

The Problem of Consciousness

In his paper 'What is it like to be a bat?' (1974), Thomas Nagel argued that consciousness is a particularly difficult problem for the philosophy of mind.

'Consciousness is what makes the mind-body problem really intractable. Perhaps that is why current discussions of the problem give it little attention or get it obviously wrong. The recent wave of reductionist euphoria has produced several analyses of mental phenomena and mental concepts designed to explain the possibility of some variety of materialism, psychophysical identification, or reduction. But the problems dealt with are those common to this type of reduction and other types, and what makes the mind-body problem unique, and unlike the water-H₂O problem of the Turing machine-IBM machine problem or the lightening-electrical discharge problem or the gene-DNA problem,... is ignored' (Nagel [1976], 2004, p.648).

Reductionist accounts of the mind

Reductionism of the mental to the physical only provides an account of what is common to all forms of reductionism, e.g. the reduction of water to H₂O, or of temperature to mean molecular kinetic energy. But the mind-body problem has a feature that is

distinct from those cases; that feature is consciousness. Therefore reductionism leaves something out of its account.

It's not clear where consciousness first occurs in the animal kingdom, but it is generally thought that animals other than us are conscious. For Nagel, to say that an organism has a conscious state is to say 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). What it is like to be that organism Nagel calls 'the subjective character of experience' (ibid., p.649).

As a first point: all reductionist accounts of subjectivity are logically compatible with its absence. Subjective character is not analysable in terms of physical or functional (causal) properties since these could be ascribed to robots or (philosophical) zombies that experienced nothing. There is more to conscious mental states than their causal properties. Reductionism leaves out the subjective character of our experience. How can reductionism be right if it leaves out such a key feature?

We cannot exclude the phenomenological features of the mental if we want to provide a full account of the mind, but physicalist explanations seem to do just that. Physical reductionism excludes the phenomenological features from physical features (for e.g., it explains the subjective features of coloured objects in terms of the effects on the minds of human observers). But in order to defend physicalism fully, we need to give an account of the mind that takes account of these phenomenological features (ibid., pp.649-50).

The subjective point of view

The main problem is that subjective phenomena are associated with a particular point of a view. Physicalism, though, seeks to understand the world from a purely objective standpoint (eventually the view from nowhere). So it will leave out just what needs to be explained. Therefore the basic problem of subjectivity is that all such analyses, by their very nature, will leave something out, namely the subjective quality of experience. Without knowing what subjectivity itself is we cannot hope to find an explanation for it.

Consider a bat. We know much about their physical natures. We know, for example, that they use a high frequency system called 'echolocation' to build up a sonic map of their surroundings. We might even come to know everything physical about bats. But there is no reason to suppose that their sensory modalities are anything like ours. Since our experience is the basis for imaginative extrapolation to the experiences of other species, we will not be able to know what it is like to be a bat. (Relatedly, we cannot imagine what it is like to be blind from birth.) Thus there are facts related to different points of view beyond our human conceptual scheme. So we will not be fully able to explain the mental (ibid., pp.650-51).

For sure, we could try to imagine what it is like 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' (ibid., p.651).

Clouds, a rainbow, lightening, etc, have an objective nature independent of their visual experience. Indeed they have a more objective character; a character which we seek to discover in order to understand their nature. Typically, explanation involves a move to greater objectivity – from appearance to reality, we could say. But this does not seem to be the case with subjective experience. This approach would take us *further* away from understanding subjectivity. Hence it would seem that we cannot seek to understand subjectivity via an objective study of the brain (pp.653-55).

This does not show that physicalism is false, only that we cannot understand how it might be true. Whereas we can tell a story about how other identity claims are satisfied (how water is identical to H₂O, for e.g.), we cannot tell a satisfactory story about how the subjective is identical with the physical (ibid., pp.655-66).

So what does Nagel propose?:

‘At present we are unequipped to think about the subjective character of experience without relying on the imagination – without taking up the point of view of the experiential subject. 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. Though presumably it would not capture everything, its goal would be to describe, at least in part, the subjective character of experience in a

form comprehensible to beings incapable of having those experiences' (ibid., p.658).

Nagel is suggesting that a more objective understanding of subjectivity may be required by the introduction of new ways of thinking about subjectivity itself.

But the question remains as to whether this would tackle the problem of consciousness.

References

Nagel [1974], 'What is it like to be a bat?', reprinted in Crane and Farkas, *Metaphysics: a guide and anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.648-58.