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Nagel, Jackson, and Physicalism

by Sarah Huizar

Physicalism is the assertion that the world is comprised solely of material matter. All things are grounded in physical truths, and governed by physical processes. Thus, everything, including mental states, can be described by purely objective means. Frank Jackson and Thomas Nagel are dissatisfied with this physicalist view of the mind. This is because it does not account for subjective experience, something that human beings universally and intuitively feel they have. To express this sentiment, Frank Jackson and Thomas Nagel each perform their own thought experiment, designed to bring attention to this “what it’s like” aspect of the mind and its functions. In this paper, I will discuss the physicalist view of the mind in greater depth before introducing Jackson and Nagel’s objections to it. A close examination of their thought experiments will reveal the significance of subjective experience to mental states. Ultimately, we will find that by appealing to our intuitive understanding of subjective experience, Jackson and Nagel have succeeded in exposing the inadequacy of the physicalist view of the mind.

In “The Nature of the Mind,” philosopher David Armstrong asks what it means to think, perceive, feel, and believe (Armstrong 259). He concludes that the answer to this question must be rooted in modern science, for it is the only field where people have consistently reached intellectual consensus on issues. Science is the only subject in which things can be certain, or at least very nearly so. For this reason, he asserts, we should use physical science, specifically molecular biology, to give a complete account of man and the mind in purely “physico-chemical terms” (Armstrong 260). This physicalist account of the mind is based on the view that the world is made solely of concrete, scientific facts. Man, accordingly, is nothing but a physico-chemical mechanism that reacts to this material world (Armstrong 260). Hence, physicalism seeks an objective

definition of mental states based entirely on physical science. Armstrong states, “Thought...is something within the person which, in suitable circumstances brings about speech...I believe this is a true account of what we mean by a mental state” (262). The issue with this statement is that it disregards thought that does not result in action. It ignores the internal aspects of thought and feeling. Thought is not merely latent when it is not in “suitable circumstances,” for it is generally agreed that it does in fact *feel like* something to think, perceive, feel, and believe. That is, thought exists as an internal experience, even if it does not bring about action. The reason Armstrong’s conclusion is so dissatisfying is that it does not take into account this subjective aspect of mental states.

Jackson expresses this subjective quality of mental states in his essay, “What Mary Didn’t Know.” In it, he asks us to consider a situation in which a girl, Mary, is confined to a black and white room her entire life. She is educated with black and white books and through lectures on a black and white television. Through this education, Mary learns all there is to know about every conceivable physical fact in the world, from every scientific discipline. Thus, she has complete knowledge of the material world (Jackson 320). This includes of course, the physical science behind vision, light, and color. A physicalist, Jackson explains, would claim that Mary knows everything there is to know. One day, Mary is released from the black and white room, and is exposed to color for the first time in her life. Jackson asserts what he believes to be an obvious and indisputable truth—that Mary has acquired new knowledge from this experience. She has acquired knowledge of the experience of others (Jackson 321). Though Mary had perfect knowledge of every physical fact, she had not experienced color as others had. Thus, while she had learned all about how the eye functions to perceive color, she only learned *what it was actually like* for others to perceive color when she was released from the room. In other words, Mary knew everything there was to know about color in scientific terms, but when she saw color for herself, she experienced something that she previously had no

knowledge of. This “what it’s like” aspect can only be described as subjective experience. It cannot be defined in any objective or scientific way, yet it is still knowledge. If one is ignorant of this firsthand experience, then one lacks this particular piece of knowledge. Mental-states then, seem to have a subjective element that is not explained or allowed by a physicalist definition of the nature of the mind.

To better understand the significance of subjective experience to true knowledge of mental states, it is helpful to try to imagine oneself in a body unlike one’s own. Nagel does this in his essay, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” Before introducing his thought experiment, Nagel explains that the real problem with physicalist theories is that they do not shed any light on the mind-body problem. That is, they do not even attempt to explain “the most important and characteristic feature of consciousness” (Nagel 311). Armstrong, when providing his definition of thought, said that it was “something within the person which, in suitable circumstances brings about speech” (262). As stated above, this does nothing to explain what thought is when it is not in suitable circumstances. Nagel goes on to explain that, at the most basic level, “the fact that an organism has consciousness means that there is something it is like to *be* that organism... something it is like *for* that organism” (Nagel 311). Thus, to have consciousness is to have subjective experience. Nagel argues that, because the physicalist rejects subjective experience as necessary for a true understanding of the mind, we currently cannot conceive of what an explanation of the physical nature of a mental state would be (311).

In order to further demonstrate the importance of this subjective experience to consciousness, Nagel employs the example of a bat. The bat, he believes, is a solid example because it is fundamentally different from us, yet we still believe that it has experience; there is something it is like to be a bat (Nagel 312). We know bats use sonar, or echolocation as a form of perception that is very different from our own. We could learn everything there is to learn about

sonar and about the bat’s anatomy and physical experiences. Just as Mary knows every physical fact about the world, we could know every physical fact there is to know about bats. We could even use all our knowledge of bats to try and imagine what it would be like for us to use echolocation, to have wings and webbed feet and a furry body. Would we know then, what it is like to be a bat? Nagel’s answer is no. I can imagine what it is like for *me* to be a bat, he says, but that does not tell me what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat (Nagel 313). Just as Mary lacks knowledge about the experience of those who have been exposed to color, we lack knowledge of the experience of bats. This knowledge that we lack has nothing to do with the physical world, or with scientific truths. It is knowledge based entirely in subjective experience. We can only understand things in terms of our own sensory perception. We cannot possibly know what it is truly like to be a bat so long as we are human. We have a wealth of scientific knowledge that can allow us to understand more *about* bats, but we will never understand what it is like to *be* a bat. Similarly, a true understanding of human mental states cannot be attained solely through study of physical processes, but must also be explained by subjective experience.

How then, could we understand the world to be entirely physical? Armstrong says in “The Nature of the Mind,” those who reject the view that we can give a complete account of man and his mental states in physical terms usually reject it for philosophical, or non-scientific reasons (259). But this is only because science is incapable of explaining subjective experience, a crucial property of the mental state. To this, Armstrong might respond by saying that we can reach no consensus on subjective experience, because it is different for all people. But the fact that our experiences are all different is precisely the point. And while it is true that we cannot reach any consensus on exactly what this “what it’s like” aspect is, we *can* reach an agreement that it is something we all have. Armstrong might then respond to the problem of subjectivity simply by asserting that we have no better way to reach any definitive conclusion about the

nature of man, which is the ultimate goal of studying the mind and mental states. He must consider though, that as attractive as finding one clear answer might be, the question of the nature of the mind might not be so simple. As Nagel so aptly puts it, “Philosophers share the general human weakness of explanations of what is incomprehensible in terms suited for what is familiar and well understood, though entirely different” (311). It is difficult for us to understand consciousness because it is so tied to subjective experience, which, by definition, cannot be understood in scientific terms. Although physical processes can help us understand mental states, they can only help us understand them to a point. Refusal to also acknowledge subjective experience yields an incomplete picture of the nature of the mind and mental states.

Armstrong acknowledges that science cannot tell us about God or morality or justice. Why then, should it be able to tell us about something as complex as consciousness, something that is so undeniably unique to every living thing that experiences it? In other words, the question of the nature of the mind may not have one simple truth. If the physicalist wants to employ scientific reason, he should ask a scientific question. Nagel and Jackson’s thought experiments do not deny that mental states cause behavior, and function to perform physical events. Rather, their experiments demonstrate that the human mind does *more* than this. Both experiments reveal the limitations of objective knowledge. If we are to gain a complete understanding of the nature of the mind, it is essential to look beyond science, and recognize that subjective experience cannot be separated from the mental state. Thus, physicalism can give neither a full account of the mind, nor an explanation of the true nature of man.

Works Cited

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In this essay Sarah is careful to avoid a major pitfall of philosophy papers – an inadequate or burdensome summary – and instead takes multiple philosophical ideas to support an understanding and objection to the physicalist view of the mind. This paper is an exemplary model of a philosophy paper – summary, argument, counter-argument, conclusion – and incorporates each necessary aspect while presenting a clear and thorough understanding of the topics at hand. In incorporating summarized examples of both Nagel and Jackson’s arguments Sarah avoids a heavy handed summary and instead ties in her examples directly to the point she wishes to explore. This not only directs the reader to her purpose, but leaves the reader with a clear outline of where the paper is headed and how each philosopher’s arguments are taken into account in her objection. In analyzing the counter-argument to Jackson and Nagel, Sarah gives adequate room to explain this point, yet leaves the reader with a clear sense of how this argument still presents dilemma’s to Jackson and Nagel. Overall, the essay is well balanced and incorporates a smooth underlying current along which the reader is drawn into the essay and gains a clear picture of both the objections and final conclusion Sarah makes.

-Tori Couch, Writing Center Consultant