

# “Thought and Reality” from *The View from Nowhere* by Thomas Nagel

Nagel’s **realist** view: “our grasp on the world is limited not only in respect of what we can know but also in respect of what we can conceive. In a very strong sense, the world extends beyond the reach of our minds.” (125)

The **idealist** views he is arguing against: “what there is is what we can think about or conceive of, or what we or our descendants could come to be able to think about or conceive of — and ... this is necessarily true because the idea of something that we could not think about or conceive of makes no sense.” (126, underlining added)

## THOUGHT EXPERIMENT: REALIST JUNIOR

- Imagine a species whose members have the mental capacities of human 9-year-olds (130)
- Suppose one of them (“Realist Junior”) believes “there may be things about the world that he and others like him are incapable of ever finding out about or understanding” (131)
  - Is Realist Junior’s claim meaningful?
  - On Nagel’s view, it’s both meaningful and right
  - On Davidson’s view it seems like we would have to say Realist Junior is right but Realist Junior *himself* “would be wrong to agree” - a paradox (132)
    - “Davidson’s notion of translation seems to be asymmetrical” (132)
- The point is: if Realist Junior can meaningfully speculate that there are things beyond his understanding, so can we (130, 132)

“Every concept that we have contains potentially the idea of its own complement — the idea of what the concept doesn’t apply to. Unless it has been shown positively that there cannot be such things — that the idea involves some kind of contradiction ... we are entitled to assume that it makes sense even if we can say nothing more about the members of the class, and have never met one.” (132)

Section 3 asks to what extent our thoughts give us information about reality in itself.

- Skeptical views say “we can conceive of things only as they appear to us and never as they are in themselves” (134)
- Reductionist views reinterpret the notion of what is possibly real to be “what is or could become conceivable to us” (134), making it easier to say that our thoughts correspond to reality in itself

Nagel defends a middle ground: reality extends beyond what we could ever conceive of, but our concepts do tell us about some aspects of reality in itself.

Primary qualities = size, shape... (143)  
Secondary qualities = color, taste, smell... (143)

Nagel thinks the best explanation for things appearing to have primary qualities is that they actually have them. (136)

Nagel warns against “a refusal to distinguish between two ways in which the human point of view enters into our thoughts — as form and as content. ... All of our thoughts must have a form which makes them accessible from a human perspective. ... What they are about depends not on their subjective form but on what has to be referred to in any explanation of what makes them true.” (136)