

Nagel's "What Is It Like to Be a Bat" Argument against Physicalism

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Nagel, Thomas. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 435–50.

_____. *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Physicalism – the claim that everything is physical – has been the dominant position in philosophy of mind since at least the middle of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, physicalism has long been accused of being unable to account satisfactorily for the qualitative or subjective aspect of experience, for example, the reddishness of one's visual experience of a ripe tomato or the painfulness of one's tactile experience of a sharp object. Many have charged that it is difficult to see how these aspects of experience could be accounted for in solely physical terms. Focusing specifically on the experience that a bat has when using its sonar, Thomas Nagel formulated this charge in a particularly powerful way. His argument is designed to show that subjective facts about experience, which are essential to it, cannot be captured in the objective language of physicalism. Although most philosophers assume that the argument, if successful, would show that physicalism is false, Nagel himself is careful to claim only that we currently lack the conceptual resources to see how physicalism could be true.

I assume we all believe that bats have experience. After all, they are mammals, and there is no more doubt that they have experience than that mice or pigeons have experience. [. . .]

[T]he essence of the belief that bats have experience is that there is something it is like to be a bat. Now we know that most bats (the microchiroptera, to be precise) perceive the external world primarily by sonar, or echolocation, detecting the reflections, from objects within range, of their own rapid, subtly modulated, high frequency shrieks. Their brains are designed to correlate the outgoing impulses with the subsequent echoes, and the information thus acquired enables bats to make precise discriminations of distance, size, shape, motion, and texture comparable to those we make by vision. But bat sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine. This appears to create difficulties for the notion of what it is like to be a bat. [. . .]

Whatever may be the status of facts about what it is like to be a human being, or a bat, or a Martian, these appear to be facts that embody a particular point of view. [. . .]

This bears directly on the mind-body problem. For if the facts of experience – facts about what it is like for the experiencing organism – are accessible only from one point of view, then it is a mystery how the true character of experiences could be revealed in the physical operation of that organism. The latter is a domain of objective facts par excellence – the kind that can be observed and understood from many points of view and by individuals with differing perceptual systems. (Nagel "What Is It," 438, 441, 442)

- P1. Humans cannot experience anything like what it is like for a bat when it is using its sonar.
- P2. Humans cannot imagine anything like what it is like for a bat when it is using its sonar.
- P3. If P1 and P2, then what it is like to be a bat is fundamentally a subjective phenomenon, understood only from a single point a view (namely, the bat's).
- P4. Humans cannot experience anything like what it is like for a bat when it is using its sonar and humans cannot imagine anything like what it is like for a bat when it is using its sonar (conjunction, P1, P2).
 - C1. What it is like to be a bat is fundamentally a subjective phenomenon, understood only from a single point of view (*modus ponens*, P3, P4).
- P5. Physicalism takes the objective point of view.
- P6. If physicalism takes the objective point of view, and what it is like to be a bat is a subjective phenomenon understood from only a single point of view, then physicalism cannot capture what it is like to be a bat.
- P7. Physicalism takes the objective point of view and what it is like to be a bat is fundamentally a subjective phenomenon, understood only from a single point of view (conjunction, C1, P5).

- C2. Physicalism cannot capture what it is like to be a bat (*modus ponens*, P6, P7).
- P8. The fact that experience is subjective is an essential fact about experience.
- C3. The subjectivity of what it is like to be a bat is an essential fact about it (semantic entailment, P8).
- C4. Physicalism cannot capture what it is like to be a bat, and the subjectivity of what it is like to be a bat is an essential fact about it (conjunction, C2, C3).
- P10. If physicalism cannot capture what it is like to be a bat, and that is an essential fact about it, then physicalism cannot capture all the essential facts about experiences.
- C5. Physicalism cannot capture all the essential facts about experiences (*modus ponens*, C4, P10).