

At the center of the notorious mind-body problem sits conscious experience. Defined as the “phenomenological character,” or “what it is likeness” of our mental states, we have no conclusive theories for what it is, how it arises, and why it exists. Two of the most notable theories of consciousness come from Thomas Nagel and David Chalmers, who both reject the notion that physical explanations (physicalism) tell the whole story of conscious experience.

In this paper I will argue that Chalmers has the more durable argument of the two as a result of Nagel’s dubious conjecture that subjective mental states are physically inexplicable. In the first part of this paper I will break down both Chalmers’ and Nagel’s arguments for why conscious experience cannot be grasped by physicalism; I will then compare the two arguments against a rejection regarding the hindrance of subjective states to physical explanation.

I. Chalmers’ Argument

P1: If a phenomena can be physically explained, it must serve a functional role.

P2: Consciousness experience does not serve a functional role.

C: Conscious experience cannot be physically explained.

In *Facing Up to the Hard Problem of Consciousness*, Chalmers argues that physical explanations can only be used to explain higher-level phenomena if they are a result of the performance of a lower-level phenomena or function. For example, higher level properties relating to projectile motion in physics are a functional role of, or performed by lower level laws and properties regarding mass and gravity. While the “easy problems” of the mind, those relating to cognitive functions such as information processing and reacting to environmental stimuli, can be explained in terms of function and structure, conscious experience is not a problem about the performance of functions. For example, my ability to differentiate between two different songs is presumably performed by some biological auditory function. Computers can replicate this performance using functionally comparable spectrograms.¹ Despite both auditory systems serving the same functional role, the performance of my auditory functions is accompanied by an auditory experience while a computer’s is not. In essence conscious experience is a phenomenon that *coincides with* the performance of cognitive functions, and therefore cannot be grasped by typical physicalist explanations.

II. Nagel’s Argument

P1: A state can only be physically explained if it is an objective state.

P2: Conscious experiences are non-objective states.

C: Conscious experience cannot be physically explained.

In *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?*, Nagel argues that since science requires an objective, third-party perspective to explain physical phenomena, it will never be able to fully explain conscious experience which is inherently subjective. In other words, since conscious experience is simply the “what it is likeness” of our mental states, which is only knowable from our subjective point of view, no objective scientific theory will ever be able to fully grasp the subjective facts of conscious experience. Nagel illustrates the distinction between objective and subjective states

¹ A spectrogram is a representation of the spectrum of frequencies of a signal as it varies with time

by examining the “what it is likeness” of a bat’s mental states. While we can neurophysiologically explain a bat’s sonar abilities in terms of structure and function, this will undoubtedly leave out the subjective facts for what it’s like for the bat to experience this ability.

III. Nagel Versus Chalmers, The Subjectivity Assumption

Nagel’s contention that consciousness is subjective and therefore physically inexplicable opens his argument up to a wave of reasonable doubt inapplicable to Chalmers’ argument.

Before I discuss why the subjectivity of conscious experience may not make it physically inexplicable, I will explain why the ultimate verdict of this question is inconsequential to Chalmers’ argument. Accordingly, let us assume for a moment that I could write an extraordinary scientific explanation of a bat’s mental states that leaves out no facts regarding their neurophysiological or phenomenological character. That is, you could read this explanation and know exactly how a bat’s brain operates, and “what it is like” to operate it. While this would annul Nagel’s argument by demonstrating the objective nature of consciousness experience, it would be inconsequential to Chalmers’ argument as there would still be the question of why conscious experience exists in the first place. Put differently, even if a bat’s experience is knowable from any and every perspective (objective), we still cannot explain why a bat should have experience when using its sonar abilities.

I will now argue that Nagel’s objective criterion for physical explanation may be invalidated by the possibility of conscious transfer. While it may be metaphysically difficult to conceive of me imparting my current stream of consciousness onto another individual, it is not as difficult to conceive of the exchange of stored experience. Whenever I look in a mirror, I am not startled by the sight of my (hideous) face as one would imagine a blind person would be if they saw their face for the first time. This is because I already know what it is like to see myself; this conscious experience, or “subjective fact,” is stored within me. If our previous conscious experiences are more or less physically encoded in our brains, it is not necessarily too big of a metaphysical leap to argue that these experiential storages could one day be exchanged between beings. Using a movie as a metaphor for consciousness, person A and person B both viewing person B’s movie at the same time may create a metaphysical discontinuity of being, but person B imparting her replays of movies into person A’s existing repertoire of his own movies is not as metaphysically inconceivable. In essence, a physical explanation of a bat’s brain *that also* contains these physical, “experiential codes” to uncover the accompanying phenomenological character of consciousness is not entirely inconceivable. In fact, it would be equivalent to my aforementioned “extraordinary scientific explanation.” If science could plausibly provide a completely accurate neurophysiological explanation of brain states and uncover their phenomenological facts through conscious transfer, what exactly is left unexplained from the Nagel point of view?

In conclusion, Nagel’s argument is the weaker of the two because it makes more assumptions to demonstrate the inexplicable nature of consciousness. Though the thought experiments posed in this paper do not definitively disprove Nagel’s argument, they show that Nagel’s

contention of the subjectivity (and therefore physical inexplicability) of consciousness opens his argument up to a wave of reasonable doubt inapplicable to Chalmers' argument.