

Philosophy 101

Nagel on Physicalism & Consciousness

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Review

Physicalism & Reduction

Physicalism: Everything that is or could exist is ultimately physical in nature

Reduction: 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.

Reducing Consciousness

- The Physicalist wants to reduce features of conscious experience (the reduction target) to matter/energy organized according to physical laws (the reduction base)

The “Hard Problem” of Consciousness: Why do the physical processes that characterize life result in conscious experience?

Nagel's Argument

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:** 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

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).

Why is Consciousness a Problem?

- What is it about consciousness that presents a problem for physicalism?

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 understand how it could be true)
- Is the argument valid?

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

- What premises might we reject?
- 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?

Facts & Points of View

- ① Physicalism entails that all facts are physical facts
- 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

The "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)

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?

Conceptions of Objectivity

- necessary for conceivability
- absolute, not relative to any perceiver
- independent, "there anyway"
- not from any particular point of view