

PHILOSOPHY 250 MINDS AND MACHINES ARGUMENT EXTRACTION 2

What Is It Like to Be a Bat?

Reductionism is the practice of analyzing a complex phenomenon such as consciousness, in terms of phenomena at a more fundamental stage to provide an acceptable explanation. Scientific theories make use of objective facts, accessible from any points of view, however the more one approaches subjective facts, the more they move away from their own personal experiences. Nagel describes subjective experiences as one's personal perspective and feelings, and objective experiences as an elimination of subjective perspectives, processed purely based on hard facts (Nagel, p.436). He further argues that the subjective character of an experience is only accessible from the point of view of the one who lives the experience, as even if an outsider detaches themselves from their own point of view, they lose sight of the phenomenon in question. He concludes that reductionism theories fail to address the conscious mental phenomena, labeling it as a poorly understood concept (Nagel, p.436).

Nagel's main argument lies in that there are facts about the conscious experience that are subjective and can only be known from that same subjective perspective, as phenomenal subjective experiences are a special case. It is a rebuttal against physicalism, which reduces mental aspects to the merely physical. Conscious experience exists within an organism when "there is 'something it is to be that organism'" (Nagel, p.436), to see, sense, and feel like that organism. Nagel notes that 'what it's like' is inexpressible in objective terms, since "these could be ascribed to robots or automata that behaved like people though they experienced nothing" (Nagel, p.436). To visualize his argument, he describes the experiences of a bat, and what it is like to be a bat in the inside.

Bats are mammals closely related to humans, as they are proven to also have experience. The argument follows the essence of the belief that bats have conscious experiences, and that there

is something it is like to be a bat. Bats suffer from substandard eyesight and perceive their surroundings through echolocation. Since bats perceive the external world through other means than humans, their form of perception is distant to any sense that human beings possess and operate. Therefore, there is no reason to suppose that their experience is subjectively like the ones we experience. One can only imagine what it would be like for them to behave as a bat, but “if [one tries] to imagine this, [they are] restricted to the resources of [their] own minds” (Nagel, p.439). The mind’s resources are thus inadequate to describe other organisms’ experiences, as it cannot form more than a representational conception of what it is like. The structure and nature of a bat’s mind highly differs from a human’s, making it impossible for a human mind to feel their subjectivity in any way or understanding another organism's own perspective.

Nagel affirms through his thought experiment that there are certain experiences that humans will never grasp, such as the feeling of sensing the surroundings through echolocation, which is simply beyond our understanding. One can only imagine what it would be like for them to behave as a bat, whereas the problem lies in imagining what it’s like to be a bat. We can’t stop being us either, as it wouldn’t be us anymore; “[a]fter all, what would be left of what it was like to be a bat if one removed the viewpoint of the bat?” (Nagel, p.443). To understand the subjective character of experience, Nagel proposes the development of an objective phenomenology independent of imagination. However, the difficulty remains in separating subjectivity. As we know, objectivity can only relay experiences up to a certain point.