

In his famous essay “What is it like to be a bat?” Thomas Nagel recognizes a problem of physicalism, namely the subjectivity of qualia. Physicalism claims (in an interpretation that we need for Nagel’s problem) that everything one can know about “being something” can be explained by examining physical processes and states of this something. Nagel states that the physicalist cannot know “everything”, because he must (it seems) leave out the subjective bits. This argument, which I will explain in detail now, shows the incompleteness of the solution to the body-mind-problem put forward by the physicalists.

Let’s start over. The goal of the physicalist must be to explain everything about the minds of human beings – and animals, for that matter – in terms of physics: Flow of energy, movement of particles and so on. The physicalist theory is quite successful in some parts: Neurobiology already has, for example, a detailed picture of the processing taking place when a monkey sees a face and already has some theories about how faces might be recognized, how learning works, and how the brain initiates and controls movement. If the research progresses further (a lot further), we might one day be able to simulate a brain, since we would understand how all of its parts should interact. While a physicalist might be happy with this, Nagel is not. He claims that one part has always been left out of the picture, namely, how it feels to be a certain organism, to sense and act as that organism. It is just not part of the theories which mostly explain what happens, but never how that feels.

Why is the part about “how it feels like” left out? Nagel distinguishes two different kinds of concepts: Objective and subjective ones. The physicalist explanations mentioned above are only about objective concepts and can be verified by anyone. What it “feels like”, on the other hand, is a subjective concept, which cannot be conveyed to others easily. More precisely, it can, if at all, only be conveyed to beings which are very similar, which, talking of sensations, would in principle be able to feel the same. When we study animals with a different sensory apparatus, like Nagel’s example of a bat, no theory at the moment can tell us what the subjective parts of its experiences are like. This is of course an extreme example, the problem applies to human beings as well, although here we generally have a great overlap. But a seeing person, for example, will have difficulties in imagining what the world is like for a blind person and vice versa, and there very probably are details in sensations even between me and you that we would not be able to convey to each other. The point is, in any objective theory about the mind that we have at the time, the subjective character of experience must be excluded – by definition, so to speak.

Nagel now claims that physicalism, since its explanations leave out this central part of a conscious organism, the subjective character of its experiences, its answers are either incomplete or it must have asked the wrong questions. Physicalism as it exists today can therefore (at best) be only part of the whole picture. This, I find very convincing.

The problem that I found most interesting at this point was: What would we lose if we did not explain the subjective character of experiences? Obviously, the picture that physicalism draws would be incomplete in the sense that we would not be able to derive the “feeling” of being a certain organism from the physicalist description of its mental apparatus. Suppose you have the complete knowledge that a physicalist would say you need: All the objective bits about the experience of a certain organism. And suppose physicalism is right in its claim that all there is about mental processes are physical states and processes. Then it might very well be, that the objective knowledge about the organism includes necessary and sufficient conditions for the

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subjective bits to arise. So although you would not be able to derive “how it feels like” to be that organism directly from your knowledge, physicalism might indeed be able to draw the whole picture. I am aware, though, that the conditions mentioned above do not amount to a reduction. One could not derive sentences like “*Feeling A* can be mapped to *B*”, since we have no clue how to describe *B* in objective terms without loss of information.

I would like to finish these thoughts with some Churchland type science fiction. One could imagine an apparatus that transfers the qualia of a modelled organism to our brain, in a way that we not only feel what it would feel for us to be that organism, but how it really feels for it to be itself. That way we would be able to feel ourselves *whether* the model feels something and maybe could reason about whether it makes sense for an organism to feel this way. We could justify or prove wrong the thesis that the objective knowledge about the organism already includes the conditions for its subjective experiences (but of course we wouldn’t be able to prove that the organism really feels that way).

Concluding, I would say that although it would be interesting to have a theory explaining how it feels like to be a certain organism the need for such a theory and how the non-existence of such a theory troubles physicalism too much I can not conceive.

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