

# Philosophy 101

## Consciousness & Physicalism

May 20, 2014

# Review

# Quiz

- ① What is a statement?
- ② What is a valid argument?
- ③ What is a sound argument?
- ④ Is this argument valid?
  - $P \rightarrow Q$
  - $Q$
  - $\therefore P$

# Physicalism & Reduction

# Metaphysics

- What kinds of things exist?
- What is fundamental?

# Physicalism

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

# Why be a Physicalist?



# Why be a Physicalist?

- ① Explanation
- ② Causal closure

# Why be a Physicalist?

## The Argument from Explanation

- ① Our physical theories are highly successful at predicting and controlling our experience of the world
- ② The best explanation of why physical theory is so successful is that it correctly describes the nature of reality
- ③ If our physical theories correctly describe the nature of reality then physicalism is true
- ④  $\therefore$  Physicalism is true

# Why be a Physicalist?

**Causal Closure:** Every event that has a cause has *only* a physical cause (or physical causes)

# Alternatives to Physicalism

- 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

# Reductionism

# Reductionism

*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

# Reducing Consciousness

- Reduce features of conscious experience to matter/energy organized according to physical laws (reduction base)
  - Can we deduce, explain, or otherwise show that conscious experience depends solely 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



# Reducing Consciousness

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

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

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*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 on the Problem of Consciousness

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- 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).*

# The Argument from Consciousness

# 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  $\therefore$  Facts about phenomenal consciousness are not amenable to a physical account
- 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

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



# Facts & Points of View

## 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”

## 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?
- 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

## Questions about Nagel on Consciousness

## Question 1

Nagel's discussion of consciousness concerns which of the following notions:

- A. *Wakefulness*
- B. *Sentience*
- C. *Phenomenal experience*
- D. *Autonomy*



## Question 2

Nagel intends his argument to show that physicalism is ...

- A. *True*
- B. *False*
- C. *Mysterious*

## Question 3

Nagel's argument concerning consciousness crucially depends on which of the following?

- A. *Primary qualities*
- B. *The accessibility of objective entities from different points of view*
- C. *Bats*
- D. *Secondary qualities*