

ASSESSING THE PROBLEM OF SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY IN  
THOMAS NAGEL'S, *WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A BAT?*

By Paul Gyaltsen

The mind-body problem concerns the nature of both mind and body and their relationship. This is complicated by the imposition of consciousness, a phenomenon which defies measurement and definition. For Thomas Nagel, the issue is the difficulty with categorising consciousness as a phenomenon of either mind or body. As such, Nagel explores consciousness in all its complexity to identify an objective standpoint from which the phenomenon and its properties can be viewed. Regardless of the limitations of contemporary science to solve the issue at hand, Nagel adopts a physicalist approach in order to identify an objective definition of consciousness. The primary problem with this approach is that a physicalist rather than metaphysical, frame of reference will tend to undermine essential phenomenal characteristics of consciousness. Moreover, Nagel fails to substantially explore, investigate and understand the terms of the debate. Finally, Nagel's argument suffers from simple logical fallacies, contradictions and errors which are sometimes acknowledged but never resolved. Errors in Nagel's investigation are not dependent on counter claims about the relationship between mind and body but reflect a failure to appropriately interrogate and enquire after the nature of the ostensible concern.

The essential problem in Nagel's analysis is a lack of insight into the mind, body and consciousness. The nature and cause of that ignorance will be discussed later but for Nagel the issue is physicalism's inability to provide an account of consciousness.

Without consciousness the mind-body problem would be much less interesting. With consciousness it seems hopeless. The most important and characteristic feature of conscious mental phenomena is very poorly understood. Most reductionist theories do not even try to explain it. And careful examination will show that no currently available concept of reduction is applicable to it. Perhaps a new theoretical form can be devised for the purpose, but such a solution, if it exists, lies in the distant intellectual future.<sup>1</sup>

Physicalists concede that it is not clear what devices create consciousness, let alone what consciousness *is*:

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nagel, *What is it Like to be a Bat?* The Philosophical Review, Vol.83 No.4, (1974) p.436

Conscious experience is a widespread phenomenon. It occurs at many levels of animal life, though we cannot be sure of its presence in the simpler organisms, and it is very difficult to say in general what provides evidence of it.<sup>2</sup>

This raises the first key issue in Nagel's analysis, namely the adoption of a physicalist approach in investigating a phenomenon which he concedes, is not understood. Such application of the terms is relevant by cause of Nagel's discussion into phenomenology in which the exploration of the very nature of phenomenology is left untouched. Including the prior admission that there is not even a comprehension of what consciousness is as such. Such a misunderstanding and lack of exploration is evidenced by contradictions in claims such as the following:

I want to know 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.<sup>3</sup>

And,

Our senses provide the evidence from which we start, but the detached character of this understanding is such that we could possess it even if we had none of our present senses, so long as we were rational and could understand the mathematical and formal properties of the objective conception of the physical world. We might even in a sense share an understanding of physics with other creatures to whom things appeared quite different, perceptually – so long as they too were rational and numerate.<sup>4</sup>

The first quote implies that phenomenological knowledge could not be shared between species due to the limitations of their perceptive frameworks. Yet in the second quote the reverse claim is made that beings could, in some manner, share a mathematical understanding, independent of their perceptive frameworks.

Nagel's argument proceeds according to a categorization of the terms, subjective and objective, though their definitions and nature are assumed. For example, characteristics of objective phenomena are that they are observable and subject to empirical analysis. The definitions are important because they serve as the foundations for the proceeding analysis. Since Nagel does not define objectivity, we must first offer our own:

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.439

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, (1986) p.14

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14

Objectivity is the philosophical concept of truth independent from individual subjectivity caused by perception, emotions or imagination. A proposition is considered to have objective truth when its truth conditions are met without bias or caused by a sentient subject.<sup>5</sup>

To perceive outside of the human framework of perception is, by definition, impossible since perceiver and perceived would necessarily be independent of each other for objectivity to be possible. In this respect, the very frameworks used to define the objective must, according to Nagel's understanding, be subjective. In other words, objectivity must *be*. Similarly, the phenomenological characteristics of 'subjectivity' are of greater concern stemming from a presupposed and uninterrogated understanding of what is being discussed. The task is a philosophical objective in which the terms should be explored. It seems self-evident that we cannot resolve the issue of the nature of consciousness without investigating our presuppositions and preconceptions. Perhaps foremost amongst those is the assumption of the subjective nature of phenomenological characteristics.

Physicalism is an inherently inappropriate means by which to approach the problem of consciousness. This is primarily because physicalism assumes the objectivity of the physical. This is by no means the fault of physicalism, its task is not to question and explore, but to define and state the observable. The problem therefore rests with Nagel's use of physicalism as both a means and point of departure from which to assess and presumably understand, an admittedly 'subjective' phenomenon. As Dorothea Frede eloquently states in *The Question of Being; Heidegger's Project*:

As mentioned earlier, the stance taken in theorizing allows the thinker to have a detached point of view. The thinker can treat the objects of his investigation as "indifferently occurring" things that exist independent of observation, just as the observer in his turn is at liberty to fasten on any object. So, observer and observed, thinker and the object of his thought, are regarded as "indifferently occurring" alongside one another.<sup>6</sup>

Such a 'theoretical stance' is adopted by Nagel although he concedes that it "requires much more discussion than he can give it":

---

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Objectivity\\_\(philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Objectivity_(philosophy))

<sup>6</sup> Dorothea Frede, *The Question of Being: Heidegger's Project in The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p.58

This brings us to the edge of a topic that requires much more discussion than I can give it here; namely the relation between facts on the one hand and conceptual schemes or systems of representation on the other.<sup>7</sup>

To clarify, knowledge acquired by humans presupposes a subjective viewpoint as a *necessity*. Objectivity, according to the definition provided, is unsustainable. An objective point of view requires perception independent of subjective perceptive frameworks. Nagel fails to investigate those issues, even asserting the similarities between the perceptive and epistemic capabilities of a Martian and those of our own:

Lightning has an objective character that is not exhausted by its visual appearance, and this can be investigated by a Martian without vision. To be precise, it has a more objective character than is revealed in its visual appearance. In speaking of the move from subjective to objective characterization, I wish to remain noncommittal about the existence of an end point, the completely objective intrinsic nature of the thing, which one might or might not be able to reach.<sup>8</sup>

Nagel makes a leap in logic here and again the concern is not the leap as such but the failure to determine its validity. This failure is once again explained by the adoption of an inappropriate approach to the problem, namely physicalism:

This is not by itself an argument against reduction. A Martian scientist with no understanding of visual perception could understand the rainbow, or lightning, or clouds as physical phenomena, though he would never be able to understand the human concepts of rainbow, lightning, or cloud, or the place these things occupy in our phenomenal world. The objective nature of the things picked out by these concepts themselves are connected with a particular point of view and a particular visual phenomenology, the things apprehended from that point of view are not: they are observable from the point of view but external to it: hence they can be comprehended from other points of view also, either by the same organisms or by others.<sup>9</sup>

Here Nagel assumes that a 'Martian scientist' with no understanding of visual perception, could understand a rainbow or lightning. The underlying problem is the assumption of understanding as seemingly exempt from perceptive frameworks or functions 'outside' of them. It is unclear quite how Nagel can claim that a Martian could understand phenomena as we do, without any knowledge of the perceptive frameworks of a Martian. Moreover, there is

---

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Nagel, *What is it Like to be a Bat?* The Philosophical Review, Vol.83 No.4, (1974) p.44

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Nagel, *What is it Like to be a Bat?* The Philosophical Review, Vol.83 No.4, (1974) p.443

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.443

no reference to the principle that perceived phenomena appear as such by virtue of our subjective perceptive frameworks. Further, Nagel asserts that the objective nature perceived by the concepts would be phenomenological but the things apprehended would be objective. There is no comment on the nature of these objective ‘things’ and once more, the question of the possibility of objectivity persists. Nor does Nagel explain how the objective nature perceived is phenomenological, yet that which is perceived is not.

Lighting has an objective character that is not exhausted by its visual appearance, and this can be investigated by a Martian without vision.<sup>10</sup>

Nagel does not explain quite how such knowledge is acquired despite conceding that he could not know what it is like *‘for’* a member of another species to be what it is. The shortcomings in Nagel’s argument are exemplified in the following:

If there are basically two separate entities, subject and object, that occur side by side, the question of how contact is possible between the thinking subject and independently existing objects remains an insoluble problem, even if one grants that the subject somehow bestows the “form” or the “meaning” on the objects. For the question remains: How can there be truth if it is conceived of as the correspondence between our thoughts (or the content of our consciousness) and the outside world? In other words, what guarantees the objectivity of our subjective impressions?<sup>11</sup>

Nagel makes an unwarranted assumption about the nature of subject and object and there is a similar assumption about the nature of truth. The concern about what could “guarantee the objectivity of our subjective impressions” is left uninterrogated, at one stage asserting that “turning away from a human viewpoint” is possible without offering any explanation:

[...] and in understanding a phenomenon like lightning, it is legitimate to go as far away as one can from a strictly human viewpoint<sup>12</sup>

There can be no assurance that phenomena such as lightning are perceived or perceptible outside of human perception. Moreover, it is unclear how it is possible that Nagel may “go as far away as one can from a strictly human viewpoint” and return to explain what has been ‘perceived’ or understood.

---

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Nagel, *What is it Like to be a Bat?* The Philosophical Review, Vol.83 No.4, (1974) p.443

<sup>11</sup> Dorothea Frede, *The Question of Being; Heidegger's project*, Cambridge University Press (1993) p.62

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Nagel, *What is it Like to be a Bat?* The Philosophical Review, Vol.83 No.4, (1974) p.443

Currently, any form of reductionism or physicalism fails to provide significant, observable or physical accounts of consciousness. Yet, even if they could produce a physical account of consciousness, the same issues implicit in Nagel's analysis of subjectivity and objectivity arise since the same epistemic and metaphysical issues are necessary. While one could establish an empirical account of consciousness, one still would not have an account of its nature. As once more the task of physicalism is not to find meaning but to measure. Again, it may be helpful to provide some definition where Nagel has not. We may understand physicalism as, "the metaphysical thesis that 'everything is physical', that there is 'nothing over and above' the physical, or that everything supervenes on the physical." The definition is sufficient to highlight the inappropriateness of the physicalist approach for the mind-body problem, but more specifically consciousness and phenomenology. It is inappropriate because the very nature of physicalist conduct is to observe those physical properties given to objects. The role of physicalism is not to describe or explain the nature of beings, but to observe their structure and behaviour. This however, cannot be applied to phenomenology and thus to consciousness in which not only can physicalism at this time not produce a physical account of those phenomena, but their specific nature is one that needs rational exploration into the categories of subject/object and the uniqueness with which each account of consciousness is equipped.

We have mentioned that an account should be rational. By that it is meant that a metaphysical reflection on the terms, their nature and relationship should be prioritised over any type of physicalist approach. By definition, philosophical objectivity is an impossible category since truth is conceived as being derived from individuated, subjective, perceptive frameworks. Further, the seeming necessity of subjectivity for truth gives rise to the possibility of multiple 'truths' and therefore the impossibility of objectivity. Physicalism will only serve to give a self-fulfilling account of reality that is systematically true. Consider that for an individual, temperature is encountered as 'hot' or 'cold'. Conversely, a Physicalist account of temperature is reflected numerically. Thus, though an account is provided which can find consensus, it neither speaks to the phenomenology of temperature nor is it subject to correction due to its systematization. One consequence of such an error is that which we have been observing; Nagel makes use of a tool inappropriate to that which it measures.

Nonetheless, we do not deny that a physicalist account of consciousness *may* be produced that could solve this issue of the relation between mind and body. Physicalist theory has accomplished a significant understanding of the human mind. Yet so long as insight into an explanation of what things *are*, not an insight into being able to observe them is to be shown, any progress into some meaningful philosophical truth will not be concluded. We take a step back and remember once more that philosophy ventures where physicalism does not. So that even if a physical account of consciousness could be produced, its meaning and

properties could not be devised. The approach taken by Descartes regarding the mind-body problem is useful in understanding and supporting the former argument. In Descartes' exploration of what can be known, everything is put into question, even the very 'objective' measures and sources of wisdom from which things are assumed to be such as mathematics or physicalism due to them being an external system of logic and truth. A similar attempt by Nagel is made, with physicalism and the seeking of objectivity, thus the same concepts can be applied. Yet while Descartes interrogates the issues Nagel does not. The question of what things *are*, not what can be observed and moreover, how it is known that they are as such, is vital to a rational, philosophical effort in understanding the nature of the problem at hand.

The summation of the mistake in Nagel's approach towards the mind-body problem is the endeavour to find an objective account of consciousness where none presently exists. Such an attempt, even *if* successful, would prove to be no more than an observation rather than an investigation into the nature of consciousness. To even begin to question that concern, it is necessary that one also develop an understanding of the questions and doubts that subjectivity and objectivity raise. Nagel's use of the terms without significant phenomenological exploration into what they mean, serves as evidence of a philosophical and rational ineptness, undermining his argument.