# What is it Like to Be a Bat? Nagel on Conscious Experience

In this lesson, we’ll taking a look at one of the most famous philosophy articles from the last 50 years: Thomas Nagel’s “What is it Like to be a Bat” (1974). Along with Searle’s Chinese Room Thought Experiment, Nagel’s argument has helped shape the way philosophers (and computer scientists, psychologists, and others) have thought about the mind and what it experiences. Some philosophers hold that these arguments are irrefutable, while others have held that they rely on psychological tricks to convince readers to agree to unsupported conclusions.

## Reduction, Physicalism, and the Philosophy of Mind

[F]undamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to be that organism – something it is like for the organism. We may call this the subjective character of experience. It is not captured by any of the familiar, recently devised reductive analyses of the mental, for all of them are logically compatible with its absence. It is not analyzable in terms of any explanatory system of functional states, or intentional states, since these could be ascribed to robots or automata that behaved like people though they experienced nothing…I do not deny that conscious mental states and events cause behavior, nor that they may be given functional characterizations. I deny only that this kind of thing exhausts their analysis. Any reductionist program has to be based on an analysis of what is to be reduced. If the analysis leaves something out, the problem will be falsely posed. It is useless to base the defense of materialism on any analysis of mental phenomena that fails to deal explicitly with their subjective character. For there is no reason to suppose that a reduction which seems plausible when no attempt is made to account for consciousness can be extended to include consciousness. Without some idea, therefore, of what the subjective character of experience is, we cannot know what is required of physicalist theory. (Nagel, “What is it Like to be a Bat?”)

**What is reductionism? Physicalism? How do these relate to the philosophy of mind?** In science and philosophy, a **reductionist** account of a phenomenon explains it in terms of something more basic (it “reduces” it). So, for example, when chemists want to explain the properties of a compound like water, they can do so by reference to the chemical *components* of water, namely hydrogen and oxygen. One variety of reductionism that is of special interest to philosophers and scientists is **physicalism** (or **materialism**)**,** which says that *everything that exists can be reduced to the physical.* In philosophy of mind, in particular, this has led most philosophers (and neuroscientists, psychologists, etc.) to reject dualism. Theories like behaviorism, identity theory, and functionalism all attempt to reduce mental phenomenon to physical phenomena. If successful, they would help defend physicalism against the idea that there might be something (a “soul” or “mind”) that is NOT physical.

**Why does Nagel mean by “consciousness” or the “subjective character of experience”? Why does he think this causes problems for reductionist theories of mind?** Nagel thinks that reductionist theories of mind, in their quest to make the world safe for physicalism, have ignored the way that we actually experience the world. That is, Nagel thinks there is a clear difference between the way the world (including our bodies) looks when viewed from the outside (from the perspective of physics) and what it looks like from the inside (when we are having subjective experiences). He thinks that current reductionism theories of mind entirely ignore this aspect of our mental life. So, for example, he (like Searle) thinks that we could build a robot that perfectly meets all the demands of functionalism and behaviorism. However, he argues that, if this robot couldn’t experience the world, it still wouldn’t have a mind. He argues that “without consciousness the mind–body problem would be much less interesting. With consciousness it seems hopeless” (Nagel).

## Thinking about how Bats think

[W]e describe bat sonar as a form of three-dimensional forward perception; we believe that bats feel some versions of pain, fear, hunger, and lust, and that they have other, more familiar types of perception besides sonar. But we believe that these experiences also have in each case a specific subjective character, which it is beyond our ability to conceive. And if there is conscious life elsewhere in the universe, it is likely that some of it will not be describable even in the most general experiential terms available to us. (Nagel, “What is it Like..”)

**What is the point of the bat analogy?** Nagel gives the bat analogy in order to help clarify what exactly it is that he thinks reductionist theories of mind. He begins with the assumption that most of us think that bats have some sort of experience of the world—i.e., that there is something “that it is like” to be a bat. However, Nagel thinks we have almost no way of conceiving of what this is like, since bats are so different from us (and from most other mammals): they are nearly blind, use sonar to navigate, can fly, etc. We can understand (intellectually) that bats can “see” sound waves, and can somehow use this to fly toward insects, but there’s simply nothing in human experience that would allow us imagine what this is like. This “what it is like” is precisely what Nagel is talking about when he refers to “consciousness” or the “subjective character of experience.”

**But who cares about bats? Isn’t this supposed to be about minds (and especially human minds)?** Nagel only chooses bats because they happen to provide an especially clear example of what reductionist theories about mind are missing. However, the general idea—that there are things about other being’s *experience* of the world that we can’t understand from the outside—is one that generalizes. A person who can see can’t actually understand (entirely) what it is like to be blind from birth, and vice versa. Men and women will always fail to imagine *something* about the way the other group experiences the world. This difficulties would become even more pronounced if we ever were to encounter intelligent aliens, who might experience the world in very different ways than we do. Nagel’s basic idea: any adequate theory of mental life has to account for these sorts of “experiential facts,” even if we (by virtue of human limitations) don’t know exactly what these facts are.

**So, what exactly are these “phenomenal facts”? Does this mean we can *never* know what anyone else is experiencing?** Nagel merely wants to claim that there are *some* facts about subjective experience that humans might be unable to understand. However, he does NOT think this is true of all such facts. So, for example, he thinks we can often do quite a good job imagining how the world looks like to someone else. However, our ability to do this depends on how similar this person (or being) is to us. Imagining ourselves into the position of a person of similar age, experience, background, etc. is relatively easy. By contrast, imagining the world from the perspective of a person living 2,000 years ago might be tougher. A chimpanzee would be still more difficult, and a bat (or so Nagel argues) would be incredibly difficult. Nagel also draws a distinction between facts that can be understood from the **objective point of view** (which any being with sufficient intelligence might understand, no matter how different from us they happen to be), and facts that can be understood only from the appropriate **subjective point of view.** These facts require understanding what it is like. Nagel doesn’t think that this is an “either/or” distinction; instead, it is a matter of degree. For example, the facts learned in physics class can be understood just using the objective point of view, while those learned while reading novels (or talking to friends) might require the ability to identify with a person’s (or character’s) subjective experience. Disciplines like sociology or psychology might fall somewhere in the middle.

## Drawing Conclusions

**Why has reductionism worked so well in the rest of science? Why does Nagel think it will fail in the case of the human mind?** Nagel argues that scientific reductionism generally works by abstracting away from any *particular* person’s subjective experience in order to figure out the objective facts that all of these experiences are about. So, for example, scientists reduced “sound” to the idea of “waves” by looking at what all noises—regardless of how they “sounded” to various people—shared. However, in the case of mind, this isn’t possible, since *it is the experience itself that we want to understand.* This means that the reductionist methods that usually work so well (just ignore what it “feels like”) can’t possibly work (or so Nagel claims).

**So, what is Nagel’s conclusion about physicalism?** Nagel doesn’t conclude that physicalism is false, or dualism is true. Instead, he concludes that, while physicalism might be true, we have absolutely no idea *how* it could be true. That is, he thinks we can’t even imagine how our subjective experiences of the world could be adequately explained using the concepts of physics. This is different from other sorts of scientific problems. For example, we don’t (now) understand exactly how each and every type cancer is caused, but we have no problem imagining (sometime in the far future) researchers announcing that they have solved this problem using the latest discoveries in biology, genetics, chemistry, etc.. Nagel thinks the case of minds is very different. For example, it seems unlikely that we could suddenly “understand” what it is like to be a bat merely because of new discoveries about the way bat brains worked, or how their sonar functioned.

**Why does Nagel think we need a method of “objective phenomenology”? How is this method supposed to work?** Theories like behaviorism, identity theory, and functionalism attempt to explain human minds in terms of purely physical properties such as behaviors, brain states, or the instantiation of certain computer program. For the reasons explained above, Nagel thinks these methods fail. While Nagel doesn’t have an alternative theory, he thinks we need to think more deeply about how we can better understand what *particular* minds are like—for example, how the experiences of people with visual or hearing impairments might differ from others. He proposes an **objective phenomenology,** where we listen carefully to what different people have to say about these experiences (and tell them about our experiences), and try to develop *analogies* that will allow people who are different from us to form concepts that will allow them to understand what we might experience. In the (very) long run, Nagel thinks this might open the door for reductive accounts of (some) mental phenomena.

## Review Questions

1. What is reductionism? Physicalism? Why might Nagel’s bat experiment cause problems for these views?
2. How might an advocate of physicalism *defend* her or his position against Nagel’s criticism? Consider a few objections, and then say how Nagel might respond.