

Title: "What is it like to Be a Bat?"

Author: Thomas Nagel

Analysis by: James Bresnahan

Summary:

Nagel believes reductionism is the most unlikely of all the current philosophical beliefs to shed light on consciousness. He believes that in order to shed light on the relationship between mind and body, one must address consciousness -- and reductionism fails to do that. He does state that we "cannot be sure" of the presence of consciousness in lesser cognitive animals, but he believes in a multiple formed belief of consciousness. This resembles most present day theories on tiered consciousness (from primary -- "I know I see you"; to secondary-- "I can think about you thinking about me").

Nagel puts strong emphasis on what he calls "subjective character." In other words, what it is like to *be* a specific organism. He states that even if you have an excellent imagination and are able to imagine what it's like to perceive things via sonar, hang upside down, and web your arms and feet you still wouldn't know what it's really like to *be* a bat. This is the idea behind subjective character -- that every "thing" has it's own interpretation of what it is like to be themselves. Nagel believes that the only way to truly boil down the reductionist theory is to turn phenomenological features a physical account, which takes away subjectivity, and therefore has no ground to stand on.

Personal note: I find this interesting, but can't the same be said about individual people? Does Brian know what it is like to be me, or does he just know what it is like to be me that than a bat knows what it is like to be me? I believe the fundamental problem in all of consciousness are absolutes.

Why **must** phenomenological features turn into physical accounts and why **must** they then in turn remove all subjectivity? Which then in turn raises the question that if I don't know exactly what it's like to be Brian (assuming there is some objectivity and some subjectivity), but I do know what it is like to be me, do I really know what it's like to be "human" assuming that human accounts for all of mankind? There seems to be a few flaws to his arguments.... but I do agree with him and where he is coming from.

Nagel then states that the structure and nature of bats own minds might make it impossible for them to feel our subjectivity in anyway and that the vice-versa is also possible; stating that subjective character is highly specific. This seems to introduce the idea that we may never get to the bottom of any of this and may just totally be arguing on the theoretical with no physical aspect showing up. Nagel

states that his own belief is that the subjective domain in all its forms implies a belief in the existence of facts beyond the reach of human concepts.

Nagel makes a valuable point (p. 326) when he states that we probably never will fully understand someone else or another organism's own perspective. He says that if one person is particularly good at something that another species is able to do (such as a blind person using their own echolocation and relating to bats) then they will have a partial yet still incomplete understanding. This is interesting to me because I have looked into mirror neurons a lot. Mirror neurons basically recreate someone else's mind inside your own mind; the cornerstone to secondary consciousness. In this sense certain people (such as those with autism, ASD, or other mental disability) have a great deal of difficulty making these mirror neurons fire and develop correctly. This also leads to an incomplete understanding of what another person is thinking. This is why we often think of these types of people as being "inferior" however it's not that they can't process their own thoughts, actually they're quite good at that, they just can't relate to others. They struggle greatly with empathy in particular and this really relates to the way Nagel believes we can only ever truly get a partial understanding of another species.... I would draw this further and say we can't even get a full understanding of individuals within our own species.

On the other hand, Nagel believes every experience does have some objective components and states that even those who are blind can know objectively what lightning is or what it is like to see. He believes we don't have an adequate way of fully explaining things but we can explain them in an objective manner that basically relays the message of what we believe is objective. We are able to relate this objectivity because we **experience** the phenomenal point of view. Aside: Language obviously has a great deal to do with everything in the realm of consciousness; he does not address language. It's interesting that so many different populations developed language independently and at different period of times; yet it still ALL happened. Is this an evolutionary aspect? Are those who were able to recreate others mental states and communicate more effectively more fit for survival? Does this possibly mean there should be more than two levels of consciousness? One level for thinking about others, one for thinking about others thinking about you, and one for relating the concepts of others thinking about others??

Nagel also says how physicalism isn't necessarily false. It is truer to say that physicalism is a position we cannot understand because we do not have any conception as to how it can be true. He then uses the example that mental states are states of the body; mental events are physical events. However, we do not know the relationship (or so he says) between the two. He refutes science in this section by saying that often the "theoretical" is not taken into consideration and

uses the example of energy. Do students who study matter really know the theory behind why it is energy?

Aside: I pose the question of the visual pathways. These have been intricately mapped, and no theory is needed -- have we proven Nagel wrong? Can we decipher between the mental events and the physical events that come about and vice versa?

Nagel then tends to refute this by saying that these examples (such as the one I just gave) fail because if we construe the reference of mental terms to physical events on the usual model, we either get a reappearance of separate subjective events as the effects through which mental reference to physical events is secured, or else we get a false account of how mental terms refer, which he calls a causal behaviorist theory. He basically claims that if you regard a sensation as an effect of neural events, then it is distinct from them, not identical... I don't follow.

Aside: As far as I have been educated there are literally processes that show everything from (using his own example) the infliction of an injury to the exact molecules that cause pain (substance P in case you're wondering). I question this.

He continues: Does it make sense to ask what my experiences are really like, as opposed to how they appear to me? Nagel states that little has been done on this basic question. We cannot genuinely understand how nature can be physical if we cannot understand the more fundamental idea that it has an objective nature in some way shape or form. In other words, some objective processes can have a subjective nature. In my own words, the same picture may stimulate completely different neurons in two people bodies, which in turn stimulate somewhat similar pathways, again not identical, and then elicit a somewhat similar response. This picture is objective. The experiences that come from it are an objective pathway, with individual subjectivities, which leads to a response that may be completely subjective or actually very similar, making it appear to be objective.

In closing, Nagel proposes that we take subjective experiences and try to develop an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or the imagination. Its goal would be to describe, at least in part, the subjective character of experiences in a comprehensible form to those incomprehensible. The problem with this lies in removing the subjectivity. I.e. everyone would describe the color red differently, albeit objectively. He uses the example of describing to a blind person from birth what it was like to see. Confusingly, he mentions that everyone will eventually hit a wall and not be able to objectively relay any farther past a certain point.