

Erik Hoversten
Mind reading response
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Thomas Nagel, *What is it like to be a bat?*

Exegesis

In *What is it like to be a bat*, Thomas Nagel explores the mind-body problem, which can be understood as the challenge of explaining how mental things like ideas are connected to physical things like the human brain. One possible such connection is that of *reduction*, which the Norton editors describe in a footnote as “roughly put, to say that A can be reduced to B is to say that A is nothing over and above B” (p. 403, fn. 1). The way I understand this idea in application to the mind-body problem is that the mind can be reduced to the physical if we can *explain* everything about the mind in purely physical terms. An example of successful reduction is our ability to understand all there is about rainbows in terms of light waves refracting through water droplets in the air.

Nagel thinks that *consciousness* poses a problem for the attempt to reduce the mental to the physical. He thinks that if we try to explain consciousness purely in terms of brain functioning, we will leave out something crucial. Thus, the explanation won’t be complete, and the mental must be something over and above physical stuff.

Nagel’s motivation for this suggestion is his story about the bat. He asks us to try to imagine what it is like for the bat. Crucially, this is not to imagine ourselves if we had wings and echolocation. This is just transferring our own conscious experience into a bat-like context. Instead, we are to attempt to imagine what it is like *for the bat itself*. Nagel maintains, and he thinks we will agree, that this is beyond our imaginative capabilities.

The problem with trying to undertake this task is that it requires us to shift *perspective* from our own human context to that of a bat. Nagel suggests that perspective is an essential element of consciousness, so to shift perspective is to alter consciousness. We can’t imagine what it is like for a bat because that would require us to give up our own consciousness and take on the bat’s. But we can’t give up our consciousness without giving up the very project of explaining things to ourselves.

So, Nagel’s diagnosis of the mind-body problem is that the mind’s perspective is one of its essential elements. And this explains why reduction is going to fail. In general, science and reduction are about widening our perspective, eliminating the specifics of our own situation in order to reach an objective understanding of the thing in question. But the bat example shows that first-person perspective is essential to

fully understanding consciousness. Thus, the very nature of reduction (eliminating first-person perspective) makes it bound to fail when it comes to explaining all there is to consciousness.

Nagel is careful to point out that his idea isn't that physicalism is false, only that perspective can sometimes be crucial to the thing we are investigating. So, if physicalism is to be vindicated, we need a method of characterizing perspective in physical terms. And this, we just don't yet have.

Critique

I find Nagel's argument to be very compelling. I see it as having 2 major premises:

1. Reduction is a matter of moving from a more subjective perspective on something to a more objective perspective. In so moving, one leaves the subjective perspective behind.
2. The first person viewpoint is a subjective perspective that is an essential element of conscious experience.

The conclusion is that reduction cannot hope to explain all of conscious experience. As for the first premise, I don't know if there is another way of understanding reduction than by appealing to perspective shifting. I'm going to leave that for someone else to discuss. In this critique, I'm going to focus on the second premise, and specifically the idea of perspective being an essential *element* of consciousness.

My main question is what *perspective* amounts to. It doesn't seem that we can think of perspective as a *part* of the mind in the way that peanuts are a part of pad thai. Perspective isn't really a thing that you add to something else. Instead, perspective is something that is external to the thing that has the perspective. It is something like a relation between an observer and a thing that they observe. If this is right, then it seems that acknowledging the significance of perspective requires us to acknowledge the observer that has the perspective. And that observer is presumably a mental entity. But then, the challenge for physicalism isn't about capturing perspective, but making sense of the mental thing that has a perspective.

On the other hand, Nagel seems to be saying that consciousness *just is* having a perspective on the world. In this case, maybe we can think of perspective as an added thing in the world. You take some physical stuff, like neural firings in the brain, and add a perspective to it to get something mental.

But now I wonder if equating the essential bit of mentality with a perspective on reality itself reduces the mind too far. When I think of my thoughts and emotions, I tend to think of them as independent things populating the world and interacting with it. I can imagine them extending out beyond me and having an impactful life in the world. Maybe my thoughts originate in my head, but I don't think of them as confined

to that space. The idea of being able to read someone's mind seems to me to require that thoughts can escape one head and enter another.

This idea seems close to what Descartes was talking about in his *Meditations*. He thinks of mental stuff and physical things as two different kinds of *substance* that somehow interact with each other. On Nagel's account, though, we can't think of the mental as independent and able to escape one's head. This is because all that makes something mental is the first-person perspective, which is limited to the head of the individual thinker. If the mental thing tried to escape, it would be severed from the perspective and cease to be mental at all. It would be lost entirely, or at least altered to the point that it couldn't be recognized as the idea it started out as.

I guess my point is that if we think of thoughts as shareable between individuals, then they must have an ability to exist independently of any one perspective. On Nagel's account as I understand it, this independent existence is not possible, and this seems to me to be a point of concern for his perspective based view of consciousness.