

Thomas Nagel (1981) – How is it like to be a bat?

Why does "consciousness" make the mind-body problem really intractable according to Thomas Nagel?

In his text "What is it like to be a bat?" of 1974 Thomas Nagel claims that consciousness is the barrier that makes the mind-body problem unique and so hard.

He states that consciousness is rarely addressed by reductionists. Because there is no really persuading reduction available, implausible accounts of the mental have been developed to help explain familiar kind of reductions. This has led to reductionists ignoring consciousness. But according to Nagel the mind-body problem is boring without consciousness.

Nagel now turns to conscious experience. He finds that some animals and aliens have it – and that there is something it is like to be that organism. He calls this "the subjective character of experience" (Searle would call it the "first-person-ontology" of consciousness) and claims it has not yet been captured by reductionists, functional states, intentional states or behavior analysis. A physical analysis of the mind must include consciousness, or some idea of it at least, from the start on to work out.

He then compares objective and subjective experience. The problem he finds for reducing the latter is that it is connected with a single point of view. To make things less peculiar, Nagel tries this on the example of bats (who are relatively close related to us, but somewhat different nonetheless – think of sonar). Because their perception is so different from ours, Nagel sees every reason to claim that we cannot imagine what it is like to be a bat. Nagel not only tries to imagine what it would be like for him to be a bat. That doesn't hit the point. He wants to know what it is like for the bat itself. Also transforming into a bat, gradually even, would not help for he wants to know it in his present condition.

This is where Nagel points out that we can only make schematic ascriptions that lack the subjective character. Although he had chosen a rather exotic example, he reminds the reader that this also holds between humans. Maybe we will never understand it, but denying the problem is wrong. Nagel explores how it is by all means possible to imagine that there are things humans may never be able to understand.

He then returns to the problem: facts about what it is to be some organism appear to embody a particular point of view. Here Nagel states that he is not proclaiming total privacy of experience. Some objectivity is indeed possible. Adopting other points of view is part of our daily life, but this is only possible for organism that bear enough similarity. Similarity, though, is just a measurable degree, in case of organisms never reaching 100 percent.

Here Nagel sees a direct impact on the mind-body problem: Accessing these facts about what it is to be some organism that stick to a point of view with objective physics seems to be impossible. This is not an argument against reduction itself. Many things allow objective comprehension, to a certain degree, that is. But in the case of experience, one thing will always fail: you cannot remove the viewpoint from subjective experience. The problem of psychological reduction is therefore formulated as follows: Where other kinds of reduction always lead to greater objectivity, a reduction of experience that moves the focus away from subjectivity is doomed to fail. In its history, the main task of reductionism has always consisted of leaving out the subjective point of view. But for the internal world, ignoring it is false. This constitutes in the failure of (neo-)behaviorism. So the main problem that Nagel sees for the mind-body problem about consciousness is that the old ways of

scientific problem solving will not help us in any way. You could describe everything that happens in the head of someone who feels anger, further progress in the neurosciences included. But no description of the objective, physical facts would deal with the subjective character of the experience itself.

For Nagel, then, there are only few things concerning the mind-body problem to be stated safely. One of them is coming to the rescue of physicalism: mental states are states of the body; mental events are physical events. But he then admits that the apparent clarity of terms like “are” are deceiving. They just claim a reference. Without a theoretical framework that makes those references understandable, they still are not well defined. What we hold in our hands is the evidence that mental events have some physical description. But what we lack is the theoretical framework.

Nagel closes with some proposals: First he asks whether the question is properly stated: is there something at all, something really objective, how it is like to have his experiences, or can we only ask for subjective appearances? Second, Nagel speculates about the development of an objective phenomenology. We could develop concepts that describe experiences for others – we could, for example, start with blind people. Maybe this would somewhen help to find experiences that really are candidates for objective explanations. Of course this is a lot of work to be done, but that correlates to the importance of the problem.