

«BLIND SPOT»
AND THE PHENOMENON OF SELF-GIVENNESS

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Abstract

One of the fundamental intuitions that plays the central role in the theological and philosophical reflections of John Paul II consists in the recognition of the gift character of person's existence. Not only the world is given and entrusted to a person but also a person himself/herself «who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself» (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24) is given to himself/herself as a gift. John Paul II explicitly writes in the *Centesimus Annus*: «Not only has God given the earth to man, who must use it with respect to the original good purpose for which it was given to him, but man too is God's gift to man» (*Centesimus Annus*, 38). Whether and how the gift dimension of one's own existence may be discovered by a person is an important philosophical question. To answer it one would have to investigate the phenomenon of person's receptivity as well as to explore the ways in which the reality including the reality of one's own being presents or gives itself to the person. In this essay I will critically examine some claims made by Thomas Nagel in his *The View From Nowhere* which if proven to be irrefutable will make it impossible for a person to ever perceive and realize one's own being as a gift given to him/her. In presenting Nagel's views I will indicate certain fundamental weaknesses in his position as well as outline the direction in which the subjectivity and self-givenness of man may reveal their true essence.

Key words: gift, subjectivity, self-givenness, Christian anthropology, Thomas Nagel.

Nagel's Argument

Thomas Nagel in his *The View from Nowhere* investigates the subjectivity-objectivity issue. His analysis is both important and interesting if only for the fact that the author is trying to find a way to combine or integrate man's «internal» and subjective perspective on the world with a capacity to transcend one's particular point of view and thus, have an «external» and objective view of the whole world and his own being as a part of this world.

Nagel has a clear sense that the moments «from within» and «from without» bear a fundamental significance in describing the

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phenomena of subjectivity and objectivity. As soon as one tries to establish a connection between these two approaches to reality, he immediately realizes the limitations and difficulties which are at stake:

«One limit encountered by the pursuit of objectivity appears when it turns back on the self and tries to encompass subjectivity in its conception of the real».²

An attempt to capture one's subjectivity, as Nagel thinks, leads us into a quite paradoxical situation, which he describes as follows:

«So the external standpoint at once holds out the hope of genuine autonomy, and snatches it away. By increasing our objectivity and self-awareness, we seem to acquire increased control over what will influence our actions, and thus to take our lives into our own hands. Yet the logical goal of these ambitions is incoherent, for to be really free we would have to act from a standpoint completely outside ourselves, choosing everything about ourselves, including all our principles of choice – creating ourselves from nothing, so to speak.

This is self-contradictory: in order to do anything we must already be something. ... Here as elsewhere the objective standpoint creates an appetite which it shows to be insatiable».³

Nagel's insight into the nature of a person's knowledge and autonomy is perfectly sound: to act autonomously means to act knowingly. Something cannot be known without being objectively, that is «from outside» or frontally perceived. The more one has knowledge about the external world and his/her own being the more he/she could be considered to be in possession of himself/herself and thus his/her acting is exercised with a greater degree of autonomy. This is why, argues Nagel, it is of such importance for a person to be able to reach the objective and detached from one's subjective perspective worldview. The true autonomy demands that a person acts and decides from the objective viewpoint. How could one reach such objectivity? This is how Nagel describes the emergence of an objective point of view:

«As things are, the objective self is only part of the point of view of an ordinary person, and its objectivity is developed to a different degree in different persons and at different stages of life and civilization. The basic step which brings it to life is not complicated ... it is simply the step of conceiving the world as a place that includes the person I am within it, as just another of its contents – conceiving myself from outside, in other words. ... Next comes the step of conceiving from outside all the points of view and experiences of that person and others of his species, and considering the world as a place in which these phenomena are produced by interaction between these beings and other things».⁴

² Nagel T. *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford University Press, 1989. P. 5.

³ Nagel, op. cit., p. 119.

⁴ Ibid., p. 65.

However, any further development of this logic, as Nagel thinks, quite paradoxically creates incoherence, which consists in the fact that to act in a fully free way means «to act from a standpoint completely outside ourselves». Thus, according to such logic, the fullness of our knowledge demands all encompassing objective standpoint which seems to exclude the very possibility of an action from within, since such inner act has to be a part of an objective worldview; it seems that prior to its being actual and in order for it to take place it has to be objectified first. What is said here could be described as the gradual externalization of a subject's interiority to the point where everything internal becomes objectified and the subject himself, as it were, appears beyond its «subjective shell». If something like this had ever been possible it would bring about a total loss of personal freedom and identity.

In his reflections Nagel comes close to the phenomena of personal self-possession. Man, writes Nagel, wants to act not only knowing the external circumstances but also in light of what takes place in his interiority. Man's desire to know his interiority could be interpreted as the need to possess his own being and to be in control of motives built upon his internal circumstances and experiences. Thus, Nagel argues:

«I wish to act not only in light of the external circumstances facing me and the possibilities that they leave open, but in light of the internal circumstances as well: my desires, beliefs, feelings, and impulses. I wish to be able to subject my motives, principles, and habits to critical examination, so that nothing moves me to action without my agreeing to it. In this way, the setting against which I act is gradually enlarged and extended inward, till it includes more and more of myself, considered as one of the contents of the world».⁵

However, since Nagel's fundamental assumption is that the only way to get «hold» of one's being is to approach it from outside, that is by the way of objectifying and grasping it with intentional, conscious acts, he is inevitably brought to a conclusion that «the process that starts as a means to the enlargement of freedom seems to lead to its destruction».⁶

If Nagel could be interpreted as saying that it would be absurd to think that someone might act *freely* without belonging to oneself, that is without being given to oneself, then he evidently is right. The reason why the activity of the non-personal world is not described as *free* is because of the fact that none of its inhabitants are in position to *experience* their own being in the sense of it *being given* to them.

However, if Nagel is claiming that man's objectifying capacity (when compared with the non-personal beings) creates merely the expectations for freedom which in fact can never be fulfilled than he certainly manifests certain misunderstandings of the nature of personal subjectivity.

For Nagel the problem of freedom eventual fulfilment is primarily due to the essential impossibility for the self to encounter itself. He ar-

⁵ Nagel, op. cit., p. 119.

⁶ Ibid., p. 119.

gues that this is so, because similarly to the fact that «some knower must remain behind the lens if anything is to be known»⁷ person's objective view of oneself remains *essentially* incomplete:

«The incomplete view of ourselves in the world includes a large blind spot, behind our eyes, so to speak, that hides something we cannot take into account in acting, because it is what acts».⁸

With this powerful metaphor of a «large blind spot» Nagel touches upon the core aspect of person's self-possession and self-giveness. If self-possession, as Nagel thinks, is a kind of power over one's own being which directly and proportionally results from the intentional and objectifying acts through which a person grasps himself/herself, then, as he acknowledges, there is an essential limitation in pursuing self-possession. The limitation has to do with the fact that the self seems to be essentially unapproachable through the mode of self-giveness. Whenever the self bends back upon itself with the intentional act it thereby makes itself completely inaccessible and hidden in a «large blind spot». What is in fact objectified looks more like traces or signs of self activity but the living and acting self always remains beyond the intentional grasp of a person.

What are the consequences of the «blind spot» theory? One may immediately see, for example, how it would influence our understanding and approach to the whole moral dimension. If Nagel is right and the phenomenon of the «blind spot» he is describing signifies essential impossibility of the agent being given to himself⁹, then there is no way to resolve the opposition between the objective standpoint with morality's objective and universal norms as its outcome and the personal perspective of the acting agent. Thus, in the ethical dimension the problem, as Nagel perceives it, consists in the «excess objectivity in ethics» as the result of «escaping from oneself», which in this context implies a gradual attainment of more and more detached standpoint from the individual perspective.¹⁰ Therefore, on the existential level the opposition between

⁷ Nagel, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁹ In Nagel's own words: «The incomplete view faces us with the possibility that we are constrained ... without knowing it, by factors operating in the blind spot. It also faces us with the certainty that however much we expand our objective view of ourselves, something will remain beyond the possibility of explicit acceptance or rejection, because we cannot get entirely outside ourselves, even though we know that there is an outside» (*ibid.*, p. 128).

¹⁰ This is how Nagel describes the problem of excess of objectivity: «There is a problem of excess objectivity also in ethics. Objectivity is the driving force of ethics as it is of science: it enables us to develop new motives when we occupy a standpoint detached from that of our purely personal desires and interests, just as in the realm of thought it enables us to develop new beliefs. Morality gives systematic form to the objective will. But escaping from oneself is as delicate a matter with respect to motives as it is with respect to belief. By going too far one may arrive at skepticism or nihilism; short of this there is also a temptation to deprive the subjective standpoint of any independent role in the justification of action» (Nagel, *op. cit.*, p. 8).

objective standpoint and subjective point of view is experienced by the person as a certain inner tension between the autonomy of one's will and the demands of morality. At one point Nagel recognizes that there is a way for a person to overcome this tension by way of personal conversion, which «may be able by a leap of self-transcendence to change his life so radically from the inside that services to this morality ... becomes his overwhelming concern and dominant good»¹¹. However, this does not resolve the issue of self-givenness but rather provides a «noble» way to escape from oneself by losing oneself in some kind of moral activity.

Personal Subjectivity

The most fundamental and far reaching implication which is contained in the «blind spot» theory has to do with the acknowledgment of the impossibility to receive one's being as a gift. Any assumption which claims person's essential incapacity of self-givenness, that is the impossibility to receive oneself in a «from within» manner thereby precludes one from experiencing the gift character of one's being. Even if there were a gift of existence given to the person it would not be able to be ever received and appropriated by the person because it would always remain hidden along with the innermost self of the person in the «blind spot».

Interestingly enough while reflecting on the incoherency of person's desire to increase his/her freedom by the way of expanding and deepening his/her objective standpoint, Nagel points out that this incoherency comes about from the evidently untenable statement: «for to be really free we would have to act from a standpoint completely outside ourselves ... creating ourselves from nothing, so to speak»¹². Nagel is perfectly right in the sense that when we think of the human being we realize that such a being cannot be merely caused or produced by some effects of the world. The very freedom of the human being in order to be what it is requires the utterly transcendent source of person's existence, that is, a person ought to be created from nothing to be capable of exercising freedom. Thus, this «being created from nothing» is something which fundamentally defines and shapes the nature of the human.

However, the Nagel misses one crucial point. It is not that the impossible self-creation of a person from nothing guarantees freedom but it is rather the being able to receive and to appropriate his/her «from nothing» creation which sets him/her free. It is not primarily the control over one's own being which makes someone free and autonomous but it is the way one receives one's being that opens a new horizon for the fulfilment of person's freedom. Such reception of one's own being is most fully actualized if one's existence is received as a gift.

Unlikely to all other creatures, a human being due to his/her personal character is endowed with a unique structure and dynamism of receptivity which are essentially characterized by the «from within» character. If the structure of consciousness were such that the person

¹¹ Nagel, op. cit., p. 206.

¹² Ibid., p. 119.

may approach his/her own reality only in a «from without» fashion, that is, in the same way in which he/she relates himself/herself to the surrounding world, than he/she would never be capable of «holding» oneself in any other way but just by grasping one's being in the specifically external fashion.

Is this really the case? Given that Nagel has proved with the sufficient evidence that a person can never reach a «purely» objective standpoint with respect to his/her own being, we are prompted to ask whether a person could be given to himself/herself in a way which differs from the merely objective and intentional grasping. If there is such a mode of self-giveness then apart from avoiding the paradox described by Nagel, there would be introduced a completely new way of possessing oneself in contrast to the external holding of oneself.

In this context it is worth mentioning that the most important challenge of contemporary anthropology and ethics, as Karol Wojtyła sees it, has to do with the «objectification of subjectivity», that is with the analysis of the self-experienced agency of the personal subject. Taken in a larger context, the issue at stake could be depicted as an effort to develop a vision of a person which would integrate both cosmological and personal ways of looking at a human being; the former being a view from the outside and the latter being a penetration into the inner structure and essence of the self-experienced personal interiority.¹³

According to Wojtyła to understand the nature of a person as the specifically personal being one, methodologically speaking, has to «pause at the irreducible»¹⁴. To say in Wojtyła's own words: «Subjectivity is, then, a kind of synonym for the irreducible in the human being»¹⁵. The *irreducibility* at stake implies that the acting of the personal subject, as it were, resists any attempt to completely reduce person and his/her nature to the level of the non-personal beings in the world. In a more positive sense irreducibility reveals itself in the moment one approaches the person as a subject experiencing his/her acts and inner happenings and thus manifesting itself as a being which surpasses any definition given merely in the terms of its species.¹⁶ In other words, to understand per-

¹³ In Wojtyła's own words: «How is the philosophy of the subject to disclose the *objectivity* of the human being in the personal *subjectivity* of this being? These seem to be *the questions that today determine the perspective* for thinking about the human being, the perspective for contemporary anthropology and ethics. They are essential and burning questions. Anthropology and ethics must be pursued today within this challenging but promising perspective» (Wojtyła K. *Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being // Person and Community*, trans. by T. Sandor. New York: Peter Lang, 1993. P. 216).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹⁶ One should not think that the recognition of irreducibility creates the unsurpassable difficulties in cognizing that which is irreducible. Acknowledgement of person's irreducibility and idea to approach the human beings from the point of view of their irreducibility is perfectly legitimate procedure methodologically speaking. Concerning this moment Wojtyła writes: «The irreducible signifies that which is essentially incapable

son's subjectivity means to «understand the human being inwardly»¹⁷. We could think of subjectivity as a way of *experiencing one's inwardness*, as a way of encountering with and living through one's interiority while exercising specifically personal capacity to act in a transcendent way.

An attempt to carefully investigate and analyze all the implications which are contained in Wojtyła's invitation to approach the nature of a person by means of looking at the irreducible in person, namely to explore the dimension of personal subjectivity through which human being is given to himself/herself would lead us beyond the limits of the short essay. At present it would suffice to acknowledge the possibility of non-objectifying and non-intentional mode of self-givenness of the person.

This intuition particularly confirms itself when we reflect on the phenomena of conscience and gratitude in which the person experiences the profoundest self-givenness combined with the acts of openness and self-transcendence. Let us see how John Crosby describes the subjectivity revealed in conscience:

«The determination of myself in conscience is a determination of myself *from within*. It is a determination that I can exercise only towards myself, never towards another. Thus, the term conscience is often used to mean the innermost center, the inner sanctuary, of the human person. How would this inwardness of self-determination be possible if I had to do with myself only as with object, if I were for myself nothing but another object on which I acted volitionally? The radical way in which I determine myself (and only myself) from the center of my being requires a subjective relation of me to myself and excludes an objective relation».¹⁸

In his short essay entitled *Healing Power of Gratitude* Balduin Schwarz similarly to Crosby argues that in being grateful the person while not intentionally focusing on his/her own being nonetheless comes to feel and possess oneself in a very fundamental sense. Thus, gratitude which properly speaking exists only in directedness to the other, paradoxically, at the same time creates the space for self-encounter and self-givenness of the grateful person.

«But the grateful person bows down, and in that very instant, he is raised, because he has humbled himself. He is elevated from within, in his being as a person. He has had courage to “let go” of himself, to “lose his soul”; and precisely in this, he has “gained it.” Gratitude is experienced as peace, the opposite of being inwardly torn. It is experienced as the truth

of reduction, that which cannot be reduced but can only be *disclosed* or *revealed*. *Lived experience essentially defies reduction*. This does not mean, however, that it eludes our knowledge; it only means that *we must arrive at the knowledge of it differently, namely, by a method or means of analysis that merely reveals and discloses its essence*» (Wojtyła, op. cit., p. 215).

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 213.

¹⁸ Crosby J.F. *The Selfhood of the Human Person*. Washington DC: CUA Press, 1996. P. 89.

about our human situation – but in pre-reflective way, in a pure innocent way, as the grace of a gift received».¹⁹

As it becomes clear from the above quoted authors an inquiry into the phenomenon of subjectivity leads us directly to the most mysterious and intimate sphere of a person. Both of them believe that there is a mode of personal self-giveness through which the person encounters his/her self and also exercises the fundamental dimension of his/her freedom in receiving and appropriating his/her own being. Both of them argue that the true personal self-possession occurs not in the intentional and objectifying acts of one's own self but in and through the transcendent acts performed in response to the other persons and to the values. This is why Crosby notices:

«We could in fact “define” personal subjectivity in terms of our directedness to the totality; we could say that personal subjectivity is that depth of inwardness in a living being which opens the being to the absolute realm of all that is».²⁰

Conclusion

If it were true, as Thomas Nagel argues, that the phenomenon of the person's being-given to himself/herself is sufficiently delineated and explained by the process of objectification through the specifically frontal encounter with the self, then we are really facing significant difficulty in understanding how it is possible that by deepening our objectivity we seem to increase our power of self-possession and yet «to be really free we would have to act from a standpoint completely outside ourselves»²¹.

The way out of this difficulty presupposes that one acknowledges that the concepts of the objective and subjective are not merely indicating the points of view the subject is capable of, but they should also be understood as the modes of givenness to and self-giveness of the subject which essentially presuppose one another: «... any deeper subjectivity in ourselves requires the objectivity of intentional acting»²². In view of this any assumption of the person's objective standpoint as being independent from or deprived of subjectivity is philosophically unjustified.

Therefore, there is a sense in which one could claim that everything given to the subject in the object mode, be it the external phenomena

¹⁹ Schwarz B. *The Healing Power of Gratitude* // S. Schwarz, F. Wenisch (eds.) *Values and human experience: essays in honor of the memory of Balduin Schwarz*, New York: P. Lang, 1999. P. 18.

²⁰ Crosby, op. cit., p. 169.

²¹ Ibid., p. 119.

²² «Without any intentional act we cannot be with ourselves as we are with ourselves in the simplest intentional act; any deeper subjectivity in ourselves requires the objectivity of intentional acting. I might also express this by saying that all intentional acts distinguish themselves from non-intentional experiences by presupposing, and also engendering, far more self-presence» (Crosby, op. cit., p. 158).

or internal mental events experienced by the person, presupposes the objective and subjective standpoints simultaneously. We could think of both moments «from without» and «from within» as being intimately combined. Every intentional and objectifying act is permeated with the «from within» character in the sense of the non-intentional self-presence of the acting subject in the acts he/she performs.

The analysis of a «subjective relation of me to myself» makes visible the inner dynamic structure and personal power of the human being. It is through this investigation that we come to understand the way the personal being experiences his/her being and agency. Given this understanding, namely the understanding of the inner experienced encounter with oneself, we are able to enter into the dynamic realm of personal self-determination, which is exemplified and revealed to the highest degree in the profoundest acts of self-reception, self-possession, and self-giveness.

In this context we may clearly see that while Nagel is completely right in saying that our freedom must come from some transcendent source he nevertheless misses the point that freedom mainly constitutes itself not through its growing controlling power over the person, which he rightly conceives to be the impossible goal in the final analysis, but rather through the acts of radical openness and the reception of the gift of one's existence.

Thus, it is only with such a concept of subjectivity in mind which allows a person for the unique way of non-objectifying encounter with the innermost core of his/her being that it becomes possible to approach the gift dimension of person's being.