

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar  
Prof. Funkhouser  
2/21/07  
Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (excerpt)

1.

- Claim: Not all motivation can be accounted for by desires.
- Nagel considers prudential and altruistic behavior in particular. He characterizes the Humean view that he will oppose:

So any apparently prudential or altruistic act must be explained by the connection between its goal — the agent's future interest or the interest of another — and a desire which activates him now. Essentially this view denies the possibility of motivational action at a distance, whether over time or between persons. It bridges any apparent gaps with desires of the agent, which are thought to supply the necessary links to the future and to external situations. (27–28)

On the Humean view considerations about what will happen to my future self or to another cannot motivate me unless I also desire my future good or the good of another.

2.

- Nagel distinguishes motivated and unmotivated desires. Motivated desires “are *arrived at* by decision and after deliberation”. Unmotivated desires “simply come to us”. (29) Nagel concedes that, in a rather trivial sense, all action has its motivation in either motivated or unmotivated desires. But, there could be purely rational explanations for motivated desires. The Humean, in contrast, demands that unmotivated desires ultimately provide all motivation.

3.

- Nagel compares practical to theoretical reasoning:

Beliefs provide the material for theoretical reasoning, but finally there is something besides belief, namely reason, which underlies

our inferences from one set of beliefs to another, and explains both the conclusions and those logical beliefs which embody our inferential principles in general propositional form. Correspondingly, desires are among the materials for practical reasoning, but ultimately something besides desire explains how reasons function. This element accounts for many of the connections between reasons (including the reasons which stem from desires) and action. It also explains those general desires which embody our acceptance of the principles of practical reason. (31)