

**Phil 490: *Consciousness and the Self***  
**Handout [4]**  
**Thomas Nagel: *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?***

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Consciousness is what makes the mind-body problem really intractable. Without consciousness the mind-body problem would be much less interesting. With consciousness it seems hopeless. (Nagel 1974, 219)

### § The Goals

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

**[Reductionism:** Every mental phenomenon and mental concept can be fully reduced to (explained by) physical phenomenon and physical concept.]

### § Nagel's Claims 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. **Main Thesis:** *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.*
4. We may call this the *subjective* character of experience. It is not captured by any of the reductive analyses of the mental, for all of them are logically compatible with its absence.

### § Nagel's Refutation of Reductionism

Any reductionist program has to be based on an analysis of what is to be reduced. If the analysis leaves something out, the problem will be falsely posed. It is useless to base the defense of materialism on any analysis of mental phenomena that fails to deal explicitly with their subjective character.

\* [Nagel's First Argument]: *what it is like*

- \_\_\_ 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]: *subjective point of view*

- \_\_\_ 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.

... In so far I can imagine this, it tells me only what it would be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task. I cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modifications. (Nagel 1974, 220)

\* [Nagel's Third Argument]: *bat*

- \_\_\_ 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.



**I wonder what it is like to be a bat...**



\* [Nagel's Fourth Argument]: *experience*

- \_\_\_ 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 experience by leaving behind the particularity of a single point of view, since experience is always connected with a particular point of view.
- \_\_\_ 3. Therefore, experiences will always be irreducible.

Does it make sense to ask what my experiences are *really* like, as opposed to how they appear to me? We cannot genuinely understand the hypothesis that their nature is captured in a physical description unless we understand the more fundamental idea that they *have* an objective nature. (Nagel 1974, 224)

§ Nagel's Ontological Assumptions

1. The subjective realm is *real*.
2. There may 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?**