Thomas Nagel and the Problem of Consciousness
Minds and Bodies

• What is the connection between minds and bodies?
• Are they essentially composed of (or just different aspects of) the same thing?
• Three different responses:
  1) Physicalism (or materialism) – everything is physical (or material)
  2) Idealism – everything is mental (or spiritual)
  3) Dualism – there are two kinds of things (or substances), physical and mental; or there are two kinds of properties, physical properties and mental properties
Physicalism (or materialism)

• Definition: physicalism is the belief that the only kinds of things in reality are physical things and the only kinds of properties are physical properties.

• According to physicalism, everything in the universe is can be explained in terms of physics (or science).

• Thus, there is nothing in the universe that is not subject to physics and cannot be reduced to it or measured by it (including mental phenomena).

• Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) is one example of a reductive materialist or physicalist; Daniel Dennett (b. 1942) is another.
Physicalism with regard to the mind

- The mind does not exist independently of the body
- Thoughts, feelings, consciousness can, in theory at least, be explained in physical terms
- All these things are a function of the brain and the nervous system
The problem of consciousness

- Kathleen Akins (1993) – “The problem of consciousness, simply put, is that we cannot understand how a brain, qua gray, granular lump of biological matter, could be the seat of human consciousness, the source or ground of our rich and varied phenomenological lives. How could that ‘lump’ be conscious – or, conversely, how could I, as a conscious being, be that lump?”
What is it like to be a bat? (Nagel, 1974)

• Why a bat?
• There is something it is like to be a bat
• Bats are mammals like us. Most people agree that they have experiences – they are conscious.
• Bats are more like humans than is a cloud, a rock or a tree; they are also more like us than is a mosquito or a frog
• But, says Nagel, their consciousness is alien to us.
What it is like to be a bat? (Continued)

• They see by “sonar.”
  They fly and hang upside down.
  They seek out the company of other bats.

• We might be able to imagine what it would be like for us to live and behave like a bat (this is something **objective**)

• But we cannot imagine what it is like for a bat to be a bat (this, in contrast, is something **subjective**)

"I mean, I've got the costume, I've got the gadgets... but I just can't shake the feeling that I'll never know what it's like to be a bat."
More on bat consciousness

- A major part of a bat’s experience is subjective.
- Consciousness = having a point of view.
- Scientific knowledge is objective (sometimes described as “the view from nowhere”).
- As an example of how these things are different, consider: lightning.
- Lightning’s subjective aspect: it looks like a flash of light.
- Lightning’s objective aspect: electrical discharge.
Is this the same as the problem of other minds?

• E.g., what is it like to be an Eskimo?
• Or what is it like to be a celebrity (for example, Beyonce or Taylor Swift)?
• Nagel: We can probably answer these questions fairly well by using our imagination.
• But the answer is accessible to us only because we base our imagination on our own experiences as members of the same species as Beyonce or Taylor Swift.
• We need the subjective experience of being human to imagine the experience of others.
• Objective science alone cannot give us these answers.
• A Martian, for instance, could not learn from objective facts what it is like to be a human.
Science, Nagel argues, cannot explain consciousness in physical terms.

- Nagel (1974): “I have not defined the term ‘physical.’ Obviously it does not apply just to what can be described by the concepts of contemporary physics, since we expect further developments. ... But whatever else may be said of the physical, it has to be objective.”
- Physical facts are objective.
- Consciousness, though, is subjective. It is something mysterious.
- So, Nagel says, consciousness can never be explained by physical facts.
Are the objective and the subjective irreconcilable? Is physicalism about mental states wrong?

• Nagel: Not necessarily

• Nagel (1974): “It would be a mistake to conclude that physicalism must be false. ... It would be truer to say that physicalism is a position we cannot understand because we do not at present have any conception of how it might be true.”

• For example, our saying that “mind is brain” is comparable to a pre-Socratic philosopher saying “matter is energy.” Neither of us know enough about what is being claimed, to understand exactly what it means.

• Nagel (1974): “Strangely enough, we may have enough evidence for the truth of something we cannot really understand.”
Another option - Idealism

- Everything that is real is mental. It is immaterial or constructed by our minds.
- What is not mental is corruptible, contingent, not necessary or inaccessible to us.
- Some thinkers even say that matter does not really exist, it is but an illusion.
- What is important, is what is in our minds or thoughts.
- The ultimate reality of something is what exists in our consciousness.
- An example of an idealist: George Berkeley or J.M.E. Mc Taggart
- In Hinduism Vedanta Idealism is also noteworthy
Dualism – another option

• One of the reasons for its appeal: How else can one explain mental phenomena?
• How can physical states alone account for emotions, consciousness, and other aspects of our inner life?
• Surely our minds are more than just our brains. Don’t we also have souls, etc.?
Different kinds of dualism

• 1. Substance dualism – there are two kinds of substances, mental (or immaterial or spiritual) substances and physical (or material) substances. Our minds are mental substances. Everything else in the universe is physical. Somehow these two different kinds of substances interact. (Descartes is an example of such a dualist.)

• 2. Property dualism – there is only one kind of substance (i.e., physical substance), but it has two kinds of properties: mental properties and physical properties. Non-physical properties (such as emotions or beliefs) inhere in some way in physical substances but are not reducible to them. (Donald Davidson and Saul Kripke hold views like this.)

• A further aspect of property dualism is the belief that when the brain ceases to exist, so too does the mind cease to exist.
More on substance dualism

• Descartes: he contrasts mind and matter.
• Mind is indivisible, it is not extended in space, it is private, it is capable of thought.
• Matter is divisible, it is extended in space, it is public (externally perceptible), and it is not capable of thought.
Problems for dualism

• Interaction problem: how exactly do such different substances as mind and body interact?

• Also, how is it that if someone’s brain is injured (e.g., as a result of a concussion or some more serious kind of trauma), the mind does not continue to function unimpaired

• Lack of evidence that mind is really different from matter (a materialist or physicalist typically will claim, e.g., that there are no minds, only mental properties, and these can be explained by their connection to brains or people).