

FREEDOM, TRANSPARENCY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS TIM HEYSSE

ABSTRACT

According to Thomas Nagel the desire for autonomy leads to a dilemma: to be certain that no unknown influence determines our decisions, we are driven to seek as much information as possible about what makes the reasons we have (e.g., to decide in favour of one alternative) the reasons for us. Eventually, we end up with a perspective that is so objective that there are no longer such things as decisions or choices, but only alternatives in the course of the world.

A way out is suggested by the work on interpretation of Donald Davidson and by remarks of Habermas: autonomy does not require a totally objective view, because in the interpretation of actions, we decide on their autonomy. However, on Habermas' own view, autonomy is also not something that we can have, because he links autonomy to a final interpretation. The common root of Nagel's and Habermas' failure to make sense of autonomy are the famous views of C. S. Peirce about rational inquiry and knowledge. If autonomy presupposes transparency in so far that we *know* that there are no external influences and if we think of this knowledge as the final and absolute knowledge of eternal truths, it is only to be expected that this kind of knowledge, and therefore autonomy; cannot be had.

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According to Thomas Nagel the desire for autonomy is a desire for something impossible: an all-embracing view on ourselves and on the circumstances in which we live (Nagel 1986, 117). About a philosophical subject as perplexing as freedom we cannot present an analysis with any confidence. "I change my mind about the problem of free will every time I think about it," Nagel writes (Nagel 1986, 112). The only thing we can do is to show how we cannot avoid a paradox if we talk in a certain way about freedom, and how that paradox disappears again if we talk in a different way. This is precisely what I propose to do in this article, drawing on some ideas of, among others, Habermas. Interestingly, however, this different way of talking about freedom leads us to hold another view on Habermas' important notion of the public sphere (Öffentlichkeit).

A Full Explanation

Human beings, we assume, naturally want to be free, but it is not easy to specify what it is that they want. What does it mean to be autonomous? In most cases, freedom is to an important extent limited by the circumstances in which we make our decisions. (The word "circumstances" here has a broad meaning, including personal qualities or the internal situation of an individual). The external and internal conditions, in which we have to act, are irrevocably determined by the world. When we act autonomously, however, alternative possibilities seem to be open to us and the choice we eventually make can be explained by referring to our intentions or motives. According to Nagel, autonomous decisions do not require any further explanation. In particular, it is not necessary to refer to the circumstances of an autonomous decision.

My reason for doing it is the whole reason why it happened, and no further explanation is either necessary or possible. (My doing it for no particular reasons is a limiting case of this kind of explanation.) (Nagel 1986, 115)

Consequently, when we claim to be autonomous creatures, we claim that we can give a full explanation of an autonomous decision. The ideal of autonomy is linked to the idea that we can determine at what moment we can stop explaining our decisions, because there is nothing left to explain (Nagel 1986, 114-115, 116).

Nagel provides us with a new formulation of a familiar thought (Nagel 1986, 114): if we wish to act autonomously, it must be possible for us to review critically all our motives, principles and habits. If such a review were possible, we would be certain that there is nothing that moves us into acting without our knowing and agreeing to it. If some motives or principles do manage to escape inspection, it is always possible that they result from all kinds of hidden influences (Nagel 1986, 113, 118-119). "We feel that in acting we ought to be able to determine not only our choices but the inner conditions of those choices" (Nagel 1986, 118). The desire for autonomy is the desire to live in transparent circumstances.

Autonomous decisions allow to be completely explained. But what does it mean to say that an action is completely explained? What is a complete explanation, if I have to decide, say, between two attractive alternatives? Suppose for example that I have a choice between two jobs: the one job offers financial security and social prestige; the other job promises fascinating work, but depends on uncertain funding. If my choice is rational, I can explain it by summing up my reasons (for example, I prefer job security) and these reasons should be sufficient to explain my decision. However Nagel thinks

it is not: when all the reasons are given why somebody made the decision he made, we still do not have a *full* explanation. For we have to explain also why he opted for the one alternative and not for the other. Giving the reasons for my choice of a job, I explain for what reasons I chose the one alternative (the secure job, for example), but I do *not* explain why I did not choose the other option for other reasons (the fascinating job, for example). I may give my reasons, but I do not explain why these reasons were reasons for me (Lucas 1970, 117, quoted in Nagel 1986, 117n).

In other words: we make a person's decisions intelligible from the subjective point of view of the person who has decided, but we cannot explain why this particular action took place, and why some other action (which would have been understandable for some other reasons) did not.

Intentional explanation [...] can explain either choice in terms of the appropriate reasons, since either choice would be intelligible if it occurred. But for this very reason it cannot explain why the person accepted the job for the reasons in favour instead of refusing it for the reasons against. It cannot explain on grounds of intelligibility why one of two intelligible courses of actions both of which were possible, occurred (Nagel 1986, 116).

From a subjective point of view a full explanation of our decisions is not possible. Yet autonomy precisely requires a full explanation. In that way the desire for autonomy requires to leave the subjective point of view.

Our autonomy only seems to be real, if we manage to subject ourselves to a total and critical review: if we can review not only the reasons for our actions but also what makes them reasons for us (Nagel 1986, 118-119). To acquire this overview on the conditions, in which we make decisions, we must, according to Nagel, leave our personal and subjective point of view and try and take an objective perspective on ourselves. If we manage to do this, we will have all the information from such an objective point of view, for instance the information of biology, psychology and the social sciences about how our motives, principles, interests and habits are acquired. The desire for a complete view on ourselves, which is inherent in the desire for autonomy, "takes us outside of the domain of subjective normative reasons and into the domain of formative causes of my character or personality" (Nagel 1986, 117, 123).

If we desire to be autonomous agents, we are forced to take an objective perspective on ourselves. The problem however is obvious: if we observe the world from an objective point of view, there does not seem to be any space for autonomy. From an objective point of view there is only the world to be seen (Nagel 1986, 112, 110, 114). From the objective point of view a person's decision is nothing more than a phenomenon in the world, and one aspect of this phenomenon is that this creature has the idea that it decides autonomously (Nagel 1986, 117, 119, 122, 124, 137). The alternatives appear no longer as alternatives for that person, but as alternatives in the course of the world and the actions of persons as mere flotsam in the stream of history.

From an external perspective [...] the agent and everything about him seems to be swallowed up by the circumstances of the action; nothing of him is left to intervene in those circumstances. This happens whether or not the relation between action and its antecedent conditions is conceived as deterministic. In either case we cease to face the world and instead become parts of it; our lives and we are seen as products and manifestations of the world as a whole. Everything I do or that anyone else does is part of a larger course of events that no one "does," but

that happens, with or without explanation. Everything I do is part of something I don't do, because I am a part of the world (Nagel 1986, 114; see also Nagel 1986, 119, 120, 122).

From an objective point of view we can no longer say that people choose autonomously.¹ This is the dilemma of autonomy, as Nagel presents it. The internal link between autonomy and objectivity leads to this dilemma. On the one hand, the desire for a complete explanation of our actions and decisions takes us out of the domain of the subjective and into the realm of the objective.² On the other hand, if we try to provide an objective explanation of actions or decisions, they are no longer visible as such, but appear as events in the world, the source of which lies outside of the agent. Because autonomy presupposes a complete explanation, the desire for autonomy is a desire for something we cannot have (Nagel 1986, 117).

The Illusion of Transparency

Nagel acknowledges that his formulating this dilemma will not stop us from distinguishing free actions from actions that are not free. Nor was that Nagel's purpose. Nevertheless Nagel signals a real problem in our ideas about autonomy.³

This dilemma is a dilemma of transparency. Nagel points out that the subjective point of view offers an illusory form of transparency: from our subjective point of view it may seem as if at least our more important decisions are prompted by nothing but our own reasons, while the possibility always remains that these reasons appear as reasons to us because of some hidden influence. The possibility of deception results from the fact that the subjective account seems to be complete, but may not be so. The subjective perspective has a blind spot, which does not appear as such.

The impact of the objective perspective is that it reveals that blind, because from the objective point of view we see that our decisions may be the effect of the external circumstances. From the objective point of view we see through the illusion of transparency of the subjective point of view. But this new-found clarity does not create new opportunities for autonomous action. Together with the illusion of transparency we lose the capacity of seeing ourselves as autonomous agents.

The dilemma of autonomy is thus a dilemma of transparency. Freedom may not be a very explicit theme in Habermas' work, but transparency is. We can read Habermas' theory of society as a reflection on what is the most adequate perspective from which to study society. If you study society from the external or objective point of view, it looks differently than when you approach it from the internal perspective. So Habermas tries to develop a critical theory of society in which the internal and external perspective can be combined (Habermas 1981b, 179, 229; 1984b, 117, 153). We do not have to accept the details of Habermas' theory of society or share his reformist political ideas to find his general picture of society compelling (Habermas 1981b, 223-228; 1984a, 148-152). From the internal point of view of the members of modern society, society appears to be a life-world, a form of Cooperation, the conditions of which in principle are subject to approval (after discussion) by the members of that society. From the external perspective of the observer, modern society can only be described informatively as a system (or several systems) in which all actions by the members serve only one goal: the maintenance or the development of the social system. From the internal perspective changes in society can be explained by referring to the arguments with which the members of a society were persuaded to give their approval to these

changes. To the observer this approval and these arguments are imposed by pressure from the system. Mutual deliberations in the life-world may be truncated in such a way as to ensure a decision, which is beneficial to the system. This is a form of structural violence that as such is not visible to the participants in processes of mutual deliberation, because the show of an independent life-world is kept up (Habermas 1981b, 278; 1984b, 187). From the perspective of the system, mutual deliberation is nothing but a conduit for creating a consensus about changes that are necessary to maintain the system (Habermas 1981b, 239-240; 1984b, 162-164).

The transparency of the life-world is an illusion, the deceptive nature of which is all too clear if one takes the objective stance of the system. Viewing society as a system makes an observer more clear-sighted, but at the same time forces him to maintain his role of an observer. To an observer mutual deliberation serves only the purpose of getting the changes accepted which the system needs. This insight prevents him from taking mutual deliberation seriously and from taking position in the discussions conducted in the life-world and to argue for his beliefs and ideas. Nagel's paradox of autonomy returns in all its social harshness. In the social or sociological version the origin of the dilemma is — exactly as it is in Nagel's version — our capacity to take an objective point of view. Because we are able to take an objective point of view towards the society we live in, we know that the life-world is subjected to the imperatives of the system. We know that beyond the boundaries of the life-world there may be all kinds of influences at work that do not come to our attention and escape from our control. The life-world is similar to our individual subjective perspective in that it offers a deceptive form of transparency:

From the internal perspective of the life-world, society is represented as a network of communicatively mediated Cooperation [...]. The life-world [...] lends to everything that happens in society the transparency of something about which one can speak [...]. As long as they maintain a performative attitude, communicative actors cannot reckon with a systematic distortion of their communications. From the internal perspective of participants of a sociocultural life-world, there can be no pseudo consensus in the sense of convictions brought about by force; in a basically transparent process of reaching understanding -- which is transparent for the participants themselves -- no force can gain a footing. We conceive of society in this way that we are accepting three fictions. We are presupposing (a) the autonomy of actors, (b) the independence of culture, and (c) the transparency of communication. [...]. These fictions become apparent when we drop the identification of society with the life-world. [...] Thus I have proposed that we distinguish between social integration and system integration: the former attaches to action orientations, while the latter reaches right through them (Habermas 1981b, 223-226; 1984b, 148-150; see also 1981b, 219; 1984b, 145).

In the Eyes of an Interpreter

Can we escape the dilemma of autonomy that Nagel describes and that I redescribed in a social version by means of Habermas' concepts *life-world* and *system*? Nagel's presentation of the dilemma is plausible because of certain assumptions about explanation. In his view explaining is something we do in a void, as if an explanation is something we give to the gods.⁴ The fact of the matter is that explanations are sought or given in relation to questions.

According to Nagel the dilemma arises, because the idea of autonomy presupposes that we can explain our actions completely and because from a subjective point of view a complete explanation is not possible. So, we must ask *when* the explanation of our actions provided by the internal point of view seems no longer sufficient. From the subjective point of view it cannot be explained why the reasons of the person who decides are reasons. How and when can the fact that I cannot explain my reasons become a problem?

From my point of view the reasons I have to prefer the one job are good reasons. Of course, I know that I could have taken the other job, but as soon as I have decided, that option does not seem as attractive as the other does. Of course, I may receive new information (which shows that my new job is not as secure as I thought) or my preferences may change, so that I change or regret my decision. But these are not the kind of cases Nagel is thinking of (Nagel, 1986, 125) Nagel is not concerned with the cases in which I wonder if my reasons for choosing something are good reasons, or if my decision a good decision. He is considering the case in which I wonder whether my reasons are actually *my* reasons, whether my decision is *my* decision (and not the effect of hidden influences).

How do I start to doubt about that? When do I start wondering whether the cause of my reasons appearing reasons to me is some external and hidden influence? An answer to that question may be easier to find, if we know when somebody else starts doubting the autonomous nature of my decisions.

In the first chapter of Daniel Defoe's classic novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, the narrator explains at great length that Crusoe does not have any reason for choosing the hard and uncertain life at sea. The miserable death of his elder brother as a professional soldier, his fine education, the certainty of a distinguished career, the love of his parents, a quite considerable inheritance are so many reasons to stay at home and enjoy a quiet and comfortable existence. Crusoe knows all of that. Yet he chooses life at sea. The narrator offers the following explanation of this choice:

[Crusoe] had several times loud calls from [his] reason and [his] more composed judgement to go home, yet [he] had no power to do it. I know not what to call this, nor will I urge that it is a secret overruling decree that hurries us on to be the instruments of our own destruction, even tho' it be before us, and that we rush upon it with our eyes open. Certainly nothing but some such decreed unavoidable misery attending, and which it was impossible [...] to escape, could have pushed [Crusoe] forward against the calm reasonings and perswasions of [his] most retired thoughts (Defoe 1965, 37).

In the case of Crusoe, the narrator starts doubting whether the autonomy of his decision to go to sea, at the moment when he judges that the decision to go to sea cannot be explained by referring to Crusoe's desires and beliefs (his decision goes "against the calm reasonings and perswasions of [his] most retired thoughts"). Whether a decision is autonomous or not, is, therefore, not something you can determine at first glance. You have to determine first what desires and beliefs may have prompted the decision. To identify those desires and beliefs you have to interpret other decisions, actions and utterances by the agent. Interpretation cannot be local. To understand the motives behind a particular decision, you have to situate the decision in a background consisting of all, or at least a lot of, beliefs, desires, hopes and fears of the person in question (Habermas 1981a, 181; 1984b, 125).⁵

Starting from what he knows about the circumstances of the decision and about the other beliefs and the desires of the person, the interpreter places the decision in a unified structure of beliefs, desires, et cetera. When the interpreter recognises that the agent has desires and beliefs that explain and therefore rationalise the decision, he does not doubt the autonomy of an agent's decision. This is the case, even if the interpreter had made a different decision in the same circumstances (because he thinks that security or social status are not good grounds for choosing a job or he knows that the job is not at all secure, but he knows that I do not know or cannot know that this is the case).

From the moment the interpreter cannot explain the decisions on the basis of what he has learned about the beliefs, desires, et cetera of the agent, he starts wondering whether the decision of the agent was autonomous or not. This is, of course, especially obvious when the explanation the agent himself gives, sounds wrong. If the reasons the agent gives cannot adequately explain his decision *in the eyes of the interpreter*, the interpreter may wonder whether the agent is lying, or, if he seems sincere, whether there is some cause influencing the agent. The interpreter's suspicions are aroused by the fact that the agent's own explanation is not consistent with what *the interpreter* knows about the agent's desires and beliefs. What I claim to believe is not consistent with the information of which the interpreter assumes or even knows that I have it (for instance, when my desire for job security will not be satisfied by my choice of employment, and according to the interpreter I know that); or what I claim to want is a desire that according to the interpreter I do not have (because it is not consistent with other desires of mine or because no rational agent can have exactly that desire).

When the subjective story in terms of the beliefs and desires of the agent does not explain a decision, the interpreter concludes that the subjective story in terms of beliefs and desires is not complete. He supplements the subjective story with objective information about the circumstances in which the decision was made and about which the agent cannot know. This objective information explains why the agent acts with his eyes closed or against his own interests, such as the "secret overruling decree of ill fate" in Crusoe's case.

An interpreter only starts to doubt the autonomy of an agent, if he cannot interpret the decision on the basis of what he knows about the motives and desires of the agent. This conclusion provides us with an answer to the question when a person starts to doubt about whether his own decision was autonomous and whether the subjective explanation of that decision is complete. For the situation is exactly parallel. This is nicely illustrated by the example of *Robinson Crusoe*: the narrator interpreting Crusoe's decision to go to sea, is Crusoe himself after his return from his island.

So an agent only starts to doubt whether the reasons for deciding are really his reasons, and not the effect of some external influence, when he starts to doubt whether his reasons are acceptable. ("Acceptable" means "reasons that may be plausibly given for that kind of decision.") These doubts may be caused by very different circumstances: the interpreter may persuade the agent that the reasons for his decisions are not really acceptable. The agent may anticipate the judgement of a possible interpreter and criticise his own (past) decisions, for example because he observes that other people act or decide differently in a systematic way, although the circumstances seem not too different from those in which he made his decision. In this way the agent may start a sort of interior dialogue and a kind of reflection on his own decisions and on his reasons for them. However this interior dialogue is only possible if I take the point of view of

an interpreter of my own behaviour and that of others. Doubting your own autonomy is something you can only do from the point of view of an interpreter. It presupposes that there is somebody who acts and somebody who interprets. At least two persons are involved.

At the very moment that Nagel starts explaining the dilemma of autonomy he has therefore already left the purely subjective point of view, and assumed a social stance. Realising that, we see that the origin of the dilemma, as Nagel presents it, is also the way out. The origin of this dilemma is the fact that a subjective or internal explanation seems to be complete but may not be so and therefore creates an illusory form of transparency. However these doubts are only possible from the perspective of an interpreter. This points to a way out of the dilemma: the only perspective we need in order to supplement the subjective point of view is that of an interpreter. When the interpreter recognises that my reasons can be reasons (for me), there is no reason for suspicion. When the interpreter agrees with me (more or less explicitly) that my reasons really may be reasons, there is no reason to wonder whether there is some hidden influence at work somewhere. My reasons are not just *my* reasons any more. The same conclusion follows in the social case, in which the interpreter, as a journalist, a social scientist or an historian, confronts a society or a culture. Autonomy lies in the eyes of the interpreter.

The reason for this is the fact that the interpreter's point of view covers more than the internal subjective perspective of an actor deliberating about what to do. An actor must decide what decision is most consistent with his preferences and his beliefs about the possible outcome of a decision. An interpreter reflects on the preferences and the decision and beliefs to judge whether the former explain the latter. This judgement can be based on subjective and objective information, which are combined in an interpreter's point of view (Habermas 1981b, 276-277; 1984b, 185-186). For instance, journalists or social scientists sometimes have relevant, objective information from which it is apparent that the decision of members of the life-world in certain circumstances has been dictated by the system.

Of course, he does not have to forget this information, when as a member of the life-world he participates in deliberation. Because the interpreter is also a speaker, he may share objective information with the persons he has interpreted. His interpretation may influence the outcome of the process of deliberation. In this sense the interpreter's findings may be part of a learning process of the subjects or the society he studies (Habermas 1981b, 193; 1984b, 134).

Habermas has clearly explained what is the most important condition of a politics in the service of freedom, as explained in those terms: a public sphere or a public opinion. The public sphere in modern societies is not independent of the economic or political system: it only came into existence because certain economic, political and technological conditions prevailed (Habermas 1990, 69-85; 1989, 14-26). Yet, however fragile, fallible, garrulous, murky, and momentary, the public sphere offers to the members of a modern society opportunities to exchange and confront interpretations of themselves and the societies in which they live.

Transparency Through the Public Sphere

Against my reply to Nagel's dilemma it could be objected that it misses the point of the dilemma. Let's suppose it is true that Nagel's analysis suffers from some conceptual

or analytical defect, because he fails to appreciate the importance of the intersubjective quality of autonomy. However, identifying this defect does not answer the real problem, which Nagel is trying to point out. To see this we only have to reflect that the perspective of any possible interpreter may be subjected to external influences. If that is the case, the fact that the interpreter recognises my autonomy does not guarantee that my decisions are really autonomous. For it is possible that all of our culture, including agents and interpreter(s), is exposed to influences that remain hidden to the members of that culture. This real problem is not addressed by my conceptual criticism of Nagel's analysis.

As I already mentioned, Habermas has not explicitly spoken out about the problem of autonomy. However I think he will feel that he did address this problem as it is put by this objection. An answer is to be found in the way in which Habermas thinks the public sphere, or more specifically, the way the *ideal* public sphere, should be conceived of. The very existence of a public sphere is a characteristic of a modern and rationalised life-world (Habermas 1990, 56; 1989, 2-4; 1981b, 471-472, 485; 1984a, 318-319). It is constituted by continuous communications (through the press, mass media, and the "cultural complex"). These different acts of communications are themselves deemed to be intercommunicating, so as to offer the members of society the opportunity to work out a common mind or a public opinion through reflection and debate. (See, e.g., Habermas 1990, 107, 103n, 168; 1989, 43, 259n, 94-95.)

Habermas' notion of the public sphere and that of the life-world of which the public sphere is a part, is deliberately and interestingly ambivalent. To see this we should understand that the common opinion reached in the public sphere is normative for the system, in the sense that both the economic subsystem and the political subsystem derive their legitimacy from a consensus about rights (such as property right) or about procedures for legitimating political power. To adequately describe this interplay between system(s) and public sphere or life-world, which is a characteristic of modern society, we must at the same time accept a realistic and an idealised or even utopian conception of the public sphere.

On the one hand, we know of course that some of the most fundamental assumptions of rational, equal and fair communication are not materialised in the public sphere as it really exists in society (Habermas 1981b, 480-481; 1984a, 363-365; 1990, 225-274; 1989, 141-180; Taylor 1995). It is exactly these deficiencies of the public sphere that explain how the system is able to subject the life-world to its imperatives. Because of these deficiencies the consensus reached may not always be rational, so that there is always the possibility that it is the result of deception or of self-deception and the effect of (unrecognised) pressures. On the other hand, we can only explain the efficiency of the systems and thus the successful imperialism of the systems and the scale and speed of the modernisation of society and culture, by accepting that the public sphere is also the place in which knowledge about scientific, moral or juridical questions can be established, independently of the pressures of the system. The deficient public sphere as we know it in everyday social life contains the ideal or the promise of an autonomous and rational life-world.

To be sure, this utopia of reason, formed in the Enlightenment, was persistently contradicted by the realities of bourgeois life and shown to be a bourgeois ideology. But it was never a mere illusion: it was an objective illusion [...]. There was at least an appearance of post-traditional everyday communication suggested by

the structures of the life-world. It was so to speak, a transcendental apparition - determining bourgeois ideology while yet surpassing it. In it, communication was represented as standing on its own feet, setting limits to the inner dynamics of autonomous subsystems [...]. And thus escaping the combined threat of reification and desolation (Habermas 1981b, 486; 1984a, 329).

As I tried to show, the perspective of an interpreter is sufficient. We do not need to supplement the subjective point of view with objective information, in order to defuse Nagel's dilemma of autonomy. In terms of society: a free society requires only a public sphere in which society can develop a common understanding of itself. As a matter of fact, the public sphere is not only the space in which to decide on moral or legal issues, but also to reach common interpretations of the world of facts, the needs of various individuals, the state of society, et cetera. The public sphere not only serves the formation of a common will, but also of a common mind. This common mind is a reflective mind, emerging from critical debate and not just a summation of whatever views happen to be held in the population (Taylor 1995, 263). Obviously, the nature of this common opinion will in part depend on the properties of the process of communication from which it has emerged.

About the properties of communication that would take place if conditions in the public sphere were ideal, Habermas has very clear ideas, as is obvious from his well-known notion of the ideal speech situation.⁶ The rules of the ideal speech situation guarantee universal access to, and equal opportunity in, the communicative interaction and only allow truthful or sincere communication. In the public sphere, thus ideally conceived, an ambitious form of transparency reigns (Habermas 1981b, 223-228; 1984b, 148-154; Williams 1985, 101-102, 214n). In ideal circumstances, common interpretations and common mind are reached after communicative interactions in which every possible speaker has the right to interfere on an equal footing with the original participants. Consensus about these interpretations therefore cannot be anything but a *universal* consensus. This is an agreement with all people "I ever could start a discussion with (and in whose number I counter-factually include all partners in discussion I could find, if the history of my life would be coextensive with the world of man)" (Habermas 1984c, 136).

As I already mentioned, the transparency, which reigns in the public sphere supposedly, guarantees the autonomy of the public sphere and of the life-world of which the public sphere is a part. Two aspects of this ideal public sphere appear to indicate this. Firstly, because of the way the rules of the ideal speech situation are formulated, it can be determined immediately and with certainty whether or not the deliberation taking place in the public sphere was determined by external influences. Whenever somebody is denied the opportunity to put anything whatever up for discussion, one or more of the rules are violated and it is clear that external influences are at work. Although the influence of the system on a particular communicative interaction may remain hidden for the actual participants of discussions in the life-world, the rules enable an outside observer or even the participants themselves after the discussion — to read off this influence from the communication. The rules create a form of transparency, so that there cannot be any doubt about the influence of the system.

Secondly, an interpretation reached in the ideal public sphere is final. If we disregard practical obstacles, as we must when we consider an *ideal* public sphere, we can imagine

the interpreter continuing to discuss the interpretation in question with his subjects and with whoever wants to contribute to the discussion. All involved would thereby learn from each other until the interpretation is unanimous. In this sense the interpretation reached in ideal circumstances is stable and absolute. It cannot be defeated or improved by any further information. If in this interpretation decisions of an agent or of a society are recognised as (largely) autonomous (or not), this verdict will be final and absolute (see Wright 1992, 45). The interpretation, acknowledging (or not) the action or decisions as autonomous, will not be defeated or improved by whatever additional information. In this sense, Habermas' conception of the ideal public sphere and the idea of interpretations reached in ideal circumstances which it implies, answers the disturbing possibility that the interpreter's point of view may be as exposed to external pressures as that of the agent himself, so that the interpreter's acknowledgement of the agent's autonomy would be worthless.

Habermas' ideas about the ideal public sphere appear to offer a way out of Nagel's dilemma in its social version. But in fact I think they run into the same dilemma. In Nagel's case the search for a complete explanation of our actions leads us to take an objective point of view of ourselves and we thereby lose all opportunity to view ourselves as autonomously acting creatures.

In Habermas' view, too, autonomy is not something to be had. For the autonomy of an action can only be established through the particular interpretation of the action which would be agreed upon by all people "I ever could start a discussion with (and in whose number I counter-factually include all partners in discussion I could find, if the history of my life were coextensive with the world of man)." It may be, of course, that the actual interpretation which is now prevailing is the interpretation which would be agreed upon by all people. "If I ever could start, et cetera." But this we cannot know and so we will never be able to determine that an action was actually autonomous (Wright 1992, 46).

An analogous problem is connected with the rules of the ideal speech situation. Precisely because these are rules of an ideal communications process, they are never materialised in actual communication even if they are presupposed in everyday communication.⁷ If the independence of deliberations in the public sphere is only assured when none of the rules have been violated, then deliberations are by the definition of the ideal sphere never independent.

The common root of Nagel's and Habermas' failure to make sense of our autonomy are certain ideas about rational inquiry and knowledge they have both taken from the work of C. S. Peirce. Nagel and Habermas accept Peirce's familiar idea that rational inquiry will end in convergence, in knowledge, that is, of *Aeternal verities*, or unshakeable truths.⁸ If autonomy presupposes transparency in so far that we *know* that an action was caused by the agent's desires and beliefs and not by external influences and if we think of this knowledge as the final and absolute knowledge of eternal truths, it is only to be expected that this kind of knowledge and therefore autonomy, which is linked to it, cannot be acquired. Habermas does not agree with Nagel that autonomy requires us to take an objective point of view on ourselves: According to him the interpreter's point of view can provide all the transparency that is needed. Still, Habermas as much as Nagel, links autonomy to total transparency (either of the objective perspective or of the final interpretation).⁹

I suggest that we give up these ideas of absolute knowledge or final interpretation, or at least, do not link them to our ideas of autonomy: there is no reason for doubting

the autonomy of an action, if an interpreter sees no reason for doubt. The illusory transparency of the subjective perspective must only be corrected by the perspective of an interpreter. Of course, it is always possible that the perspective of the interpreter is itself subjected to external influence, as was objected to my analysis.

However, the only answer I can give to this radical version of Nagel's dilemma is to repeat my questions already stated above: How do we become aware of this possibility? Why do we come to realise that our internal life-world-perspective may always be influenced by the external influences of the system? The only reason is that authors such as Nagel and Habermas pointed it out for us. We become aware of this possibility, because people interpret each other's (social) behaviour, because we have interpretations of our culture, our social system and our social behaviour (such as Habermas' theory of modern society, for instance). Nagel's problem is, in the social version, once more the problem of an interpreter.

The only possible reply to the presentation of the dilemma of autonomy by Nagel must then be found in repeating how rich the perspective of the interpreter is. Wanting to interpret a person's actions and utterances, we try to identify the beliefs and desires that explain that person's behaviour. But if the subjective account does not seem sufficient, it is always possible to fall back on an objective account. When the account in terms of beliefs and desires does not satisfy the narrator of *Robinson Crusoe*, he appeals to objective circumstances to supplement the subjective account. The objective and the subjective are combined in the perspective of an interpreter. Because the interpretation is also a speaker, he may share objective information with the persons he has interpreted. In the case of the society of which he is a member, his interpretation may influence the outcome of the processes of deliberation in that society.

However, this does require that he abandons a fully objective stance, because from such a fully objective stance mutual deliberation in the life-world cannot be taken seriously. For the objective information of an interpreter to influence deliberation, the interpreter must not take a fully objective point of view. So it may always be possible that the activity of the interpreter is itself influenced by a cause that escapes from his attention or control. All perspectives that are not the fully objective perspective — assuming that such a perspective is possible — have a blind spot, behind which unknown influences may be at work.

Autonomy requires us to keep on presenting new and more adequate interpretations of social and cultural processes and developments. And Habermas is right: autonomy requires a public sphere, which meets certain standards of tolerance and fairness, so that it allows society to reach common interpretations about itself and its history. But if these standards are set too high (as in Habermas' ideal speech situation), autonomy can never be reached. Both Nagel and Habermas believe that autonomy presupposes that we know with certainty or with absolute transparency what explains our actions. As this kind of knowledge or transparency is not something we can have here and now, we do not have autonomy either.

However, autonomy does not require absolute knowledge or total transparency. It presupposes that time and again it is explained how a particular development in society has come into existence and that an answer is formulated to the question whether we may interpret a particular development as a consequence of a decision for which arguments can be formulated or as an effect of influences about which the people concerned were unaware.

Notes:

1. Once we have taken the objective point of view, we no longer are in a position to choose anything. For the objective point of view is stripped of all that is subjective, of personal tastes and preferences, desires and motives. In a word, of all we make use of in making decisions. From the objective perspective there is therefore no decision conceivable in the situations in which we normally make decisions (unless, perhaps, in extreme cases in which fundamental moral issues are at stake). I prefer job security to fascinating or rewarding work; somebody else may prefer interesting work. From an objective point of view there is most likely something to be said for job security and for interesting work. From an objective point of view you can understand that some people prefer job security and others interesting work. But because nothing subjective remains, there is nothing left that could count as a reason in a decision. To decide you have to be able to take a subjective perspective of things. From an objective point of view, you can only look on.

2. Moreover, the subjective and the objective points of view are mutually incompatible (Nagel 1979).

3. Nagel (1986, 126): "This is a genuine challenge to our freedom and the attitudes that presuppose it, and it cannot be met by the claim that only internal criticisms are legitimate, unless that claim is established on independent grounds. The push to objectivity is after all a part of the framework of human life. It could only be stopped from leading to these sceptical results if the radically external view of human life could be shown to be illegitimate - so that our questions had to stop before we got there." Nagel (1986, 112): "Like other basic philosophical problems, the problem of free will is not in the first instance verbal. It is not a problem about what we are to say about action, responsibility, what someone could or could not have done, and so forth. It is rather a bafflement of our feelings and attitudes - a loss of confidence, conviction, or equilibrium." See also n. 6 on p. 126.

4. Nagel (1986, 119): "Can we proceed part way along the inviting path of objectivity without ending up in the abyss, where the pursuit of objectivity undermines itself and everything else? In practice, outside of philosophy we find certain things, natural stopping places along the route, and do not worry about how things would look if we went further. In this respect too the situation resembles that in epistemology, where justification and criticism come fairly peacefully to an end in everyday life. The trouble is that our complacency seems unwarranted as soon as we reflect on what would be revealed to a still more external view, and it is not clear how we can re-establish these natural stopping places on anew footing once they are put in doubt." Nagel (1986, 130): "Descartes tried to recapture knowledge by imagining his relation to the world from the point of view of God. Finding one's feet within the world in a way that will withstand criticism from more objective standpoints than one can take up is Cartesian enterprise, and like Descartes' it can hope at best hope for only partial success."

5. Readers familiar with the work of Donald Davidson will recognise his ideas here; see Davidson 1984.

6. In spite of this name, the rules of the ideal speech situation are the "inescapable presuppositions" of communication in everyday life. Every participant entering a communicative interaction has tacitly accepted these rules: in this sense the ideals of communication are "transcendentally" present in communication as it actually takes place in our contemporary societies.

7. This does not mean that in actual communication some groups, types or classes of citizens are always denied a fair hearing. Charles Taylor has pointed out that citizens can have the feeling to have been heard, even if not all of their objection has been answered (as is demanded by the rules of the ideal speech situation) or if the debate ends in a conclusion they cannot agree with (Taylor 1995, 277).

8. Peirce (1992, 177), quoted in Nagel (1997, 128): "Belief is the willingness to risk a great deal upon a proposition. But this belief is no concern of science which has nothing at stake on any temporal venture, but is in pursuit of eternal verities, not semblances to truth, but as that of generation after generation indefinitely."

9. Nagel (1997, 128-129): "reason itself [has] [...] according to Peirce nothing to do with 'how we think.'" See also Habermas' "impersonality — supratemporal — of an idealized agreement" (1992, 278; 1981, 110; 1984, 72).

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