

The Nature of Consciousness
Handout [16]
Thomas Nagel: *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?*

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§ The Goals

- 1. To define the notion of consciousness.**
- 2. To argue against any reductive approach to consciousness.**

§ On Consciousness

1. Consciousness is what makes the mind-body problem really intractable.
2. Conscious experience is a widespread phenomenon. It occurs at many levels of animal life.
3. Fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to be that organism -- something it is like for the organism.

§ Nagel's Refutation of Reductionism

*** [Nagel's First Argument]:**

- ___ **1. The fact that an organism has conscious experience at all means, basically, that there is something it is like to be that organism. [x's having conscious experience = there is something it is like to be x]**
- ___ **2. What it is like to be that organism is called 'the subjective character of experience.'**
- ___ **3. Any reductive analysis of the mental is logically compatible with the absence of the subjective character of experience.**
- ___ **4. Therefore, any reductive analysis of the mental would fail to capture the subjective character of experience.**

*** [Nagel's Second Argument]:**

- ___ **1. Physicalism is the thesis that physical theories can fully explain every phenomenon of the world.**
- ___ **2. Every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view.**
- ___ **3. But it seems inevitable that an objective, physical theory will abandon that point of view.**

___ 4. Therefore, physicalism is false in that it fails to explain any subjective phenomenon.

* [Nagel's Third Argument]:

___ 1. In order to know the conscious experience of bats, I need to know what it is like to be a bat.

___ 2. But to the extent that I could look and behave like a bat without changing my fundamental structure, my experiences would not be anything like the experiences of bats.

___ 3. Therefore, the knowledge of the conscious experience of a bat is forever closed to me.

* [Nagel's Fourth Argument]:

___ 1. The process of reduction is a move in the direction of greater objectivity, toward a more accurate view of the real nature of things.

___ 2. But it appears unlikely that we will get closer to the real nature of human experience by leaving behind the particularity of our human point of view.

___ 3. Therefore, experiences will always be irreducible.

§ Nagel's Ontological Assumptions

1. The subjective realm is *real*.

2. There exist facts beyond the reach of human concepts.

3. There exist facts that do not consist in the truth of propositions expressible in a human language.

4. In particular, facts that embody a particular point of view (other than human's) are facts beyond human conceptual/propositional representation.

5. The point of view can only be shared among creatures sufficiently alike in physical structures.

6. Human understanding and human knowledge is thus limited to human experiences only.

7. A proposal:

___ It may be possible to approach the gap between subjective and objective from another direction.

___ This should be regarded as a challenge to form new concepts and devise a new method -- an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or the imagination.

8. Finally, any physical theory of mind must deal with the general problem of subjective and objective.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: (possible paper topics)

Q1: What is it like to be conscious? Can we describe the experience of being conscious?

Q2: Is consciousness necessarily a subjective experience? Do we leave anything out when we give it a neurophysiological explanation?

Q3: How do we reconcile the subjective and the objective points of view?

___ They may be two views of the same thing, but one view does not cancel out the other view.

Q4: How does having this subjective character of experience affect the thesis of reduction?

___ Reduction is compatible with the absence of subjective experience.

Q5: Is it impossible to give a physical account of the subjective, phenomenological feature of experience?

Q6: Is the subjective domain "real"? Are there things that can never be expressed in the propositional form of human knowledge?

Q7: Is Nagel right in saying that only sufficiently similar beings can understand each other's point of view?

Q8: Why does he say that his "point of view" theory is not by itself an argument against reduction?

Q9: Do we have a theory of consciousness if we have a scientific explanation of when we have consciousness?