

# Philosophy 101

9.5.13

# Consciousness & Physicalism

## 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:** The 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 experiential aspect of what it is like to be something

## What is Consciousness?

- Being conscious in senses (1)-(5) are all compatible with purely physical ways of characterizing the phenomena
- It is less clear that (6) — phenomenal consciousness — can be given a purely physical characterization

# What is Consciousness?

*Why do we need a physical characterization of consciousness?*

- Characterizing consciousness in physical terms makes it less mysterious/spooky
- Required for worldviews that understand reality in fundamentally physical terms

# Physicalism

**Physicalism:** Everything that could exist is either physical or depends on the physical

## Reductionism About the Mental

*Deducing, explaining, or otherwise showing a dependence relation to exist between one set of properties, facts, or concepts, and another privileged set of properties, facts, or concepts.*

## Reductionism About the Mental

- Features of conscious experience (subject matter to be reduced)
- Matter/energy organized according to physical laws (reduction base)

*Can we deduce, explain, or otherwise show that conscious experience depends on matter/energy operating under physical laws?*

*If the answer is “yes” then we have “reduced” or “given a reduction” of conscious experience in terms of physics*



## Nagel on the Problem of Consciousness

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

*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).*

## Nagel on the Problem 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:** The 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 experiential aspect of what it is like to be something
- Nagel means to indicate consciousness in the sense of (6)  
— phenomenal experience

## Nagel on the Problem of 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).*

## Why is Consciousness a Problem?

*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).*

## Why is Consciousness a Problem?

*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).*

## Nagel's Argument

- ① Physicalism requires that all aspects of reality be 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  $\therefore$  Facts about phenomenal consciousness are not amenable to a physical account

## Is Physicalism False?

*What moral should be drawn from these reflections, and what should be done next? It would be a mistake to conclude that physicalism must be false...It would be truer to say that physicalism is a position we cannot understand because we do not at present have any conception of how it might be true (446)*

## Not False but Mysterious

- ① Physicalism requires that all aspects of reality be 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  $\therefore$  We cannot understand how physicalism could be true because we cannot understand how it is compatible with the existence of phenomenal consciousness



## Examining the Argument

- 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

*Why think that the notion of a “point of view” is relevant to the truth of physicalism?*