

The Subjective Character of Experience

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Thomas Nagel's efforts have come to symbolize the heartfelt resistance to a scientific orthodoxy that would demystify our everyday interpretation of behavior by viewing mind and consciousness as simply surface manifestations of micro-physical structures. Although I think that Nagel is quite right in his belief that physical facts and subpersonal levels of explanation cannot completely represent the inner side of life, what I argue is that the perspective that Nagel would have us adopt does not really fare much better—that Nagel's argument for subjectivity is so loosely knit that it in no way presents a serious threat to physicalist dogma. Even more damaging, Nagel's inattention to the depth and range of conscious processes, as well as to processes which are systematically linked to consciousness (e.g., how memory works), only ends up making the subject of consciousness a series of primitive experiences while reducing its status to a position that is not that far removed from the scientific perspective he tends to hold suspect.

Much has been made of Thomas Nagel's belief that to undergo an experience is for there to be something it is like to be the subject of that experience. This should come as no great surprise. Nagel's efforts have come to symbolize, almost heroically, the heartfelt resistance to a scientific orthodoxy that would demystify our everyday interpretation of behavior by viewing mind and consciousness as simply surface manifestations of micro-physical structures. This is not to say that Nagel offers us only an apologia for common doctrine or a warmed-over argument for a noumenal self. Nothing as familiar as this would seem to be the case. Rather, it would seem that Nagel's intent lies between (1) reproaching the current extant model of the mind for failing to deal with what is meant by the having of a point of view, and (2) providing a way of meeting the challenge of science, especially the computer sciences, by grounding what constitutes a subject in the concept of a sentient being.

Let me lay the first stone by saying that I think Nagel is correct in his suspicion of the "scientific image," at least as it was originally conceived, to adequately deal with "inward" things like secondary qualities or whatever. Moreover, I think Nagel is quite right in his belief that physical facts and subpersonal levels of explanation cannot completely represent the inner side of life; the fact that the person as a single logical entity has meager standing within

an activity that is primarily concerned with cataloging the kinds of entities or events that populate the universe makes it difficult to see how a strict scientific account can handle the uniqueness and particularity of the subjective character. What I would argue in this paper, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, is that the perspective that Nagel would have us adopt does not really fare much better; that is, that regardless of all the hoopla that has come down, Nagel's argument for subjectivity is so loosely knit that it in no way presents a serious threat to physicalist dogma. Even more damaging perhaps, Nagel's inattention to the depth and range of conscious processes, as well as to processes which are systematically linked to consciousness (e.g., how memory works), only ends up making the subject a series of primitive experiences and reducing its status to a position that is not that far removed from the scientific perspective he tends to hold suspect.

Nagel's Subjectivity

It is important to note, if only in the interest of fairness, that Nagel never really takes a firm position on the nature of subjectivity; only that "no matter how the form may vary, the fact that an organism has conscious experience at all means, basically, that there is something it is like to be that organism" (Nagel, 1974, p. 436). Although there is good reason for being less than satisfied with Nagel's lack of commitment to articulating subjective experience, I doubt if we can judge him too harshly for this side-stepping; not only are intrinsic descriptions hard to come by, but Nagel makes it quite clear from the start that his objective is not to explain how mental and physical properties relate (not unlike his functionalist counterpart), only to convince us that any attempt to objectify the subjective character of experience will at best lead to partial understanding. This is not to suggest that Nagel leaves us completely forsaken with no word to say on this count. Certainly, he has little trouble providing a *via negativa* of what subjective experience is not. It is surely not anything that can be analyzed in terms of physical operations and functional states; yet it is not anything that can be regarded as non-physical either (viz., a Cartesian Ego). What it is, simply put, is something "very peculiar" which we are simply "unequipped to think about" (Nagel, 1974, p. 449).

What I think is important here is that even though we are not furnished with a solid explanation of subjectivity, we are presented, no matter how obliquely, with an argument that looks upon subjectivity as being a direct and unjointed acquaintance with one's mind. This is brought out quite clearly in a more recent work by Nagel (1983) where introspection tends to be perceived as a "centerless" and impersonal representation of the world which has nothing to do with the nature of mental states; that is to say, that any attempt to place the particularity of an experience under general concept will only succeed in relinquishing its subjective character. There is simply no such thing as a subject

of a concept. Or as Nagel puts it: "The self that appears to the subject seems to disappear under external analysis" (Nagel, 1983, p. 201). I assume that what Nagel has in mind here is that the natural level of subjectivity is intuitional and does not involve receiving a form established by something apart from oneself (viz., objective knowledge); that on the inside the subjective character of experience, like a signal conducted along nerve fibers, is a simple and ungeneralizable phenomena which does not admit of evaluation or degree. The essential quality of a subject, to take a page out of Kripke (1972), is its "immediate phenomenological quality" (p. 340). In contrast to the variation and diversity which characterize intelligence, a creature is either conscious or it is not—there are no borderline cases. Those that have it are beings that it is like something to be. Those that do not (e.g., rocks and vegetables) are "objects" with no inner life or point of view of their own.

Now I believe that there is good reason to stand behind Nagel's conviction that subjective experience is an inner and private thing and beyond the capacity of strict physical explanation to successfully capture. No doubt there are many microtheorists who would take very strong exception to this claim (and considering the impressive gains of scientific knowledge quite understandably so—for example, Churchland, 1981). But as things generally stand, it is not easy to see how something as personal and content-void as pain, for example, can be thought of as either a transformation of mental representation or an epiphenomenal prisoner of the nervous system (although I would not discount the possibility of some sort of multivariate approach). Clearly the more asomatic, "program-resistant" concept of pain that one finds prescribed in psychoprophylactic childbirth techniques—a concept of pain that seems more qualitatively and phenomenologically structured—does not seem congruous with, or reducible to, what has become the received view in neurophysiology and psychology.

Where the shoes start to pinch is when Nagel argues that what it is like to be something is a simple and unmediated acquaintance with one's mind and therefore the key to subjectivity. There is no doubt that it would please our sense of dignity to think that there is something about us that is beyond dissection and reduction; and admittedly there is something to be said for the claim that being aware has a phenomenological content not amenable to causal analysis. But I would think that there is an overwhelming mass of information to suggest, *pace* Gibson, that even the most primitive stage of awareness contains mediating factors (e.g., pre-experiential sensitivities, imput analyzers, subdoxastic states) which roundly subvert any claim to a depurated form of immediacy and non-inferentiality. Certainly the impressive study conducted by Lackner and Garrett (1972) rather strikingly shows that the interpretation and comprehension of what we attend to is greatly affected by unattended channels. The fact that the most minimal level of awareness might have more to do with the firing of retinal images than with conceptual interconnectedness, i.e., more

to do with energy than informational transformation, should not mislead us into thinking that such states are free of mediation. If we had to experience everything immediately or non-inferentially, we would be overwhelmed by the magnitude and diversity of what we experience (Bobrow, 1975; Crowder, 1976). We simply do not react to things *de novo*, but are fortunately predisposed towards moving through this world more efficiently by incorporating past patterns and expectancies into the act (the speed in which we notice and adapt to change and novelty I would think is evidence of this).

I sense that the reluctance of some phenomenologists to accept this fact might have something to do with their apprehension that if antecedent states are in any way involved in subjectivity, that is, if something like pain is post-cognitive or the result of non-conscious processes, then subjectivity would become so derivative or devalitized as to make any explanation, other than a subpersonal explanation, trivial.¹ In one very good sense this is understandable. Since inorganic or “unnatural” complexes may very well be capable of thought while utterly lacking experience, i.e., solving problems and processing information without awareness, there is certainly no reason to believe that the ability to experience, as the ability to will, is a necessary condition for the ability to think. The character of subjectivity does not seem to belong as intrinsically to thinking and belief as it does to experience, where it appears more personally endorsed. But lest we go too far, neither would I think there is good reason to believe, as apparently Nagel does by removing subjectivity from conceptualization, that the ability to think and the ability to experience are so distinct in nature that they can be firmly set apart. The distinction between thinking and feeling—these “disparate commitments”—is a working distinction, not an article of faith. We must not confuse thinking about experience with thinking as a component of experience. Even though concepts do not have the phenomenological characteristics of a sense modality, it does not follow that possessing a general concept is logically independent of subjective properties (as

¹To counter this possibility it has been frequently argued that though physical systems can often simulate sapience they can never capture the sentient character of natural individuals. That is, that any acceptable account of subjectivity is not compatible with, or replaceable by, any form of physical explanation (and this includes the subsystems of homunculus functionalism which can only end up in neuroanatomical terms). Though I am sympathetic to any attempt to preserve the interiority, intimacy and warmth of lived experience, and though I am inclined to agree with John Haugeland that an inner aspect will not be realized by inorganic materials no matter how “user friendly” they might be, it would be remiss of me not to say that this line of argument strays dangerously close to a *petitio principii*. To situate feelings and thought in two different theoretical domains does not entitle us to conclude that physical explanation is incompatible with sentience. Nor, does it logically warrant the stronger belief that inorganic or “unnatural” things cannot feel. As Shoemaker (1981) has responded to Block (1980) on qualia, and I think quite correctly on this point, we do not know the composition and potentialities of physical things well enough to say that in principle they do not feel. Certainly with the advent of analog/hybrid computers, or with computers that are capable of correlating features of the world with their input, there is always the heuristic possibility, no matter how remote or distasteful this might be, that if inorganic materials do not feel now they might very well do so in the not too distant future.

it does not follow that subjective experiences are necessarily devoid of representational content).

There is a real irony to Nagel. By holding thinking to be a formal relation which is divorced from direct mentation, and by making immediate awareness the thing-in-itself, Nagel's argument seems to end up mirroring much of what has become the tenor and theme of functionalist and cognitivist discourse. There is nothing in either the script model or in Nagel that enables subjects to think of themselves in a first person referential way, that has any interesting connection with the conscious and creative manipulation of symbols, or that sees the subjective element in non-conscious psychological states. In both cases, cognition is regarded as language-like abstraction that is acquainted with the content of mind, but not with the essence of the subjective *per se*.

It would be foolish, of course, to conclude from this that Nagel intends to pitch his tent in a cognitivist camp. Certainly any cognitive account formulated in terms neutral to alternative forms of incarnation would be open to the charge of dualism and therefore simply unacceptable along evolutionary grounds (although it is worth noting that since information processing can refer to a transmission of messages by genes, hormones, enzymes, etc., that not all cognitive accounts hold to a multiple realizability argument). Fodor's (1975) prescription to cognitive psychologists—that they should forswear the world beyond the subject and only consider the formal relations internal to the system itself—would sit as well with Nagel as sacrilegious humor would to a puritanical preacher. It is evident that even though we cannot objectively know what it is like to be a bat or a dog, we can know that a bat or a dog's embodied way of being in the world underdetermines not only what they know about the world but what they know about themselves. The possibility of different systems having the same content of experience, which is so real a possibility to many contemporary cognitivists, does not appear to be a viable option in Nagel's phenomenology. The limits and constraints of our biological nature, *i.e.*, those "canalized" processes or organic structures that lead individuals closer to the norms of their respective species, makes any representation of the world by one type seemingly beyond the reach of any other. (Whether this applies to abstract content over and above experience is a question that Nagel never satisfyingly addresses.)

There is a real dilemma in Nagel's work. On the one hand, the account of subjectivity that he would have us adopt is so repelled by higher level explanations which attempt to reduce personal functions to how events are embedded in an abstract causal chain, that any direct acquaintance with oneself seems to occupy only the immediate present. Though I can certainly sympathize with Nagel's opposition to encoded relationships and conceptual structures that tend to withdraw attention from the subject and its embodiment, I am somewhat at a loss to see how a collection of momentary happenings can have much business with the subject as a life structure. One might say that Nagel leaves us

worse off than any functionalist ever intended; for by having less of a compliance to what has gone before, he provides us with no way of connecting the moments in a single life (and whatever shortcomings might befall functionalism, it at least can span the intervals between conscious experiences to deal with the unit as a whole). I would think that without a locus of permanence—in which the same activity can refer back to that same person—the subjective character of experience that Nagel advances could scarcely qualify as natural. Natural creatures endure and change, but a sequence of temporary states without any ties to the past or integration with the future would in fact do neither.

On the other hand, any attempt on Nagel's part to deal with the subjective character of experience naturalistically would seem to make the subjective factor a surface manifestation that might not be worth pushing inward. Even if what is "natural" to Nagel has little to do with the system of physical laws that Smart (1963), for example, demands, it would still seem to entail an arrangement of sorts that would require conformity from its subjects, i.e., an order or regularity that would force the subjective character of experience to be confined and constrained by whatever determinants constitute its boundaries. Simply to talk about what it is like to be a bat, or a dog, does not really amount to much. If what it is like to be a bat, or a dog, is just a matter of certain sentient types seeing things differently, then there is no reason to believe that a physical explanation, say of species-competence or representational constraints, could not very easily accommodate this. Nor is there any reason to believe that an account of subjectivity would be anything more than a theory of meaning that is activated when behavior cannot be captured by a vocabulary of physical description—a temporary stopgap which is employed only until we can figure out how to work it into a natural order or scheme. (Indeed, it is worth noting that physicalism is not false to Nagel—it is just not the whole explanation.)

The problem seems to be that Nagel is caught precariously between his phenomenological and naturalistic ambitions; which is to say, that he is loathe to separate the organic process from the organism's feelings of it in fear of endangering the subject by separating consciousness from body, and yet, at the same time, he seems to want an explanation of what it is like to be an incarnate being without seeing things in terms of neurophysiology or behavior. Whereas many functionalists have strived to separate psychology from the hard sciences in order to study the causal relation among internal states, the stickling call here, as with Davidson (1978), is for a separation of psychology from science *tout à fait*.² Since little is being said about the ontological structure of the subject (or how mental and physical properties relate), what this "objective phenomenology" would entail is never really spelled out and would seem to be of less

²Regardless of his naturalistic inclination, I would think that Nagel would agree with Davidson's comment that "there is no important sense in which psychology can be reduced to the physical science" (as I think he would agree with Davidson, against Fodor, that psychological phenomena are

importance than the fact that a system of description is on tap to repel the advances of an insensate science.³ As partisan as this might be, and I do think that both Nagel and Davidson have rather restrictive views of science, there is a measure of legitimacy to it. Scientific efforts in the past have not only been motivated by a desire for a uniform causal explanation of behavior, but in many cases they seem to have abandoned the possibility of anybody or anything experiencing the world by attempting to explain consciousness externally or in terms of its component parts. Add to this the fact that much of what has been proposed in the cognitive sciences tends to endanger the subject by separating consciousness from body, and any wariness of the scientific enterprise on Nagel's part cannot be regarded as totally without warrant.

What is at issue, of course, is whether the position that Nagel would have us adopt, namely his natural phenomenology on what it is like to be something, is any more favorably disposed. My own feelings are that unless some self-catalytic, self-subsisting, historical and enduring element is put back into the picture, and this seems unlikely for such factors I believe would be perceived by Nagel as either opening the door to bizarre and non-natural complexes, or else giving subjective properties an objective nature of an immaterial sort, then any effort to defend the reality of subjectivity cannot be seriously entertained. In other words, if the subjective is to be an intrinsic and embedded factor, rather than something that simply satisfies a mental description or arises out of the organization of physical systems, then I would think that a more substantial account of how singular wholes affect and reorganize parts, of how consciousness can play a causal role other than representational, and of how non-conscious processes may continually express the self, would seem to be in order. Simply to say that what it is like to be something is not non-physical, not epiphenomenal, not emergent, or not caused by underlying components, does not provide an

not in accord with the extensional tone of science). To be sure, Davidson hangs his position on the belief that there is nothing in physical theory that can resemble rationality. To Nagel, there is much in physical theory that can resemble rationality, but not much that can approximate sentience. I would think that this is not a minor point of distinction, for unlike Davidson who sees the mental as epiphenomenal, Nagel leaves room at least for other than physical factors to do the work.

³The fact that Nagel regards science as not the only kind of knowledge, or even the best, can only leave one wondering as to how his phenomenological perspective can deal with subjectivity without jeopardizing the objective dimension of a methodology. Apparently Nagel wants a descriptive method, an "objective phenomenology," that can go beyond the realm of language and yet can still be known from the inside; a method that can handle objectively the subjective character of experience while at the same time explain how the objective is subjectively constituted. I confess that I am at a loss, as most assuredly Zeno was centuries ago, as to how a system of intrinsic description based on a temporal presence which is neither anything in itself, nor any relation of reference, can be objectively pursued: whether this entails a science that can dispense with symbols, a monadic description of secondary qualities, or what. Perhaps what Nagel has in mind here is that the objective mode of knowledge operating in terms of truth cannot give us knowledge of subjectivity; that if we want objective knowledge of subjectivity it will have to take the form of an hermeneutic inquiry.

enhanced account or even a heuristically interesting account: it just adds another scrap of obscurity to an already unmanageable pile. Regardless of their philosophical unsophistication, at least scientists like Sperry (1970) and Eccles and Popper (1977) have attempted to show that the subject's consciousness has causal control over the cellular and molecular aspects of the brain.

Without a more explicit account of how the subjective is interwoven into all experiences, and how an intrinsic factor is present at all levels of organization and occurrences with an organism, I see but three options open to Nagel (none of which I believe he would regard as particularly inviting):

(1) Either Nagel can limit description to just the presentational form of experience and completely disregard the physical elements involved (in which case his position would be nothing other than a gleaning of individual interpretations; nor would it be radically different, at least on this point, from functionalist thinking in that it would make the hardware factor irrelevant; nor would it be very naturalistic since the experiences would be explicated without being fused with the world of nature).

(2) He can admit that phenomenological description by itself cannot objectively deal with subjectivity (but such a move, I would think, would make subjectivity too mysterious again and consequentially leave the importance of consciousness considerably in doubt).

(3) He can acquiesce to the possibility that subjective experiences find their way into the objective world of physical things. However this would not only bring him close to the non-reductive physicalism and property dualism accepted by many philosophers today, but it would also seem to imply some supraindividual constraints, perhaps on the order of Piaget's developmental laws, that would minimize the influence of the subject on the character of experience.

If it is the latter, as I think it must be if one assumes (as Nagel evidently does) that the embodiment of a creature affects what it is like for that creature to be what it is, then I would think that it would be difficult to renounce science completely since it would be difficult to look upon the subjective character of experience as being intrinsic in a way other than physically as the recurrent and regular behavior of a kind (and even though Nagel states that subjective phenomena are essentially concerned with a single point of view, he openly admits that the subjective point of view is often characteristic of a type). This is not to say that science would become the guardian of human meaning, or that the physical aspect would become the total content of experience, but it is to suggest that if Nagel is bent upon setting up a dialogue with nature, then he might have to admit: (1) that consciousness is affected by prior mental constituents and biological constraints in a way that deprives it of the authority of being the essence of what subjectivity is, and (2) that even though we may not be able to obtain exceptionless laws or strict nomologicality, scientific analysis is not necessarily inconsistent with such experiences and may even be helpful, as Dennett (1982) suggests, in exploring and explicating consciousness through

exteriorizing means. (Though I would take exception to Dennett's claim that only subpersonal theories are scientific.)

It is obvious that while Nagel attempts to avoid the pitfalls of physicalism and functionalism and dualism, the bridge that he forms to span the waters between naturalism and phenomenology has ruts and snares of its own. Since it is difficult to see how a phenomenological perspective can deal with subjectivity without summoning an objective dimension, it is tough to figure out whether Nagel's disagreement with the "scientific image" revolves around the nature of consciousness or simply around the nature of objectivity and explanation; that is, with whether Nagel reproaches science for ignoring the power of awareness or for positing a form of knowledge that is evidently creedbound and limited. I find it not in the least bit capricious to wonder, particularly if no middle ground has been established between dualism and physicalism, whether Nagel is not paving a path that will bring him one step closer to making the subjective character of experience simply a putative phenomenal entity. Certainly if Nagel goes the route of Davidson—and a skepticism of psychological laws leads to a skepticism of psychological explanation—then it is not wanton to wonder whether talk of the subjective can be anything more than a placeholder for talk on things which are beyond awareness, such as excitation patterns and cell matrices. It would surely seem that if Nagel is to counter hostile claims like "consciousness is not a process that makes things" (Dennett, 1982, p. 179), that there is "no reason to grant that persons have more of an inside than particles" (Rorty, 1982, p. 183), or that subjective experience is nothing other than a "will-o'-the-wisp" (Wilkes, 1984, p. 224), then it is incumbent upon him to show that his "what it is like to be" explanation relates to some inner dynamic that is different from the underlying processes that mediate it—and more importantly—that it does in fact increase our understanding of ourselves better than either physical or psychological scientific thinking. I take it that a good theory explains the greatest possible range of behavior and that a good explanation facilitates understanding, if not prediction. Though I am appreciative of the fact that Nagel alerts us to the abuses of an overly objective and analytical model, I am not terribly convinced that what he offers in its place is either a good theory or a good explanation.

An Alternate Proposal

My own thoughts are that if there is a case to be made for the subjective character of experience it will not be made by falling back on a phenomenological defense. My reasons for saying this are twofold. In the first place, eidectic analysis, which historically has absorbed much of phenomenological thought, might attempt to remove every theoretical element and presupposition so as to provide a way of describing a pure and primordial experience, but as we have noted above, consciousness is not an isolated occurrence—it is a complex

transaction that is continuously and systematically informed by a variety of elements that entail, among other things, an aspect of appraisal and past judgment. This is not to say that we are not capable of direct mental contact with ourselves or with the world outside. The fact that an objective epistemology analyzes things into separate mechanisms or conveniently invents names for underlying processes certainly does not entail that there is no directness of experience or that the subjective character can have no intrinsic properties which specify what it is like to have them. It at most implies that when we face the world we are not guided solely by our intentions and that when we are conscious we are aware of more than what is at a moment phenomenologically salient.

My second reason follows closely in the footsteps of the first; for if we are aware of more than what is phenomenologically striking, then I find it legitimate to query whether subjectivity need be identified with consciousness at all. The fact that we seem to be able to attend to things non-consciously, and in fact are often aware of things while not even attending, leads me to believe that there might be more ingredients to subjectivity than can be found in the formula of consciousness (cf., Dixon, 1981). Unfortunately, by dealing with subjectivity at a primitive or immediate level (since higher level activities are evidently associated with mediation, propositions and non-conscious processes), Nagel fails to take seriously how psychological factors interact over time and between levels of organization to yield the thoughts and feelings of which we are aware. Which is to say, that he misses an opportunity to provide a more improved and penetrating profile of our subjectiveness—one that might help us explain how feelings continuously run through our world whether we are conscious of them or not; how we are sometimes unable to report our experiences of awareness at the very moment we are aware; and how we are often not attentive to the different qualitative aspects of experience even when we are aware.

This is not to depreciate consciousness, for consciousness is still the place where we most appropriately objectify and fulfill ourselves. Indeed Dennett's challenge (1979) to the necessary connection between intentional interpretation and consciousness notwithstanding, consciousness seems indispensable for drawing things together and energizing the system as a whole. But I would think that what I am or the quiddity of what is me is not always found in the well-lit corridors of my mind. The fact that I do not appear to be broken by intervals in which consciousness lapses seems to imply (1) that both the past and the future are somehow present in me before they are realized in consciousness, and (2) that a suitable explanation might have to gain entrance to those factors which set a limit to consciousness if it is to bring to light the subjective character of experience.

No doubt Dennett (1979) makes a good point when he suggests that we should introduce a special non-conscious use of awareness to describe the way unattended cues are involved in the control of actions. Of course, Dennett's

intent seems to be (1) to play down the existence of consciousness by showing that it is not a single quality or an all-or-nothing affair; and (2) to convince us that some sort of combination of hard-wiring connections and plasticity would have the capacity to bring about and achieve the ends for which conscious minds were suppose to exist. It should go without saying that this effort is not expansive enough to do justice to the richness and provocativeness of Dennett's thoughts. Suffice it to say that the fact that "consciousness" is a blurred and shifting concept does not entitle one to deny its existence as a natural kind; nor does it entitle one to assume, conversely, that the non-conscious part of the self is simply a storage place of what the mind has forgotten or blocked out. If anything, it might be more plausible to conclude that if awareness can be extended to non-conscious processes, as Dennett somewhat tongue-in-cheekly suggests, then either subjectivity is more than consciousness or otherwise consciousness is more varied and dispersed than either Nagel or Dennett would be inclined to admit. Until what consciousness is becomes clear (is a person dreaming, or under the influence of an anesthetic, a case of consciousness or non-consciousness?), it may not be contradictory to talk about levels of consciousness or to suggest that pre-conscious and subconscious processes may be dynamic enough to contain an aspect of subjective awareness (afterall "virtual particles" in current physics seem to exist without being actually formed). Sartre's query as to how can we be conscious of something whether we are aware of it or not is really misconceived. It is obviously true that one cannot explain consciousness in terms of what is not conscious, but it is not obviously true that one cannot explain subjectivity in other than conscious terms. Awareness often exceeds our consciousness and makes subjectivity neither identical to nor co-extensive with consciousness.

One thing is for sure, if there is to be a case for the subjective character of experience it will not be made by basing one's position on the inability of others to simply deal with the inner side of life. Nagel is correct to raise the question as to why an explanation of behavior should be limited to the "scientific image;" for certainly it ought to be the explanation, and not science, that does the work. But Dennett (1982) is also quite right to point out that any position that deals with an unanalyzable and irreducible quality will become so intractable that no explanation will be readily forthcoming. If a case for subjectivity is to avoid the excessive apriorism that so plagued Husserl, then it cannot limit itself to simply showing that physical-type explanation neither exhausts, nor accurately reflects, the nature of inner experience. Instead it might attempt to explain how the subject contributes to his/her own experience of the world (e.g., Humphreys and Revelle, 1984); how everything from cells to synapses to molecules may be organized or modified by the subjective factor (e.g., Eccles and Popper, 1977); how content is meaningful as actions or attributes of a developing self (e.g., Skinner, 1985); and how a representation would not be representative without a subjective point of view (e.g., Kellogg, Cocklin and

Bourne, 1982). Perhaps better stated: a case for subjectivity would demand that we consider not only the unique and private aspects of the person, but that we remain open enough to accept more rigorous offerings—ones that would not depart from the data supplied by the particular sciences; ones that can shed light upon the vital functions, constraints and causal relations that affect the living organism as a whole; and ones that can help us explain how subjects can create fantasy, influence their own physiological states, and affect events in the natural world. When I say a more rigorous offering, I mean in the sense that we should deny that the subject of experience is a separately existing entity distinct from his or her body or immune from physical investigation—but not that we should see objective reality as limited to scientific characterization or be blind to the concerns of phenomenological research. Though science helps us explore our nature and makes that nature clear to itself, not everything need be described impersonally or be reduced to a complex of highly specialized structures.

It would be a great folly to think that such an undertaking would emit of a quick and easy solution. I say this because it looks like both Nagel and Dennett have been smitten by their respective iconologies into thinking that the solution to this issue is not that involved: the one relegating subjectivity to the simplicity and ineffability of the experience; the other seeing it as simply a description that occurs in a given vocabulary.

I, for one, cannot imagine a case for subjectivity that fails to deal with memory. I say this because even though we do not have a definite idea of how memory works, we do know enough about it to conclude that it is a necessary condition of consciousness and that it is inextricably intertwined with the functions of the organism as a whole. No doubt there will be those who will look upon such a claim as being a classic case of avoiding Scylla only to fall into Charybdis, since the controversy surrounding memory is not any less torrid than that which embroils subjectivity. Such an assessment would not necessarily be incorrect. Any issue that deals with a concept of mind in the throes of contemporary science and philosophy is not going to be without strife. But as we have observed, it is difficult to attack the problem of subjectivity head on because it appears to persist without a uniform front. Memory, if I might push the metaphor, has at least been better reconnoitered and surveyed (e.g., short and long term memory, semantic and episodic memory). As such, it appears to afford us an opportunity to advance on subjectivity by providing us with a better vehicle for assaulting its flanks.

Consider the theory of distributed memory as a case in point (Murdock, 1983; Pike, 1984). If current evidence holds up then the traditional information-processing model of memory (see Fodor, 1983; Stich, 1984), with its modularity and separate storage structures, would be replaced by a more active model: one where the fact that all information is multiply represented (as in a holographic image) makes us better able to explain how coherent experiences of remember-

ing emerge and how a limited mind can handle an unexhaustible flow of information. This would not only cast doubts upon the cognitive model of the mind as consisting of fairly independent computational mechanisms or domain-specific structures, but it would spell considerable trouble for any theory that would try to make psychology overly compatible with lower level theories of memory (e.g., reducing memory to hippocampal activity). On the debit side, it would certainly give considerable grist to those upholders of subjectivity who would have us believe (1) that we can conceive of the person as being an integrated whole, and (2) that we can look upon the mind as being directly accessible to itself without falling back on inner eyes or little men to watch over all activities.

There is certainly evidence emerging that memory is not simply a physical trace or higher level phenomenon; that there is a dimension of subsidiary awareness rooted in the nerves, muscles and chemicals of embodied existence (as Polanyi never tired of pointing out) which leaves the subject with the retained skills and sense of directionality needed to survive (see Bandura, 1978). Nor does memory appear to be as "neutral" and "without authority" as Dennett (1979) would have us think (and I fear, because of his restrictive phenomenology, Nagel as well). Although the world independent of the mind contains features that demand representation, the moods and motives, the beliefs and personality, of the subject are not divorced from what is being remembered or from influencing the regularity in the recall order (Johnson-Laird 1983; Jolicoeur, Gluck and Kosslyn, 1984). Not only do stored master representations focus on things unique to the subject, but evidently, the object to be processed has a particular entry point level that is very much dependent upon the person's receptivity (or what John Searle would regard as a condition of satisfaction and success). If subjects are beings that possess a point of view, then most of what they remember is from their point of view. The function of memory is not just backward directional and justificatory, but forward looking and reconstructive; that is, it helps us establish our being and what we will become. This would give considerable credibility to the drift and spirit of Nagel's argument, whether he welcomes assistance from such quarters or not.

I might also add, somewhat tentatively, that since remembering is intrinsically imagistic in nature, a more scrutinous look into imagery might help us to better understand the non-representative aspect of experience. The fact that the organism is in one sense a closed system of containment, i.e., what some would regard as a feedback loop or "tangled hierarchy" (Hofstadler, 1979), presses me into thinking that a more global, cross-modal perspective might prove a more effective way of getting in touch with subjectivity than any account based on a piecemeal description. Although the penetrability or impenetrability of imagery is still in question, it does appear that imaginal forms of representation are often

analogical or prototypical in nature (Cooper, 1976; Kosslyn, 1983; Paivio, 1971).⁴ This means that imaginal forms are so phenomenally similar to the actual perception of things (presumably because the processes involved have, among other things, the same physiological properties) that they can preserve the directness of the object, episode or emotion experienced while at the same time drawing connections with other entities to form a more generalized meaning (a kind of Hegel-like concrete universal).

Although inverted spectrum arguments do support different phenomenological mediums for shared information about the world, such arguments appear to be primarily countervailing or apologetic in nature and therefore limited in explanatory power. Since imagery is like a picture without a medium, other than perhaps the spatial medium of the subject itself (although this is a matter of some controversy), an imagistic account may offer insights into how underlying processes can stabilize and identify a given moment of phenomenological quality with earlier moments so as to leave the organism with a long-term awareness of the position of its body with respect to its parts as well as to the world around (Pinker, 1980). Indeed, it may not be wrong to say, since imagery contains memory fragments and reconstructive interpretations, that it is more like an act of a particular embodiment than a representation—a means by which I explore what I am, not what I know. I would think that this is what Merleau-Ponty had in mind when he talked about a complex inter-relation of body, figure, ground; that is, that subjectivity might best be seen as a unique and personal configuration which is not identical with any set of experiences, but is that which has all of them.

Conclusion

I, too, sense the threat of current scientific thinking to the inner and private aspects of life. There is a logical-mechanistic tendency in physical explanation today, especially functional-type physicalism, to lessen the gulf between non-living and living things by regarding anything that is intrinsic as relational or epiphenomenal. Whereas consciousness was traditionally held to be direct and intuitive, the postulation of underdetermining formal organizations and cognitively penetrable processes (e.g., subroutines, memory structures) has greatly impacted upon what it is like to be something by leaving the reliability, if not the reality, of primitive feelings, existential continuity and conscious planning

⁴Since to represent representations is as confusing as having a mental image of a mental image of something (and in a sense nullifies itself), a phenomenological medium becomes plausible not as a medium of strict reference and denotation, but as a "fuzzy" medium of parallel, affective encoding centered upon the particular position of the subject (Dixon, 1981). This would give support to Nagel's view that we have pre-linguistic knowledge of real essences which is not caught in our knowledge of the truth of propositions. It would also refute those people like Dennett who tend to believe that the paradigm of psychological states is linguistic. For a defense of imagery as intrinsic, see Shepard, 1980; for a counterview, read Pylyshyn, 1980.

considerably in doubt. I share with Nagel the conviction that a strict physical account cannot do justice to the essence of lived experience; as I share with phenomenologists in general the dismay that mediating systems seem to have become a better idiom of behavior than any form of direct description.

Where we part company is over the implications of all this. To me what is disturbing is not how the reigning orthodoxy affects subjective experience *in particular*, but how it has de-valued the human individual *as a particular*. Both cognitivist and functionalist thinking in general have come to look upon the behavior of the individual as dependent upon a pre-existing system of categories and beliefs, each with their own intrinsic structure, that is independent of one's intention. The crippling flow of such explanation appears to be that the representational factor is taken too much to heart and offers a causal explanation of human behavior that makes the relation of element to whole in a symbolic network so overridingly important that the individual can only be distinguished at the cost of triviality or misrepresentation. What follows from this is the supposition that the events that take place can be defined and considered without reference to the individual; that the individual subject is no longer the cause of what comes to pass but simply an ephemeral stage in the course of the event's development—a conduit through which we channel information.

What I have argued in this paper is that while Nagel alerts us to the inherent insensitivity of current scientific thinking, and to its obvious limitations in dealing with consciousness and the individuation of the organism, his efforts are really not much of an improvement upon it. By making something like "what it is like to be" the argument for subjectivity, he does right by the *present* as a feature of our identity but he does not do justice to the *constancy* and *integrity* of the individual as a whole. The individual as a life structure is depreciated here in deference to a collection of mental states which place each person in a momentary role setting. The phenomenological perspective that Nagel has spawned with his epochal article is not a home for the preservation of the subject—it is simply a home for the preservation of a field of experience. There is no subphenomenal dimension around that can close the gap between past, present and future states of consciousness to form a more enduring core. Perhaps it is because Nagel associates permanence with the task of scientific investigation to disclose objective order that tends to explain how he can deal with feelings and experiences, but neglect how they are fused and retained.

Regardless of his billing, Nagel is not that out of line with functional-type thinking in that both attempt to reconcile ontological physicalism with anti-reductionism while neither seem particularly concerned about the issue and importance of individual uniqueness. There is simply no identity through change—no transtemporality that is a reality already present—that can carry the subject's potential into actuality. The individual here does not possess any sustaining force or form of his/her own. Like the scientific perspective he

rebukes, Nagel discards the animated entity as being superfluous to our understanding and thereby deprives us of a subject who has the power to scan his own activities so as to seek and bring about that which is not in existence.

Though I find it particularly upsetting that a case for subjectivity would look upon the subject as being such a passive and splintered soul, it is evident that this line of thinking is neither foreign to nor inconsistent with Nagel's long-standing beliefs. In more vintaged works, Nagel (1971) has argued quite extensively that the brain is the cornerstone to our identity and that no psychological property can be conclusive with regard to the nature of the person; more specifically, that split-brain cases show that any claim concerning a single subject of consciousness cannot be anything but dubious. It is plain to see that regardless of his interests and affiliation, Nagel is not that far removed from the likes of Hume and Dennett. For all his deep-felt concern for the subject, there is no unity of psychological function here that is explained simply by ownership. It is not the subject of the experience that is an all-or-nothing affair. Like a Feynman diagram, it is only the experience itself—the psychological factor as an instant “now”—that is unmitigated. If the unity of the brain is a matter of degree, then the subject that Nagel offers up to us cannot be otherwise.

In total perspective, what is telling about Nagel is not so much his views on what consciousness is, but rather his emphatic innuendoes on what non-conscious processes are not. There is simply no subjective character to psychological states that are separated from direct mentation. There is nothing in non-conscious processes that is subjectively dynamic enough to follow the course of a single person's life. When we look at Nagel's subject we can never be sure as to whether we have a continuity of one and the same person. Even memory is unreliable. As with Parfit's puzzle cases and Shoemaker's Q's, there is nothing in what we remember which authenticates these memories as true recollections or which indicates that they are permanent and recoverable.⁵ The constant downpour of events which characterizes the world of Nagel's subject is so torrential that it washes away all our older memories and with it any connection to an historical self. A point, I might add, which is not inconsistent with the unsettling findings of Loftus and Loftus (1980).

What is burning here, just waiting to be addressed, is not whether the unity of consciousness is a matter of degree; with cases of blindsight, subliminal perception, co-consciousness (Hilgard's hidden observer), this conclusion is hardly disputable. Where the fire rages, and where I think the future battle

⁵There is no doubt we can recollect things that we have not done, and not remember things that we have. But memory is inherently incorrigible and only detectable from the inside; that is, it has a subjective source. If the paradigm of knowledge as objective is not identical with a state or condition of the subject, then memory as a phenomenon is non-criterial and must be looked at without reference to the truth. It would be a mistake, however, to deny memory its status because of its epistemological bankruptcy. Memory is not concerned with how error occurs and how we can overcome it, but with how to bring things into the subject's view so as to allow events to be anticipated.

must eventually be fought, is over Nagel's contention that if consciousness admits of variation then the foundation of our personal being is fated to be serial and unstable. Personally, I find nothing in what Nagel has said, either logically or empirically, that would support such a thesis. The fact that consciousness is a matter of degree and not omnipresent to all mental activity certainly does not imply that there are no subject-related aspects in any and all persons, and at any and all levels, which are pervasive and permanent. Nor does it succeed in showing that the subject is simply a series of temporary states or variegated experiences. If the non-conscious part of the self is not a storage place of what the subject has forgotten or blocked out, and if some form of subjective awareness lines the walls of non-conscious processes, then it is not unreasonable to assume that the subjective character of experience may be left steadfast and unbroken both before and after the events of consciousness. It is well known that in many instances what we remember is related to the nature of the original event and to the character of the subject's original intention, and furthermore, that these instances are indelible episodes in an altering but stable autobiography. Although one's consciousness might fail to conjoin at times, it does not usually do so permanently. Parfit's borderlines cases (1971) may be "possibles" conceptually, but they do not appear to be so either nomologically or metaphysically. The fact that subjects do not divide their orientation between non-adjacent locations (Gassaniga and Ledoux, 1978; Mandler, 1980), that catastrophic injuries do not always change and eliminate what is learned (Pribham, Nuwer and Baron, 1982), and that the disassociation induced in commissurotomy patients are often artificial and fleeting (Marks, 1980), suggests that there is a dynamic cohesiveness at work and that it will take a lot more than the disunity of consciousness to disrupt it.

Admittedly, it is easy to read more into something than what is actually there. This is especially true when one is dealing with something as opaque as the human mind. But I think there is something to the fact (1) that the basic level of categorization in mental processing lies somewhere between the cluster of parts which represent concrete relations and the superordinate levels of functional abstractions; and (2) that these prototypes reflect not only the structure of the world due to ecological constraints, but in that they vary according to a given person's associations and demands, as well as the structure of the particular embodiment that is negotiating its way through that world (Murphy and Medin, 1985; Shepard, 1984). Perhaps what is being disclosed here, contrary to Rosch's (1978) stable exemplars, is not so much that we have a natural way of classifying things, but that we have natural beings who give form to conceptual awareness only so far as they are involved. Perhaps the real message is that event-type or process-type thinking, whether in the form of mediational theory or an "objective phenomenology," has no isolated building blocks—no natural concept of elementary things as being real or even significant. That if we are to respect the integrity of a being, then we must come to realize that the designs

and purposes, the feelings and experiences, that run in the individual, are components or subsystems of a more primitive self—a superordinate self who is not simply a highly content-sensitive structural formation, but a monadic formation of a Leibnizian sort who has the power to affect its own universe throughout the whole causal chain.

This is not to advocate a return to an unknown and unqualified substratum. We need not be afraid of a move to substance-type thinking, for such thinking might prove valuable in explaining experience and behavior patterns. But as it is foolish now to talk about a center of the universe, so it would be foolish to shift back to an impoverished notion of the individual, as Bishop Berkeley well knew, as an unchanging inner core. What is needed while we attempt to work out the psycho-physical details that are involved is something that can express the constancy of an active system as it strives to maintain the singleness and uniqueness of its overall structure through change and development. What is needed is what David Bohm (1980) has recommended for physics and Ilya Prigogine (1984) for chemistry and biology: a new and wholistic conception of order in which analysis is replaced with synthesis and linearity with non-linearity (but one that begins with the active subject, and not some external source).

As I have suggested above, one of the benefits that accrues to a memory/imagery account of subjectivity is that one seems to be able to reach back to make connections with other lived moments in order to grasp the synchronic-diachronic identity of the individual. Such an account, of course, is no where near comprehensive enough to capture the totality of dispositions and historical elements that constitute the integrity of the person. But I do think that a swing in this direction would be a marked improvement over an effort that would reduce the subject to a series of primitive experiences and time dispersals that seem stochastically independent. I sense that Nagel assumes that he is immune from the charge of reductionism because he has shown that subjectivity cannot be captured in physicalist language. Though there is the legitimate issue as to what “reductionism” entails, it is not obvious that Nagel is in a different league from those theorists who would have us believe that the rejection of the “given” means no ground-level of simplicity. What I mean by this is whereas writers like Dennett often confuse claims about consciousness with epistemological claims about incorrigibility, and assume that if incorrigibility is impossible so must all the intuitions about consciousness, Nagel similarly assumes that because he has made a case for the “givenness” and unanalyzability of subjective experience that therefore he has made a case for the subject.⁶ But a paradigm of

⁶The rejection of the “given” has left many with the belief that the contingency of the association between external physical things and internal experience precludes any simple or unmediated awareness. Of course, what is “given” and what is “simple” are not identical notions. The “given” is an epistemic state that refers to direct awareness and incorrigible knowledge. The “simple” entails that we have entities without parts.

knowledge, whether objective or subjective, is not identical with the state or condition of a subject. To deal with the subject as one that experiences, or as one that is "subjected" to something, is only moderately different from dealing with the subject as the object of clinical study or as the term of a proposition about which something is affirmed or denied. In both cases we are dealing with what is happening to the subject, not with what the subject can do. Certainly one can seriously question whether a manner of explanation that finds the subject indispensable, yet replaces the subject with a phenomenological unit that has an integrity, pattern and order of its own, is broad enough to be at variance with reductionist ambitions or really coherent enough to have a sense of what it is like to be a subject.

The point I have tried to make is that whether a vocabulary of mediated sequences or a vocabulary of unmediated experiences is touted makes only a slight difference in the long run, since neither speak to the capacity of the person to actively choose his/her future course of action and to attempt to be a particular type of person. More simply put: Neither current scientific thinking nor Nagel's phenomenology puts the individual in the center of the frame. Neither seems capable of reconstructing a situation as it might have been grasped by a subject, or of assessing the power of the person qua person to act and affect oneself or others. Nagel openly admits as much when he suggests that the concept of a subject's power "is a doomed attempt to capture the doing of the action in a new kind of causation" (Nagel, 1983, p. 198). As I see it, to subscribe to Nagel is simply to continue along a path that is slowly enervating the status of the individual by undermining the integration, persistence, creativity and power which makes the individual the nucleus of what occurs.

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