



The Last Word

Thomas Nagel

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If there is such a thing as reason, it has to be universal. Reason must reflect objective principles whose validity is independent of our point of view - principles that anyone with enough intelligence ought to be able to recognize as correct. But this universality of reason is what relativists and subjectivists deny in ever-increasing numbers. And such subjectivism is not just an inconsequential intellectual flourish or badge of theoretical chic. It is exploited to deflect argument and to belittle the pretensions of the arguments of others. The continuing spread of this relativistic way of thinking threatens to make public discourse increasingly difficult and unproductive. In *The Last Word*, Thomas Nagel, one of the most influential philosophers writing in English, presents a sustained defense of reason against the attacks of subjectivism, delivering systematic rebuttals of relativistic claims with respect to language, logic, science, and ethics. He shows that the last word in disputes about the objective validity of any form of thought must lie in some unqualified thoughts about how things are - thoughts that we cannot regard from outside as mere psychological dispositions. His work sets a new standard in the debate on this crucially important question and should generate intense interest both within and outside the philosophical community.

The Last Word Details

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Author : Thomas Nagel

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Grasped in Thought says

Overall, this was a rather well done refutation of most vulgar relativistic conceptions of knowledge and justification. His arguments in favor of ethical realism seem to be rather well constructed, even if I completely disagree. In short, this is definitely worth reading if you want a refutation of the more naive forms of relativism floating around the intellectual zeitgeist.

Mitch Flitcroft says

This is a book about where epistemic justification comes to an end. It defends the universality of reason against subjectivist critiques by showing that the critiques are either self-defeating (as is the case in logic) or less plausible than their alternative (as is the case in science and ethics). There was a brief discussion of Godel's incompleteness theorems, but I would have loved more. I'd recommend this book if you're interested in philosophy, particularly epistemology.

Ryan says

1 of Sam's top 3 philosophy books for everyone to read.

I'm a big fan of Thomas Nagel's earlier work... He is a very fine writer — a very clear writer — and just as a style of communication ... he's worth going to school on." Sam Harris
Champions rationality)

Rui Coelho says

This was a fun read. It was amusing to watch Nagel contradicting himself, question-begging and making a fool of himself in general in order to advocate for his unreasonable and outdated belief that reason and logic are the sole foundations for a valid discourse.

Alexi Parizeau says

It was shocking how relevant this book turned out to be, at least for my own interests. Sorry this is going to be a useless review, because I'm utterly blinded by the profundity this has for my own work.

[First Reading: April 12-13 2015]

Auntie Pam says

Un saggio davvero difficile per me che non amo la filosofia, e non c'entra nulla che l'ho letto in spagnolo. No, è proprio un rapporto di amore ed odio quello che ho con questi temi: o mi piacciono molto o li trovo banali e una perdita di tempo. Questo per me è stata una perdita di tempo. Secondo il mio modesto parere Nagel è una persona egocentrica, uno che anche se vuol fare finta di dare il beneficio del dubbio, in cuor suo lui non ammetterà mai che può sbagliare. Perché dire che ogni forma di pensiero soggettivista è falsa? Perché per lui tutto quello che è soggettivo è assurdo? Mi domando perché per Nagel sia tanto difficile ammettere con serenità che $2+2=4$ e finirla lì, ma no, lui invece insiste col dire che c'è sempre qualcosa in più per cui dibattere e l'ultima parola non sarà mai l'ultima.

Mi sembra come quei bambini (e mi sono limitata a dire bambini che potrei dire uomini e il discorso non finirebbe più) che vogliono per forza avere l'ultima parola, anche se l'ultima parola non li convince mai abbastanza. Insomma, io e Nagel siamo come due amanti: ogni tanto si amano e ogni tanto si tengono il muso!

Jacob says

The good thing about Thomas Nagel is that he puts himself out there. Frankly, I think his "defense of reason" walks and talks like Blackburn--all the better for Blackburn, I say! Still an engaging read. Pair it with Blackburn's *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* and decide for yourself.

Andrei Khrapavitski says

My weekend read was "Last Word," a book by philosopher Thomas Nagel. Considering how prevalent postmodern subjectivist, relativistic, pragmatist and/or naturalistic beliefs are these days, I highly recommend to pick this book and read Nagel's arguments carefully. Together with Derek Parfit, Peter Singer and a number of other authors, Nagel masterfully attacks these views. Maybe not a knockdown argument, considering we always view the world from within our own perspective, but it helps, if you want to understand his arguments, to look at yourself and all your reasons from an impersonal perspective, or as Sidgwick calls it, point of view of the Universe. Nagel himself offers a different name for such view: view from nowhere, which is the title of one of his books, by the way.

Reading his book, I recalled a nice example where evolutionary programming fails unless a certain species can reason.

Remember that moths fly towards light. Well, they also fly right into a light bulb and die from its heat. They do so one after another. It's possible that moths have an escape-route mechanism related to light. They evolved to follow that path. But they cannot reason that light bulbs are to be avoided.

Viewing from a viewpoint of a human, we can clearly see that. Likewise, whatever matters to us (religion, national or personal identity, etc.) is subject to reasoning (ours or an outside observer). You don't have to be an Einstein to clearly see that we can be wrong about many things. Many subjective things that matter to us are irrational and if we reason hard enough about these things, they are to be avoided, just like light bulbs should be avoided by moths. The question is can we individually and collectively avoid the light bulb?

Kean Chan says

Nagel defends the rationalist concept of reason and leads a polemic against subjectivist conventions, exposing them as inherent fallacies

Greg says

This is a short but brain-hurting little book on reason, and the fallacies of non-rational / subjective attempts at building epistemologies and ethical systems. I won't bore anyone with the details, and this isn't a spoiler because he throws out his view right at the start of the book, but Nagel's basic idea is that any attempt to overthrow rationality, say for example for a cultural relativism for how come to think the way we think, is doomed because to engage in the exercise we are still in the basis of rationality that we are trying to disprove, thus rationality wins. By Nagel's account all attempts to get around this in pragmatic or positivist ways have failed because they still need to rely on reason to basis their own explanations, and thus reason is kind of irreducible. The kind of fascinating stuff that only a philosophy person would find interesting, and everyone else would ask, so?

I've written in more detail some problems that I had with the last chapter here:

<http://appendixa.wordpress.com/2009/1...>

Ela says

A good headache! Am writing a paper on the Ethics chapter now; comparing some of his writing with Wittgenstein. I can't believe how much their views have in common...
