

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

Definition

- Here is the Merriam Webster definition:
- Main Entry: con·scious·ness; 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

Definition

- 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)

Definitions

- 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



Nagel



- 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

At issue

- 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

Explanation

- 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 a 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)

Discussion

- 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.