Thomas Nagel’s book, *Concealment & Exposure and Other Essays*, adds little new to his body of work, but it does display his talents to maximum advantage, showing him to be a subtle thinker and an outstanding writer.

The book is divided into three parts: a first part discusses the distinction between public and private, especially in relation to sexuality; a second part pursues debates within egalitarian liberalism and includes two notable essays on the “political liberalism” of John Rawls; and a third part, which seems a little “tacked on” vis-à-vis the rest of the book, deals with (among other topics) the mind/body problem, rationality, and relativism.

**Public and Private.** The centerpiece of the book is the title essay, originally published in 1998 in the journal *Philosophy & Public Affairs*. The context for the essay is the sex scandal involving Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, or rather the rapt attentiveness of the news media and the general public in the United States to every detail of their sexual interactions that emerged into full public view as the scandal unfolded.

“Everyone knows,” according to the book’s opening sentence, “that something has gone wrong in the United States with the conventions of privacy” (3). But *what*, exactly, has gone wrong?

Nagel offers a diagnosis and a prescription. The diagnosis hinges on his interpretation of the social and psychological function of privacy norms. The first thing we need to notice, he suggests, is “the sheer chaotic, tropical luxuriance of the inner life” of persons as such, and of persons in their sexual aspect in particular (4). When we see this, we will see too that it is simply impossible for us to fashion viable routines of interpersonal interaction unless our modes of public self-presentation are radically curtailed, such that a vast range of our thoughts, desires, and impulses are screened out, either through our own reticence, secrecy, or restraint on the one hand, or through the tactful non-acknowledgement of certain actualities or possibilities on the part of our interaction partners on the other hand. A gap, therefore, must open up between our unruly and largely unpresentable inner life and our “exposed public self,” which is partly a fictive construct, but “over which we have enough control to be able to identify with it, at least in part” (4). “The possibility of combining civilized interpersonal relations with a relatively free inner life” relies on collective acceptance of boundaries between public matters and private matters: “between what invites attention and a collective response and what remains individual and may be ignored” (7). I cannot do justice, here, to the subtlety of his reflections on the psycho-social dynamics of this public/private dichotomy, but “Concealment and Exposure” is full of astute observations of how people negotiate the hazardous terrain of taboo subjects, potentially tactless revelations, and politely unvoiced opinions and urges.

Nagel wants to remind us that such restraint is very different from dishonesty: the norms of non-disclosure are themselves publicly understood and shared, indeed enforced by communities of people (although, of course, such norms vary depending on the context, the social group, the cultural community, etc.). Indeed, respect for such
boundaries is itself an important virtue. Were these norms widely disregarded, we would quickly confront threats from two directions: first, we would see “disruptive” material spilling over from our inner lives into public arenas, continually generating bitter conflicts, hurt feelings, and awkward silences; and second, we would find our inner world subject to the oppressive oversight of the “panoptical” gaze of public opinion and collective nosiness.

And this is exactly what we see happening, on Nagel’s account, in the popular culture and political journalism of the United States: we are overburdened with disruptive information about private matters, and the realm of privacy itself is invaded by too much scrutiny and public commentary. He goes on to offer an alternative formulation of what is, in essence, the same point: “American political culture is in a condition of generalized adolescent panic with regard to sex, brought on by a sudden overthrow of puritanism without a concomitant development of worldliness” (45).

What is to be done about this state of affairs? Nagel’s prescription is, as he puts it, “conservative” (25), precisely in its insistence on clinging to a beleaguered principle of traditional liberalism. What is needed, he thinks, is a restoration of the disciplined restraint by which public bodies and the public political culture are not allowed to intrude upon or regulate or promote any of the private thoughts, opinions and preferences of individual citizens. “Best would be a regime of private freedom combined with public or collective neutrality” (25).

In his defense and elaboration of this public neutrality principle (in both Parts One and Two of the book) Nagel articulates with admirable clarity “one of the things that people hate about liberalism” (22): its insistence that a society’s public institutions and its political culture, and even (in his view) its establishment of etiquette norms, should refrain from any active attempts to dispel (for example) racist, sexist or anti-Semitic opinions and passions. Engagement in such efforts, which he calls communitarianism, is antithetical to the liberal project: “No one should be in control of the culture, and the persistence of private racism, sexism, homophobia, religious and ethnic bigotry, sexual puritanism, and other such private pleasures should not provoke liberals to demand constant public affirmation of the opposite values” (26). His case for liberalism thus has the virtue that it helps to explain why so many of those who value social justice find the liberal approach to securing it to be fatally flawed: in the name of public neutrality it consigns to the “private” and hence protected realm the fascist’s revulsion toward immigrants and Jews, the corporate executive’s callous greed and contempt for his impoverished neighbors, and the sexist employer’s demeaning and hostile attitudes toward his female employees. “True liberals,” as Nagel says elsewhere in the book, “are reluctant to interfere even with anti-liberal cultures in their midst” (134). Nagel declines to sugarcoat either liberalism’s commitments, or its repudiation of certain sorts of commitment.

Right and Wrong. The liberal principles in terms of which Nagel discusses the public/private distinction in the first part of the book are formulated at a higher level of generality in the second part of the book, which contains two clear and very sympathetic overviews of Rawls’ theory of justice, and a series of other chapters on egalitarian justice theory and contractualist moral theory. These chapters mainly consist of book reviews for publications like the *London Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, so much of their content consists of eloquent and sympathetic presentations of key
arguments from recent books by leading contemporary moral and political philosophers like Jeremy Waldron, Joseph Raz, G.A. Cohen, and T.M. Scanlon.

**Reality.** The third part of the book compiles a series of occasional pieces about, among other topics, Richard Rorty’s neo-pragmatism, the infamous Sokal Affair, and (in a longer, exploratory paper on “The Psychophysical Nexus”) the mind-body problem. In his reviews of books by Rorty and Sokal, Nagel upholds the fashionable but implausible idea that science is on the defensive in the modern university: threatened by an onslaught of relativism and, to borrow one of Nagel’s characteristic phrases, “a lot of left-wing cant.”

He sums up Rorty’s stance clearly enough: “that all experience is shaped by language, that language is contingently formed by history, and that therefore everything we think should be accompanied by a large dose of historicist self-consciousness or irony. The idea that our beliefs…could be in any strong sense objectively true or false should simply be abandoned” (160). Such views, he thinks, are dangerous as well as incoherent. Nagel regards the “postmodernist” science studies project, parodied by Sokal’s hoax-article published in *Social Text*, as committed to a similar point of view, and hence as similarly disreputable. In “The Sleep of Reason,” a review of the book by Sokal and Jean Bricmont elaborating on the idea of the original hoax, Nagel indulges in a polemic, not only against “postmodernist” science studies, but against “postmodernism” in general. It is a striking feature of this polemic that he explains what he takes to be the views of “postmodernists” mainly by discussing two decidedly unpostmodernist analytic philosophers, Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend. Occasionally he ascribes some claim or other to postmodernists, like “there is nothing outside the text,” but he shows little sign of understanding the meaning that remarks like that have in the work of someone like Jacques Derrida (the source of that particular aphorism). Even worse, he seems to want to encourage the conclusion that the Sokal Affair tells us something, not only about the specific intellectuals (mostly literary theorists and clinical psychoanalysts) implicated in the Affair itself or the subsequent Sokal/Bricmont book, but also about the wider range of figures that find themselves labeled as “postmodernists” or “poststructuralists.” Think of Michel Foucault, say, or Jacques Derrida. Physicists Sokal and Bricmont acknowledge their lack of adequate expertise to assess the work of these figures, neither of whom indulged in embarrassing or superficial flirtation with the jargon of theoretical physics. But Nagel seems intent on exploiting the Sokal Affair as a propaganda tool in some kind of culture war. Unlike Sokal and Bricmont, Nagel’s target is not people of any ideological stripe who are guilty of pretentious intellectual incompetence. His target is rather those whom he calls “the new relativists,” guilty of reinterpreting claims to “objectivity” as nothing but “a mask for the exercise of power,” a critical project which, in Nagel’s view, serves as “a natural vehicle for the expression of class hatred” (174).

But this is a political dispute, and the Sokal Affair – a cautionary tale about what happens when literary critics and psychoanalysts misappropriate technical terms from contemporary physics – is ill-suited to shed light on either the moral or the methodological questions it poses.

In contrast to this foray into unfamiliar territory, the paper on the “Psychophysical nexus” is far more serious, due in large measure to the fact that here he is thoroughly familiar with the relevant literature.

Of course, few readers will make the mistake of turning to Nagel for insight into
recent French philosophy. On the other hand, where we really do expect first-rate philosophy from him – in the philosophy of mind or moral and political philosophy – Nagel does not disappoint, offering readers eloquent and insightful treatments of key issues in contemporary philosophy, engaging for specialists, yet accessible to intelligent and interested general readers.

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