasts at every point with the natural attitude of experience and thought”.²⁶

I suggest that, in order to express the relationship between subject and object that Nagel attempts to articulate, something like Husserlian ‘constitution’ needs be taken as *basic*, conveying a relationship between ego and world that is essential to a philosophical grasp of the nature of world-experience, a ‘world-disclosure’ that gives the experienced world its sense of being.²⁷ However, ‘constitution’ cannot simply be extricated from Husserlian phenomenology and tagged onto an objectivist metaphysic, amending it in only one specific respect in order to conveniently accommodate subjectivity. Its acceptance requires a more general epistemological and ontological overhaul. But this overhaul does not result in idealism. In fact, I will show that idealist interpretations of Husserl’s phenomenology presuppose a tacit acceptance of the very objectivism that Husserl seeks to dispel. Hence Nagel’s resistance to the Husserlian shift in standpoint can, I will suggest, be attributed to his own implicit retention of the very objectivist framework he proposes to escape from.

Husserl’s concept of ‘constitution’ and why it does not entail idealism can be further elucidated by a consideration of the role played by the epoché. The function of the epoché is to reveal relationships of constitution, and thus the nature of such relationships can be made clear via an examination of the epoché and what it reveals/leaves behind. Husserl describes his epoché as an “abstention” from existence claims (CM, §8, p. 20), as opposed to a denial that anything exists outside the mind or a claim to the effect that the transcendental ego *contains* everything. In the epoché, the natural (objective) attitude is not turned into an idealist attitude but is simply put “out of play”; its meaning is preserved. Instead of turning the objective into the subjective, Husserl takes our conceptions of the objective at face value but turns away from existence to existence-sense and inquires as to how objective being with its sense of ‘objectivity’ or ‘transcendence’ is constituted, how it appears to us with the sense it has:

By epoché, we effect a reduction to our pure meaning (cogito) and to the meant purely as meant. The predicates *being and non-being*, and their modal variants, relate to the latter – accordingly, not to objects simpliciter but to *objective sense*. (CM, §23, p. 56)

Hence the commitment to a pre-given objective world is withdrawn through the epoché in order to make explicit the underlying sense of that commitment; the *objective* world remains just that. To reduce the objective to the subjective would be to change its sense and this is precisely what Husserl wants to refrain from doing. It would be wrong to regard the objective as reduced to

the subjective, given that the transcendental ego is the ultimate condition for the sense of the objective as precisely *out there* and not *in here*:

Just as the reduced Ego is not a piece of the world, so, conversely, neither the world nor any worldly Object is a piece of my Ego, to be found in my conscious life as a really inherent part of it, as a complex data of sensation or a complex of acts. This transcendence is part of the intrinsic sense of anything worldly, despite the fact that anything worldly acquires all the sense determining it, along with its existential status, exclusively from my experiencing [. . .] (CM, §11, p. 26)

This is an especially telling passage. For Husserl, idealism is itself a kind of objectifying doctrine that takes the world to be somehow reduced to or ‘contained’ in the mind. But for idealism to make sense in the first place, the mind has to be construed as some kind of objective thing; the sort of thing that can *contain*. However, the transcendental ego is no such thing. It is not a ‘thing’ at all and, as such, lacks the sense to enable it to *contain* being as a ‘piece’ of it. Instead, Husserl retains the sense of the objective world as independent of the (objective, empirical) subject and employs the transcendental ego in a meaning-constituting role and nothing more. It not only renders an objective world intelligible but also renders any explicit contrast between *worldly* subject and *worldly* object conceivable. It supplies the existence-sense of the very distinction between subjective and objective and is not itself *subjective* in any sense that can be contrasted with *objective* but, rather, the ultimate ground presupposed by the sense of all experiential possibilities. So Husserl preserves “the meant world purely as meant” (CM, §15, p. 37), whereas doctrines such as idealism or physicalism, which assume the sense of both *subjectivity* and *objectivity* and then mistakenly try to reduce one to the other, succeed only in distorting and losing that meaning. As Husserl notes, “if transcendental subjectivity is the universe of possible sense, an outside is precisely – nonsense” (CM, §41, p. 84). It is prior to the sense of an explicit subject-object distinction and preserves that sense without distorting it to ground one in the other. To regard this as idealism is to confuse the transcendental subject with the objective subject and misconstrue its role, which is to express the relation between objectivity and subjectivity without losing either via a process of inappropriate objectification, of which both physicalism and idealism are cases in point. Hence the Husserlian epoché does not end in idealism; idealism only results if one abandons the phenomenological standpoint and tacitly lapses back into objectivist thinking. As Husserl notes:

Our phenomenological idealism does not deny the positive existence of the real [*realen*] world and of Nature – in the first place as though it held it to

be an illusion. Its sole task and service is to clarify the meaning of the world, the precise sense in which everyone accepts it, and with undeniable right, as really existing (*wirklich seiende*).²⁸

As the above passage suggests, Husserl does imply that the transcendental ego, in its world-constituting role, is not a part of the *real* but, rather, that whereby the real is given sense. One might therefore object that, even without the spectre of idealism, the ego is ontologically problematic. If it is not part of reality, then it is 'unreal' or 'outside of the real', divorced from a reality with which it needs to be somehow reunited. However, applying binary oppositions such as real/unreal or existent/nonexistent to the transcendental ego as exclusive ontological options is to fall back into the very objectivism that Husserl rejects, to take as basic the distinctions and oppositions that Husserl seeks to *get behind*. The ego is not a *thing* that can be intelligibly categorised as real or unreal but a condition of sense for even that distinction. As Husserl explicitly states, transcendental phenomenology goes beyond "traditional antagonisms" and attempts to articulate the sense of objective reality "against which [sense] the supposedly realistic objectivism sins by its failure to understand transcendental constitution" (1999, p. 330). Thus *realism*, when taken as synonymous with a totalising metaphysical *objectivism*, is in fact a distortion of our sense of reality, a sense that depends for its constitution on the transcendental ego. Phenomenology incorporates a very different philosophical standpoint, which *gets beneath* all the familiar philosophical antagonisms and explicates a relationship between subject and world that cannot be categorised in such terms; it is, if you like, pre-ontological. So phenomenology does not deny or distort 'objectivity' and 'reality' but it does reject the epistemological and ontological assumptions of totalising objectivism.

As Nagel observes, "the very idea of objective reality guarantees that such a picture will not comprehend everything" (1986, p. 13). As a consequence of the same sentiment, Husserl rejects the path of objectification, adopting a different standpoint to explicate the ways in which subjective and objective relate and, in so doing, constitute our sense of world. This does not make the world any less real or objective. It is rather to admit that the world as it is objectively given cannot encompass that by which the world is objectively given with precisely the objective sense that it has for us.

Contra Nagel (e.g., 1986, pp. 18–19), I suspect that phenomenology also escapes charges of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism. The transcendental ego may be the condition for the sense of absolutely everything but it is not, in any meaningful sense, a human ego. The transcendental ego gives sense to any objective characterisation of 'the human' and also to the distinction between human and nonhuman perspectives. It is prior to the human/

nonhuman distinction. It does not entail a wholly human point of view but instead supplies in its structure the sense of any distinction we might care to make between human and nonhuman points of view. So the Husserlian transcendental ego does not deny us the sense of questions such as ‘what is it like to be a bat?’ but constitutes the sense of such questions. As discussed in the previous section, Husserl attempts to explicate a sense of reality that is neither culture-specific nor anthropocentric, a sense of reality that is more robust than that assumed by physical objectivity and embraces many different forms of understanding. Phenomenological description thus provides fuel for Nagel’s contention that reality is more than simply the physical; that physical objectivity is just one form of understanding and should be recognised as such.²⁹ As Nagel observes, an alternative to objectifying strategies is to “resist the voracity of the objective appetite, and stop assuming that understanding of the world and our position in it can always be advanced by detaching from that position and subsuming whatever appears from there under a single more comprehensive conception” (1979, pp. 211–212). Ironically, this is just what Nagel refuses to do, in regarding Husserl’s radical departure from totalising objectivism as a pernicious form of idealism and thus tacitly retaining the very objectivist metaphysic he seeks to question. Nagel concludes his essay ‘What is it like to be a bat?’ by calling for an ‘objective phenomenology’ that transcends the subjective-objective barrier:

...at present we are completely unequipped to think about the subjective character of experience without relying on the imagination – without taking up the point of view of the experiential subject. This should be regarded as a challenge to form new concepts and devise a new method – an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or the imagination. Though presumably it would not capture everything, its goal would be to describe, at least in part, the subjective character of experiences in a form comprehensible to beings incapable of having those experience. (1979, pp. 178–179)

It is arguable that Husserl’s phenomenology attempts to fulfil this very function. Husserl’s epoché does not centrally involve empathy, imagination or some kind of introspective regress into the bowels of one’s subjectivity. It is instead a kind of *stance*,³⁰ a radical change in viewpoint that resists the sedimented urge to objectify and thus opens up philosophical possibilities that are eclipsed by an objectivist stance. The transcendental ego, rather than being a ‘subject’ in any traditional sense, is the precondition for both the explicit subject and the explicit object and any constituted differences between them. It is not subjective in a way that can be contrasted with the objective but is presupposed by the sense of distinctions between worldly subjects and

worldly objects. It therefore seems inappropriate to regard Husserlian phenomenology as 'subjective' in any familiar sense. Hence it is not something that can be obviously contrasted with an 'objective' phenomenology. The question therefore arises as to what Nagel's explicitly 'objective' phenomenology might achieve that Husserl's does not. Furthermore, the quest for an 'objective' phenomenology suggests a retention of the epistemological primacy of an 'objective view', rendering the subject a *problem* for a more general objectivism rather than something whose comprehension requires a more radical revision of epistemological and ontological assumptions. However, it is just such a revision that Nagel explicitly calls for in his critique of 'physical objectivity' and scientised conceptions of the subject. Without the charge of idealism, it is unclear why the door should be closed to a more generally Husserlian reorientation of philosophical inquiry, in order to unite the objective and the subjective without lapsing into metaphysically unpalatable physicalism or idealism.

A Husserlian interpretation of Nagel's position provides a route from mainstream objectivism to phenomenology, a conceptual bridge between radically different conceptualisations of subjectivity and objectivity, and estranged philosophical discourses. In so doing, it illustrates the continuing relevance of Husserlian phenomenology as a critique of and positive alternative to contemporary objectivism, and opens up the possibility of constructive debate between two very different philosophical traditions. Husserl does not merely provide an assortment of occasionally fruitful insights that can be cannibalised in the service of naturalism. Rather, his core account of subjective-objective relations comprises a coherent and radically different philosophical viewpoint to that assumed by mainstream objectivism, an alternative that should not simply be dismissed.

The common insights that emerge from the comparison between Husserl and Nagel cast doubt on the basic premises of many current debates concerning consciousness and subjectivity. There have recently been a number of attacks on several aspects of the Cartesian conception of consciousness,³¹ most notably by Dennett.³² However, such accounts generally continue to rest on the assumption that consciousness must be some kind of *objective thing*,³³ it is either a mental thing or a physical thing or it is nothing at all. For example, Dennett (1991) enthusiastically commits himself to a perspective of totalising scientific objectivity, whereby phenomena are to be philosophically accounted for by assimilating them into a comprehensive objective, third person picture of the world, which is driven by science. The more a philosophical account conforms to such a goal, the more epistemic authority it commands. A consequence of this commitment is his assumption that consciousness and subjec-

tivity must either conform to what science has discovered about the objective features of the brain or resign themselves to nonexistence. When Dennett finds that his model of the brain cannot accommodate a Cartesian self or a subject, his only remaining resort is to argue that the self is a fiction – albeit a very useful ‘narrative fiction’.³⁴ This lack of options is a direct consequence of his faith in physical objectivity as a totalising form of understanding. In contrast, both Husserl and Nagel give us a view of the self as something that is neither an objective thing nor a fiction but a condition for the sense of any objective perspective, suggesting that it is a lack of imagination rather than a lack of options that commits Dennett to his fictional view.

According to both Husserl and Nagel, the true source of Descartes’ mistake is not to postulate a mental substance that fails to fit in with modern ‘physical objectivity’ but to conceive of the self as a substance at all,³⁵ and contemporary philosophers of mind are still entrenched in the resultant binary opposition between dualisms and physicalisms, all of which presuppose an objective perspective on the subject. Husserl and Nagel redirect the problems of consciousness and intentionality to a different source – a tension between subjective and objective rather than a tension between mental and physical objectivities. They suggest that it is quite tenable for something to have a completely different nature to that of the *objective*; an option not generally considered by contemporary philosophers of mind.

If this position is accepted, then both sides of the traditional mind-body problem are merely the symptom of an unjustified apotheosis of our objectifying tendency that has resulted in the senseless doctrine of ‘transcendental realism’. This involves a confusion of the essential relationship between subject and object, and stems from the unwarranted belief that the only way to understand something is to construe it as an objective entity integrated into a broader objective framework. In such a framework, subjectivity is lost from the start.

Notes

1. I am much indebted to three anonymous referees for very helpful reports on earlier versions of this paper. I am also grateful to Dolores Dooley, Joan McCarthy, Sinéad Murphy, Norman Sieroka, Alan Thomas and an audience at the Royal Irish Academy 2001 Conference for some very helpful comments.
2. J. Petitot, F.J. Varela, B. Pachoud and J. Roy, eds. *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 1–2. Petitot, Varela, Pachoud and Roy remark that “even though this concern for naturalization is not unanimous, and is actually even dismissed by a minor-

- ity, it can hardly be denied that it lies at the core of current research in the field" (p. xiv). Not all the contributors to the volume endorse this kind of scientific naturalism.
3. This quotation refers specifically to Husserl's position on the gulf between phenomenology and the mathematics of his time.
 4. For example, Dennett says of Nagel that "it takes courage to stand up for mystery, and cleverness to be taken seriously. Nagel repeatedly answers that he has no answers to the problems he raises, but prefers his mystification to the demystifying efforts of others" (D.C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, Cambridge MA, London: MIT Press, 1987, p. 5).
 5. For the purposes of this discussion, I use the terms "naturalism" and "objectivism" interchangeably. "Naturalism" is a more specific doctrine, which assumes objectivism and also adds that the sciences constitute the best vehicle for understanding the structure of the objective world. However, the argument of this paper is concerned with assumptions common to both doctrines. I regard Nagel's "physical objectivity" as synonymous with "the naturalistic standpoint" and his "scientism" as synonymous with "naturalism".
 6. Originally published in *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974), pp. 435–450. Reprinted in T. Nagel (1979) *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 165–180.
 7. See, for example, Hofstadter's commentary on Nagel's article, in D. Hofstadter and D.C. Dennett eds. *The Mind's I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 403–414. See also Dennett (1987, Ch. 1).
 8. T. Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 7.
 9. In Nagel (1979, pp. 196–213).
 10. Nagel (1986, p. 29) repeats his earlier criticism of dualism.
 11. Nagel treats 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity' as graded properties of *perspectives* had by a subject. His question is whether the subject herself, who adopts variably subjective or objective perspectives upon the world, can ever be fully integrated into an objective perspective, thus accounting for all subjective phenomena in wholly objective terms. 'Subjectivity' and 'objectivity' can also refer to the properties of *entities* encountered by a subject, indicating their dependence upon or independence from a subject's point of view. In what follows, I employ both senses of these terms.
 12. Of course, our physicalist might retort by arguing that a vast web of inductive evidence makes our 'faith' in 'physical objectivity' perfectly rational. But Nagel could simply reply that physicalism's failure to tackle the problem of consciousness is strong inductive evidence of its limitations as a form of understanding, a line which is vindicated by Chalmers's observation that many philosophers have simply given up on the 'hard problem of [phenomenal] consciousness' and turned to easier problems instead (D. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. xi–xii).
 13. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), hereafter CM.
 14. For the purposes of this paper, unless otherwise stated I identify 'world' with the 'objective world', in relation to which Nagel ponders the place of the subject. However, it is worth keeping in mind that Husserl also employs a very different conception of world, as a pre-given *horizon* that is presupposed by the objective world upon which the empirical sciences operate.

15. For Husserl's critique of the Cartesian ego, see also his *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. D. Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), Part 2, §16–§19, hereafter *Crisis*.
16. "Phenomenological Psychology and Transcendental Phenomenology" (article from *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1927). Reprinted in D. Welton, ed. *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 322–336: 330. Husserl also addresses the paradox in the *Crisis*. For his attempt to resolve it, see *Crisis*, Part III, §53–§54.
17. D. Carr, *The Paradox of Subjectivity: Self in the Transcendental Tradition* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 9.
18. T. Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997).
19. For Husserl's argument against this sort of relativism, see *Cartesian Meditations* §60, p. 140. Husserl's account of intersubjectivity in the *Fifth Meditation* is complex, ambiguous and highly problematic. However, the utility of my comparison between Nagel and Husserl will not hinge on the acceptability of Husserl's account. For the purpose of this paper, I want merely to make clear that, for both philosophers, the sense we have of an objective world is closely tied to intersubjectivity.
20. It should be made clear however that the rejection of physical objectivity as a totalizing understanding does not entail that 'anything goes'. The point is simply that physical objectivity is a form of understanding that is tied to only certain methods and goals, and should be acknowledged as such rather than overly generalized or even universalized. 'Good for something' does not imply 'good for everything' and an acknowledgement of this certainly does not entail that all forms of understanding are as good as each other in all contexts.
21. Nagel thinks that all other objective sciences will be similarly limited.
22. P.M. Churchland, "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes" *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981), pp. 67–70.
23. Similar interpretations to the one I defend in this section are proposed by H. Hall ("Was Husserl a Realist or an Idealist?"), in *Husserl, Intentionality and Cognitive Science*, H.J. Dreyfus and H. Hall, eds. (Cambridge MA, London: MIT Press, 1982), pp. 169–190 and D. Carr (1999) amongst others.
24. P. Lübcke, "A Semantic Interpretation of Husserl's Epoché," *Synthese* 118 (1999), 1–12, p. 9.
25. D. Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 169.
26. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Humanities Press, 1931), p. 43.
27. The irreducibility of the basic relationship of transcendental constitution does not imply that constitution is a simple phenomenon. It may have many different and complex variants. For example, Husserl distinguishes between 'static' and 'genetic' constitution and between 'active' and 'passive' constitutional genesis. (See e.g., *Fourth Cartesian Meditation*).
28. Author's Preface to the 1931 English translation of *Ideas*, pp. 20–21.
29. Nagel might also seek further ammunition for such claims by drawing from the later Heidegger's work on technology, e.g., "The Question Concerning Technology", in Heidegger's *Basic Writings*, ed. D.F. Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 311–341. Heidegger's use of the term 'enframing' [*Ge-stell*] has much in common with Nagel's 'physical objectivity'; a background of understanding that serves to *reveal* the world in a certain way – because we are so immersed in it, we take for granted that it puts us in

contact with *the way things are*. Heidegger maintains, like Nagel, that technological 'enframing' (similar to physical objectivity in being the essence of scientific thinking) is only one form of understanding or 'way of *revealing* beings' amongst many, which, though it increasingly comes to totalise, is restrictive and misses much of our possible understanding of Being. Though, I suspect that Nagel would find Heidegger's relativistic tendencies and the later Heidegger's leanings towards mysticism extremely unappealing, limited comparisons might still prove fruitful.

30. Of course, Husserl's epoché faces a number of serious problems. First of all, it is less than clear how it is possible at all. What are we actually doing when we abstain from the natural attitude? How do we do it? To this, one might retort that the Husserlian epoché is no more mysterious than the objective, 'detached' attitude that scientists supposedly take up. It may also be possible to renounce some of Husserl's stronger claims, such as that the epoché involves a complete absence of prejudice and a total suspension of the natural attitude, whilst preserving the idea that some kind of perspectival switch can illuminate, wholly or partially, constitutive structures that are invisible to an objectivist stance, which takes the givenness of the objective world as its starting point.
31. Perhaps the most provocative title is Antonio Damasio's *Descartes' Error* (London: Picador, 1995).
32. D.C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Allen Lane: Penguin Press, 1991).
33. I use the term 'thing' rather loosely to include 'object' and 'process'. The only indispensable characteristic of 'thinghood' that I want to insist on is 'objectivity'.
34. In fact, Dennett appears to oscillate between the naturalism he explicitly endorses and a more Husserlian perspective. See Carr's "Phenomenology and Fiction in Dennett," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 6 (1998), pp. 331–344 for an examination of the relationship between Dennett's scientific objectivism and his fictional self. Carr argues that Dennett's scientific objectivism is an unargued assumption or act of faith. It is also something that rests uneasily with his 'heterophenomenology'. See Carr (1998, 1999) for some interesting comparisons between Dennett's notion of a 'stance' and Husserl's epoché. See also D.L. Thompson, "Phenomenology and Heterophenomenology: Husserl and Dennett on Reality and Science," in *Dennett's Philosophy: A Comprehensive Assessment*, eds. D. Ross, A. Brook and D. Thompson (Cambridge MA, London: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 201–218) for a comparison between Husserl's phenomenology and Dennett's heterophenomenology.
35. One might contend that, as with most things, Kant actually got there first. I am thinking of his discussion of the *paralogisms of pure reason* (*Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. V. Politis, London: Everyman, 1993, Transcendental Dialectic Book II, Chapter 1) where he argues against the Cartesian tendency to conceive of the subject as object:

The Unity of consciousness, which lies at the basis of the categories, is considered to be an intuition of the subject as an object; and the category of substance is applied to the intuition. But this unity is nothing more than the unity in thought, by which no object is given; to which therefore the category of substance – which always presupposes a given intuition – cannot be applied (p. 270)

However, there are differences; Kant's account incorporates *things in themselves*, which seem to presuppose a sense of the objective, consciousness being only a condition for the unity of *phenomena*. Husserl rejects 'things in themselves', avoids idealism and re-directs the emphasis from the conditions of knowledge to the conditions of meaning.

