

LSU PHIL 4941 / Spring 2016 / John Protevi

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Lecture notes on Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like To Be A Bat?" in Chalmers 2002, p 219-226

Cness makes mind-body problem intractable. Reductionists tend to pick easy analogies from history of science of old ideas reduced to new material terms (e.g., genes are really DNA stretches) but they miss what makes cness special (its subjective character). (cf. Strawson on the easy models of emergence: you have to make sure you have correctly specified the target to be reduced, but that's what reductionists are missing.) In Chalmers' terms they are solving easy problem: giving neural correlates of functional cness, but missing hard problem: why is there a subjective feel at all? It doesn't have a function so it's not amenable to functional analysis.

Nagel introduces the "what it is like *for* the organism" language. This is missed by functional analysis, which is compatible with zombies / robots. He doesn't deny you can attribute causality to mental states or give a functional analysis. It's just that there will be something irreducible to those analyses: the subjective aspect. As that's not part of the target, the reduction problem is badly posed. And you can't just "extend" a functional analysis to include non-functional cness.

Now cness is not like "phenomenal effects" of say, lightning (the seen flash) that can be reduced or accounted for by scientific account of visual perception. Rather, cness is "necessarily connected with a single point of view" (a 1st person view, a "for itself") that is going to be lost when giving a 3rd person, objective, explanation of what it is "in itself."

So, let's use bats as an example. They are close enough to us for us to assume that they have experience, there is something it is like to be them, but they are far enough away in sensory setup that we would never be able to (sympathetically) inhabit that perspective. We can't walk a mile in their shoes. We might be able to imagine what it would be like for us to fly at night but that wouldn't be really close enough to what it is like for a bat to live a bat way of life. There's no way for us to project ourselves into a becoming-bat.

We can guess from their structure and behavior that they have types of experience – fears, lusts, joys – but not what they are like from the inside.

So we are to bats as aliens are to us: unable to imagine / sympathetically inhabit, but no reason to deny there is a subjective experience we cannot capture.

Nagel's realism about subjective experience that we cannot sympathetically / imaginatively inhabit brings him to say there are facts beyond human concepts and thus that there are truths of propositions not expressible in human language. The upshot of that here is that subjective experiences embody a particular point of view. This is not individual privacy or idiosyncrasy, but a type: we can sympathetically inhabit the individual point of view of those sufficiently similar to us.

This bears on the mind-body problem: that kind of sympathetic transposition into someone else's first person perspective is excluded from third-person explanations of physical structure, which, as objective, can be understood by us with regard to bat echolocation, by Martian scientists with regard to human sensori-motor coordination, and so forth. So a Martian scientist could understand the referent of the human concept "lightning" but not the place lightning plays in our experience or the meaning of the concept "lightning" for us.

"Objectivity is a direction in which the understanding can travel" – heading in the direction of the "in itself," moving from appearance to reality. So that's fine when we're talking about reducing lightning to electricity. But you can't reduce "experience" as that's essentially tied to how things appear to a subject inhabiting a species-typical point of view. You move from appearance to reality by reducing sound to waves in a medium, but you don't thereby reduce the human or animal point-of-view by which sound is experienced by those species – its "phenomenal form."

Nagel is not saying physicalism is false; what he's saying is that we can't understand the position because we don't know how it might be true. We don't know how to evaluate the identity claim in "mental states are brain states" because we can't understand how the "two referential paths might converge," and so we are left with an "air of mysticism."

Right now, we can't do more than imaginatively take up a position; what we need is an "objective phenomenology" of the "structural features of perception" that are accessible to objective description.