

# PHILOSOPHY 101

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# NAGEL ON THE PROBLEM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

# PHYSICALISM

Everything that is or could exist is ultimately physical in nature

# THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM

*Consciousness is what makes the mind-body problem really intractable (435)*

## The "Hard Problem" of Consciousness:

Why do the physical processes that characterize life result in conscious experience?

# WHAT IS CONSCIOUSNESS?

*fundamentally 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 (436).*

# VARIETIES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

1. **Sentience:** being able to discriminate, categorize, and react to environmental stimuli
  2. **Wakefulness:** being awake and capable of attending to something
  3. **Autonomy:** deliberate control of one's behavior
  4. **Introspection:** the internal accessibility of one's mental states
  5. **Communicability:** the reportability of one's mental states
  6. **Phenomenal consciousness:** the first-person experience — what it is like to be something
- Nagel means to indicate consciousness in the sense of (6) — phenomenal experience

# CAN WE REDUCE CONSCIOUSNESS?

*we have at present no conception of what an explanation of the physical nature of a mental phenomenon would be... The most important and characteristic feature of conscious mental phenomena is very poorly understood. Most reductionist theories do not even try to explain it. And careful examination will show that no currently available concept of reduction is applicable to it. Perhaps a new theoretical form can be devised for the purpose, but such a solution, if it exists, lies in the distant intellectual future (436).*



*If physicalism is to be defended, the phenomenological features must themselves be given a physical account. But when we examine their subjective character it seems that such a result is impossible. The reason is that every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view, and it seems inevitable that an objective, physical theory will abandon that point of view (437).*

*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 (442).*

# THE ARGUMENT FROM CONSCIOUSNESS

1. If Physicalism is true then all aspects of reality are amenable to being “given a physical account”
2. Giving a physical account of something means giving an account that is accessible from many different points of view
3. Facts about phenomenal consciousness are accessible from only one point of view
4. There are phenomenal facts (i.e. facts about phenomenal consciousness)
5.  $\therefore$  Physicalism is false (or we can't conceive of how it could be true)

# EXAMINING THE ARGUMENT – VALIDITY

1.  $P \rightarrow A$
2.  $A \rightarrow M$
3.  $C \rightarrow \sim M$
4.  $C$
5.  $\therefore \sim M$  (3, 4, MP)
6.  $\therefore \sim A$  (2, 5, MT)
7.  $\therefore \sim P$  (1, 6, MT)

# EXAMINING THE ARGUMENT – SOUNDNESS

1.  $P \rightarrow A$
2.  $A \rightarrow M$
3.  $C \rightarrow \sim M$
4.  $C$
5.  $\therefore \sim M$  (3, 4, MP)
6.  $\therefore \sim A$  (2, 5, MT)
7.  $\therefore \sim P$  (1, 6, MT)

(2) Giving a physical account of something means giving an account that is accessible from many different points of view

(3) Facts about phenomenal consciousness are accessible from only one point of view

# NAGEL'S "GENERAL DIFFICULTY"

*We appear to be faced with a general difficulty about psycho-physical reduction. In other areas the process of reduction is a move in the direction of greater objectivity, toward a more accurate view of the real nature of things... Experience itself, however, does not seem to fit the pattern. The idea of moving from appearance to reality seems to make no sense here. What is the analogue in this case to pursuing a more objective understanding of the same phenomena by abandoning the initial subjective viewpoint toward them in favor of another that is more objective but concerns the same thing? (444)*

# FACTS & POINTS OF VIEW

1. All (possible) facts are physical facts (assume for *reductio*)
2. Physical facts are objective facts
3. Objective facts are independent of any particular point of view
4. Facts about consciousness depend on particular points of view
5.  $\therefore$  Facts about consciousness are not objective
6.  $\therefore$  Facts about consciousness are not physical
7.  $\therefore$  There are non-physical facts (i.e. (1) is false)

# PHYSICALISM & OBJECTIVITY

- Why assume that all physical facts are objective facts in Nagel's sense?
- Why assume that all objective facts are facts that are independent of any particular point of view?
- Are there alternative conceptions of objectivity?



# PHYSICALISM & ALTERNATIVES

## Physicalism:

Everything that is or could exist is ultimately physical in nature

## Dualism:

Physical things exist but some things that do (or could) exist are not (or are not ultimately) physical in nature (e.g. minds, souls, God)

## Idealism:

Everything that is or could exist is ultimately *mental* in nature

