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Intro to Philosophy of Mind

Paper 1

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Anti-Physicalism and the Mind

The mind-body problem is an oft debated but seldom agreed upon idea in philosophy. For the vast majority of philosophers, there are two sides to the argument. There are outliers, but generally there are two-widely held viewpoints; physicalism and anti-physicalism. They both imply two very different views of the mind-body problem. The physicalist argument centers around the premise that mental phenomena, either are or depend on, physical phenomena. Countering that is the anti-physicalist argument, which states that not *all* mental phenomena depend, or are, physical phenomena. Many different philosophers have debated this issue, but a small number of arguments stand out. One of the more convincing anti-physicalist arguments was made by Thomas Nagel. His argument, published in *The Philosophical Review* in October of 1974, was titled “What Is It Like To Be a Bat?” and discussed the mind-body problem by asking the reader the same question that titles the article; What Is It Like to Be a Bat? To an anti-physicalist like Nagel, we simply do not know what it is like to be a bat. We may *think* that we know, he argues, but we are limited by our own minds. We can think about what it is like to flap wings, we can picture what it is like to hang by our feet from a cave, we can envision ourselves using echolocation. However, we cannot know what it is like for a *bat* to do all these things. That is the crux of Nagel’s argument. Our brains simply do not posses the necessary structures to do this. Nagel states,“But bat sonar, though clearly a form or perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we posses, and there is no reason to suppose that is is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine” (Nagel 438). We can imagine the sensations of other organisms with mind, but we cannot experience them. Subjectively, we are missing out. If we cannot experience the sensations of other beings with mind, then we are unable to say how the physical experience in that organism occurs, which is the center of Nagel’s argument.

Nagel also touches on another important philosophical aspect, specific to the physicalist argument—reduction. A reductionist would say, simply, that all mental phenomena can be reduced to physical phenomena. Nagel asserts that the more we reduce something, the more objective it becomes. When something becomes more objective, it becomes easier to describe in less specific terms. Nagel admits there are things that are better to be described objectively, like lightening. However, he also goes to say there are things that certain things must be experienced from a point of view, because otherwise, describing it objectively is complicated and does not make much sense. “It is difficult to understand what could be meant by the *objective* character of an experience, apart from the particular point of view from its subject apprehends it” (Nagel 443). Nagel asserts that this causes a problem, more specifically a problem with reduction. If we reduce everything, then everything becomes objective. As Nagel puts it, “We describe it not in terms of the impressions it makes on our senses, but in terms of its more general effects and of properties detectable by means other than the human senses.” (Nagel 444). The issue Nagel takes with the reduction idea is that, the further a subjective view is taken from subjectivity and closer towards objectivity, we are losing “the real nature of the phenomenon” (Nagel 445). This objective view point may work in certain situations, but Nagel says for experience, a reductionist view cannot work. Additionally, if everything was described from an objective view point, everything described would be lacking qualia, or the qualitative properties of an experience. These are essentially the sensations one feels during an experience. These can be experienced from a non-reduced, subjective point of view. Nagel concludes his paper with a rather obvious argument—there is simply no idea if physicalism is true, and even less of an idea of how to prove it. “We do not have the beginnings of a conception of how it might be true” (Nagel 447). Indeed, it would be extremely difficult to prove the idea of physicalism.

In conclusion, Nagel’s paper, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” offers very solid points contributing to the idea that anti-physicalism is about mind. The bat phenomenology being the center point of the paper, Nagel reasons that the because we cannot subjectively feel others experiences in mind, we cannot reduce the mental into the physical. In the case of the bat, we cannot feel what the bat feels, we can only imagine what the bat is feeling, leaving us with a barrier in the subjective experiences of not only the bats, but every other organism with mind. Certain experiences can be objectively described, and may be better off that way, but subjective experiences must be felt. Only through a single view point can we subjectively describe an experience. All in all, Nagel offered several strong points on why anti-physicalism is about mind, as it ultimatel should be.