Consciousness

Phil 255
Disclaimer

☐ What we are talking about?
  ☐ Do we mean awareness (e.g., awake vs. asleep)?
  ☐ Qualia?
  ☐ Noticeability (i.e. conscious as opposed to sub-conscious)?
  ☐ Introspection?

☐ Often terms aren’t defined before launching into a discussion, of consciousness, some dismiss talk of ‘consciousness’ as use of the ‘C’ word.

☐ Sweeping claims about consciousness are difficult to verify or adjudicate if we don’t know what the subject matter is.

☐ This discussion is peppered with my skepticism about some of the recent claims in philosophy of mind about consciousness.
Here is the Merriam Webster definition:

Main Entry: consciousness; Function: noun; Date: 1632

1 a: the quality or state of being aware especially of something within oneself  
b: the state or fact of being conscious of an external object, state, or fact  
c: AWARENESS; especially: concern for some social or political cause

2: the state of being characterized by sensation, emotion, volition, and thought: MIND

3: the totality of conscious states of an individual

4: the normal state of conscious life <regained consciousness>

5: the upper level of mental life of which the person is aware as contrasted with unconscious processes
The term is used in a wide variety of ways.

Scientific experiments have attempted to get at some aspects.

- E.g., patterns of EEG changes during sleep and waking have shown that specific kinds of wave activity can be associated with certain kinds of unconscious (i.e., sleeping) states.
- There are different patterns for deep sleep vs. REM sleep, so different degrees (or types) of unconsciousness are apparent.
- The mechanisms of sleep have not been pinned down, but progress is being made.
- For this aspect, at least, understanding consciousness is closely related to understanding how the brain works (as expected by a materialist).
Other kinds of experiments also suggest the relevance of understanding the brain to understanding consciousness.

- the effects of drugs on consciousness; the effects of diseases and injuries on consciousness; psychological studies of unconscious effects (e.g., priming); electrophysiological studies (single electrode) of the relation between reports of awareness of the stimuli and neural firing.

- People are considered dead when they have suffered “brain death”; i.e., cessation of function in consciousness-supporting brain areas.

- Crick and Koch, have argued a scientific understanding of consciousness is a search for the NCC.

- One way of understanding the question we will be concerned with is whether or not the NCC is all there is to consciousness.
Written in 1974; issues resuscitated by Chalmers in the 90s.

Terminological issues: Physicalism vs Materialism

- Physicalism (epistemological): true knowledge could only be gained using observer independent vocabulary

- Materialism (metaphysical): everything there is is matter

Recently, physicalism is sometimes taken as the view that all causes are physical causes (a metaphysical claim that follows from materialism)

Nagel has the first definition in mind

May not consistently hold when examining his conclusions
Nagel raises a number of complex issues including:

- the uniqueness of mental/physical reduction;
- the nature of explanation (including the other minds problem);
- difficulties involved in making identity claims;
- the limits on possible human knowledge;
- appropriate scientific methodology for studying the mind.

Let’s consider each of these in a bit more detail.
Mental/physical reduction

- Discussion is aimed at showing that the mental cannot be reduced to the physical.
- Nagel thinks that any physicalist description of a mental state will necessarily miss some aspect of that state of the world.
- Nagel’s position does not seem compatible with even token identity (is anti-physicalism to be anti-third-person description or anti-all causes are physical).
- Says reductionist euphoria is from a poor analysis of the problem.
- No current cases of reduction are analogous to mind/body reduction.
  - Because of the centrality of the subjective experience.
  - Notes that any of the reductive strategies employed are logically compatible with the absence of the subjective.
Mental/physical reduction

- “if physicalism is to be defended, the phenomenological features must themselves be given a physical account”
- these features are independent of physical features
- calls himself a “realist” about the subjective domain
- Nagel suggests reduction lessens our dependence on a particular viewpoint; i.e., it makes us more objective.
- Subjective experience doesn’t warrant objectification
- “[subjectivity] is the essence of the internal world”
Problems

☐ Nagel doesn’t consider the example of the reduction of “life” to biochemical processes

☐ The reason this is relevant because many people thought that life, the vital powers, were independent of physical processes

☐ Still a disanalogy, as life itself is not? a subjective phenomena

☐ How do we tell objective from subjective phenomena?

☐ Nagel provides a number of arguments for the uniqueness of mental/physical reduction

☐ Must be careful that for uniqueness is not cover for arguments from lack of imagination
Identity claims

- Suggests a criticism of Place’s analysis of ‘ises’
- Ignoring constraints the left- and right- and sides of the ‘is’
- Namely, there must be “referential paths” to each that we could understand as converging
- “The idea how a mental and physical term might refer to the same thing is lacking, and the usual analogies with theoretical identification in other fields fail to supply it” (p. 169).
- He here compares a pre-socratic philosopher offering the ‘mass is energy’ statement to Davidson’s ‘mind is matter’ statement.
- We have no conceptual tools for understanding such a statement.
- Butterfly/caterpillar analogy
Problems

- What about the life analogy?
  - Referred to ‘life’ using a variety of intuitive conditions on picking out living things.
  - Picked out things using biochemical constraints, and found that the latter satisfied (most) of our intuitions about the former and adopted the identity.

- This analogy seems to hold very well for mind/matter identity.

- Are we really as ignorant about the physical substrate of mental processes as pre-Socratics were about mass and energy?

- We have at least started collecting data on conscious-relevant brain processing.

- The butterfly analogy is misleading because no one is making the claim that brain processes cause or ‘turn into’ mental processes.
How can we suppose that physical explanations will be explanations of subjective experience?

To explain to me what it is like to be a bat, you have to get me to extrapolate from my experience to that of a bat.

Problems

1) that would only get me to know what it is like for me to be a bat (not for a bat to be a bat);

2) extrapolation is only useful 'nearby' and gets arbitrary when comparing very different systems.
Problems

- Nagel doesn’t offer any suggestions as to what an ‘account of subjective experience’ would amount to.
- What *would* count as an explanation of subjective experience?
- If there are no criteria, maybe we can have no such explanation at all(?)
- Equivocation on ‘point of view’
  - Sometimes no objective language will help explain the first person point of view.
  - But Nagel then claims that this is true for ‘types’. I.e. that I can know your mind but not a bat’s.
  - Extrapolation allows inter-subjective transfer of ‘point-of-view’; why can we not then expect a science of such facts?
Problems

- Nagel provides no criteria for how to draw the line between subjectively accessible and inter-subjectively accessible
- He needs that line to avoid *solipsism* and solve the *other minds* problem.
- He even claims: “one person can know or say of another what the quality of the other’s experience is”
- Bach Y Rita experiments seem to contradict Nagel
- Nagel admits that “it is very difficult to say in general what provides evidence of (consciousness)” (p. 160)
- Perhaps this admission is more important than he lets on
Limits on knowledge

- We should expect there to be things beyond our conceptual capacities.
- If the plague had wiped everyone out before Cantor came along, there still would have been transfinite numbers.
- We have to realize that there might well be humanly inaccessible facts.
- We may not have the conceptual structure necessary to understand theories of the subjective.
Problems

- Nagel needs two arguments here:
  - One to show that there is some set of facts that we can never know (‘mysterianism’)
  - The second to show that facts about subjective experience lie in that set

- If we take facts to be descriptions of relations between objects, the claim seems too strong

- Not possibly describable (given infinite time?, in a completely productive system?, etc.)

- No reasons given for the second argument (except perhaps the original thesis, which means this can’t support that thesis).
Method for studying mind

- Suggests that we should arrive at an “objective phenomenology”
- Goal is to provide clear and careful descriptions of the subjective character of experience.
- This would allow us to share the subjectivity of experience as much as possible
Problems

- Either subjective experience is mysterious or it is not
- If not mysterious, then either it is all or partially accessible by other subjects
- If subjective experience is mysterious, then no inter-subjective description will do (including this one).
- If it is not mysterious, then physicalism will do, because
  - If subjective experience is completely accessible by other subjects, then physicalism will do.
  - If subjective experience is partially accessible by other subjects, then the part that is accessible can be so with physicalism
- His proposal doesn’t seem helpful (recall introspectionism)
The ‘very strong intuition’ behind Nagel’s paper, is that the subjective/objective divide is enormous.

All of science is focussed on just one part of that divide and has no (little) hope of shedding any light on the other.

The same was said by the ‘vitalists’.

Lyons suggests consciousness is both epistemologically and metaphysically subjective.

My pain can only be known by me (epistemology).

My pain “only ever exists as a feeling” to me (metaphysical).

But, the ontological claim begs the question. If pains just are neural states, then it is false.
Discussion

- What is most evident from the paper?
  - That the subjective/objective divide is unclear, perhaps
  - Sometimes ‘subjective’ is inter-subjective and sometimes not
  - Sometimes it is an informational relation between an observer from a literal point of view, sometimes not

- Question begging is also a constant problem
  - the ‘absent qualia’ kinds of arguments
  - arguments about the unknowability of subjective states
  - claims about metaphysical subjectivity
Thought

- Can this analysis be applied to non-mental phenomena? (I.e. is it too powerful)
- What is truly objective?
- Don’t all descriptions rest on subjective (particular point of view) descriptions?
- If descriptions of mental phenomena are no different, the mystery is less interesting.