

**KINDS AND CONSCIOUS EXPERIENCE:
IS THERE ANYTHING THAT IT IS LIKE TO BE SOMETHING?**

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Abstract: In this article I distinguish the notion of there being something it is like to be a certain kind of creature from that of there being something it is like to have a certain kind of experience. Work on consciousness has typically dealt with the latter while employing the language of the former. I propose several ways of analyzing what it is like to be a certain kind of creature and find problems with them all. The upshot is that even if there is something it is like to have certain kinds of experience, it does not follow that there is anything it is like to be a certain kind of creature. Skepticism about the existence of something that it is like to be an F is recommended.

Keywords: bat, conscious experience, consciousness, Thomas Nagel, what it is like.

I

In T. H. White's novel *The Once and Future King*, the wizard Merlin changes the Wart, the future King Arthur, into an ant, a fish, and a bird. This is part of the Wart's education, designed to broaden his experience in ways unavailable by any nonmagical means. As an ant, the Wart learns, for instance, that ants have a kind of public-address system in their heads that broadcasts incessant propaganda against other colonies, directs the movements of individual ants, and offers patriotic encouragement. Individual ants like to gossip and have cockney accents but not a lot of personality. No doubt the experience is salutary for the Wart, teaching him about totalitarianism and individuality. But how much does the Wart's transformation tell him, and the story of it tell us, about what it is like to be an ant? White's fable is of a familiar kind in which the lives of animals are depicted to teach us about ourselves, not about them. Nonetheless, the idea that there is something it is like to be a certain kind of creature, something we might yearn for magical knowledge of, or frustratedly feel forever cut off from, is a powerful one. That different species, or different types of creatures, have fundamentally different ways of being in the world is a heady and exciting idea. In this article I try to

see what sense, if any, can be made of the notion of there being something it is like to be a creature of a given kind.

Thomas Nagel, of course, put the idea of there being something it is like to be a kind of creature on the contemporary philosophical map in his paper “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” (1974). He made famous the locution “what it is like to . . .” and asked it to do some heavy lifting in the mind-body problem. The phrase caught on and is now widely employed in philosophy. It is, indeed, a philosophical trope, at once a common piece of jargon and a signal of ramified tracts of philosophical ideology. Some of the things philosophers discuss what it is like, drawing from journal article titles alone, include to be me, a person, an aardvark, a honeybee, a conscious subject, a zombie, someone else, an agent, boring and myopic, to see, and to believe that *p*. Uses of the locution fall into two main categories. One form concerns (1) what it is like to be an *F*, where *F* ranges over types of creatures, typically either species or genera (a bat, an aardvark, a person), or what we may call, broadly, moral types (an agent, a zombie).¹ The other form concerns (2) what it is like to Φ , where Φ ranges over types of experience or mental states (to see, to believe that *p*).² Most work on consciousness, in the wake of Nagel’s paper, has focused on the notion of there being something it is like to Φ . In this debate, two broad currents have emerged. On the one hand, there are those who are sympathetic to qualia—the “what it is like”s of various kinds of experience—and who claim that their existence poses, or does not pose, a problem for one or another theory in the philosophy of mind. On the other hand are those who, either in the name of some such, typically materialist, theory in the philosophy of mind, or for more Wittgensteinian reasons, deny the existence of any such potentially mysterious entities as qualia.

Notwithstanding the predominant interest in what is expressed by expressions of type (2), a large part of the discussion follows Nagel’s original usage by being cast in the vocabulary of expressions of type (1), of there being something it is like to be an *F*. Rarely, however, is the notion of there being something it is like to be an *F* subject to any critical scrutiny of its own. In this article, I want to address directly and explicitly the question of whether there is anything it is like to be an *F*. In particular, I investigate what the prospects are of making sense of this

¹ In this article I shall not problematize the relation between the categories *human* and *person* and shall treat them as coextensive (though in fact I think they are different). If anything hangs on distinguishing them in this context, the appropriate parts of the following discussion will need to be amended accordingly.

² Anomalous with respect to this classification are at least the following forms: (3) what it is like to be me (or some other particular individual), and (4) what it is like to be boring and myopic. I shall say something about (3) in the body of the article; (4) might be assimilated either to (1) (a boring creature, a myopic creature) or (2) (to bore people, to see myopically). I shall have nothing to say distinctively about (4).

notion, and what might be the relations between there being something it is like to be an F, and there being something it is like to Φ , where to Φ is a kind of experience of an F. I look at a number of ways of making sense of the notion and identify two that I think are the most plausible. Both come with significant costs. They depend on the fulfillment of substantive conditions, and the most promising of them turns out to have epistemological consequences that may be somewhat controversial, namely, to give one example, that a human who is blind from birth will not be able to know what it is like to be a human. This leads me to conclude, provisionally, that the concept of what it is like to be an F defies analysis that is at once clear and such that, on that analysis, there is something it is like to be an F. Anyone who wants to hang on to the notion will have to deal with the problems I raise here for the options I discuss, or come up with a different avenue altogether for understanding the notion.

It may be the case that many uses of the locution “what it is like to be an F” by philosophers are simply dramatic devices for engaging in discussion of whether there is something it is like to Φ and could be eliminated from such discussions with little or no loss. I contend, however, that it is worthwhile nonetheless to pursue the question of whether there is something it is like to be an F for several reasons. First, the question is intrinsically interesting, even if it is not the problem of qualia that most occupies philosophers of consciousness. Whether there is something it is like to be a certain kind of creature, and if so, how it might be related to the various “what it is like”s of that kind of creature’s experiences, are questions that deserve attention in their own right. Indeed, the continued attractions of the locution “something it is like to be an F,” especially if it is put to work for an official agenda that really concerns what it is like to Φ , testifies to the fascination we have, philosophers and nonphilosophers alike, with the idea of something special attaching to existence of a certain *kind*. Second, if it turns out that there is nothing it is like to be a certain kind of creature, it might be tempting to infer from this that there is nothing it is like to Φ , that there are no qualia. By distinguishing carefully the question of whether there is something it is like to be an F from the question of whether there is something it is like to Φ , however, we can see clearly that such an inference would be mistaken. A friend of qualia can happily agree that there is nothing it is like to be an F. Thus, my skepticism about the existence of something it is like to be an F should not be taken for skepticism about the existence of qualia. Third, however, an investigation into how there being something it is like to be an F might be related to what it is like to Φ will raise some interesting questions about what it is like to Φ . In particular, we shall look at whether there is something it is like to see or experience by some other sensory modality, and whether this notion, too, can be analyzed using the tools I develop here.

One may wonder, initially, how the notion of what it is like to be an F, where F is some type of creature, relates to what it is like to be X, where X is an individual, and whether there *is*, in fact, something it is like to be a certain individual. The various proposals I consider below about how to make sense of what it is like to be an F might all apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the question of what it is like to be X. Indeed, as we shall see, at least some of those proposals seem much more naturally to lead to an account of what it is like to be X than of what it is like to be an F. Nevertheless, there might be something it is like to be an F without there being anything it is like to be a *particular* F. If there is something it is like to be X, then presumably a vacuous, disjunctive sense could be given to the notion of what it is like to be an F, namely, what it is like to be X_1 , or X_2 , or . . . X_n , where X_1 to X_n are all the Fs. However, this sense of what it is like to be an F would be of little theoretical interest. And there surely could be something it is like to be X without there being anything *interesting* it is like to be an F. So the two notions—what it is like to be an F and what it is like to be X—are to that extent logically distinct.

Tim Bayne and David Chalmers (2003) focus on the notion of what it is like to be X at a time t . Again, this notion seems logically independent of what it is like to be X and what it is like to be an F, except through, in this case, a trivial conjunctive claim that what it is like to be X might be seen as the conjunction of what it is like to be X at t , for all t in X's life. Bayne and Chalmers say nothing about the connection of what it is like to be X at t with our notion, and it seems to me doubtful whether their paper implies anything about whether there is something it is like to be an F and, if so, what it is. Accordingly, I shall not directly confront the questions of whether there is something it is like to be X, or to be X at t , in this article.³

I shall consider four approaches to an analysis of what it is like to be an F: the minimalist, the primitive, the extrapolative, and the aggregative. All of them seek to understand the notion in terms of conscious experience. In fact, many potential answers to the question "What is it like to be an F?" are not related to conscious experience (in any very direct sense). Being aware of one's own mortality, for instance, might say something about what it is like to be a person, but that kind of "existential" consideration will not find a place in the accounts I deal with here. I return briefly to the significance of this exclusion at the end of the article. I simply note here that in tying the notion of what it is like

³ Bayne and Chalmers do, however, have some very interesting things to say about the relation between what it is like to be X at t and various "what it is like"s that characterize X's experiences and states of mind at t . Briefly, they claim that what it is like to be X at t *subsumes* these other "what it is like"s. Much of their paper is devoted to explaining the subsumption relation. To compare what they say about subsumption with what I say below about aggregation and extrapolation would be extremely interesting but would require too much exegesis for this article.

to be an F to conscious experience, I follow Nagel and the vast majority of philosophers who use the expression “what it is like to be an F.” I also note that the only kind of conscious experience I deal with is perceptual experience. This is merely for the sake of simplicity. Other kinds of conscious experience could easily be integrated into what I say below.

2

In this section, I examine what I consider the two more extreme accounts of what it is like to be an F, the minimalist and the primitive. The minimalist account is suggested by Nagel’s language in introducing the notion of “what it is like.” He writes: “The fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism . . . an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something it is like to *be* that organism” (1979, 166; emphasis in the original). The equivalence here has that air of something-from-nothing that Stephen Schiffer (1996) notes in connection with properties and propositions. Schiffer discusses how sentences without a certain ontological commitment, such as “Fido is a dog,” can be pleonastically transformed into ones that do carry a commitment, such as “Fido has the property of being a dog,” thus yielding us something, a property, from nothing. Entities that are introduced by these kinds of transformation are sometimes called “ontologically minimal” entities. (Thomasson 2001 provides an excellent discussion of the issues.) Such entities are “creations of our linguistic and conceptual practices—our ways of introducing referential and quantificational talk of these things—and there is nothing more to their natures than is determined by those practices” (Schiffer 1996, 151–52).

Nagel’s claim makes it look as if something like this may be going on here, too, suggesting a minimalist approach to what it is like to be an F. On this approach, sentences without a certain ontological commitment, such as “Fs have conscious experience,” can be pleonastically transformed into (“means, basically”) sentences with that commitment, such as “There is something it is like to be an F.”⁴ But the “something it is like to be an F” introduced this way would be ontologically minimal. There would be nothing to its nature that was not determined by the practices by which we introduced reference to it through transformations such as

⁴ In this case, the untransformed sentence “Fs have conscious experience” already carries an apparent ontological commitment to conscious experience. Does this mean we are not looking at a case in which we have the something-from-nothing feature? Are we just getting something from something, perhaps even from itself? No. One might just “adverbialize” away the reference to conscious experience and treat it, in turn, as a pleonastic transformation of “Fs experience consciously” or, better still, simply note that the apparent ontological commitment to something it is like to be an F is clearly to something other than the conscious experiences of an F, so whatever the ontological status of those experiences, we are still, effectively, getting something from nothing in the present case.

the one just considered. The truth of sentences of the first kind would suffice for the truth of sentences of the second kind.⁵ Since I assume it is uncontroversial that humans do have conscious experience (and pretty uncontroversial that bats do too), it would, on the minimalist approach, likewise be uncontroversial that there is something that it is like to be a human (or a bat).

The minimalist approach would clearly be acceptable if the only thing we wanted to say about what it is like to be an F was that there is such a thing. What is questionable about any ontologically minimal theory of some kind of entity is whether it is robust enough to make sense of all the things we want to say about it. This means that we must evaluate the proposal by considering what it tells us about claims we want to make about what it is like to be an F other than that there is such a thing. Since I am somewhat skeptical of the idea that there is something it is like to be an F, it is difficult for me to evaluate the minimalist approach in this way. Nonetheless, some kinds of claims which any theory of what it is like to be an F worthy of the name ought to accommodate would seem to cause difficulties for a minimalist approach. A prominent type of claim in which the notion of something it is like to be an F features is one in which it appears as a direct object of the verb “know.” Thus, philosophers of many persuasions are convinced that it at least makes sense to ask whether, for example, humans can *know* what it is like to be a bat. Here, what it is like to be a bat seems to feature as an object of knowledge by acquaintance. It is in such contexts that what it is like to be an F appears in its most ontologically robust guise. Can such uses be explained in terms that make no use of ontologically loaded locutions? We cannot allude to things like “the nature of a bat’s conscious experience,” since this seems to be as ontologically controversial as “what it is like to be a bat.” I have no proof that no non-ontologically loaded claims can be found of which “humans cannot [or can] know what it is like to be a bat” is a pleonastic transformation, but I do not see any obvious candidates.

One could put the point like this. Ontologically minimal entities, by their very nature, are unfitted to play robust explanatory roles or feature in substantive discussions of knowledge and other philosophical concepts. The price to be paid for seeing what it is like to be an F as ontologically minimal, introduced by pleonastic transformation from claims that Fs have conscious experience, would be to render the notion philosophically impotent. Philosophical impotence is fine for kinds of entities, perhaps properties are one kind, where (a) we are committed to the forms of discourse about them that appear in the pleonastic transformations and (b) we do not want or expect the entities to play any robust explanatory role or to feature in interesting discussions of knowledge and the rest. But

⁵ This would make what it is like to be an F a *relatively minimal* entity, in Thomasson’s (2001) threefold taxonomy of ontologically minimal entities.

these conditions surely do not obtain in the case of what it is like to be an F. We are not antecedently committed to discourse about what it is like to be an F (at least, in the ways in which that expression is used in discussions of consciousness)—indeed, it is an objection sometimes made against there being any such thing that the notion is a creature of philosophical confusion; and Nagel's paper and subsequent discussion engendered by it surely seek to put to philosophical use the notion of there being something it is like to be an F. For example, Nagel says that "that there is something it is like to be a bat" is "the essence of the belief that bats have experience" (1979, 168). One could hardly expect someone who took properties to be ontologically minimal to hold that "that something has the property of redness" gives the essence of the belief that something is red. If anything, the reverse would have to be maintained by the ontological minimalist about properties.

Rejecting, then, the attempt to understand what it is like to be an F as ontologically minimal, let us try going to the other extreme: the primitive account. Perhaps what it is like to be an F is primitive, a kind of ontological hum that accompanies existence as an F. In effect, this is to treat being an F as a type of conscious experience itself. What it is like to be an F would simply be the quale of being an F. Such a "what it is like" could certainly now play a role in explanations and substantive knowledge-claims. If "what it is like to be an F" is supposed to be something primitive, then I can only say, in the manner of Berkeley or Hume, that I hear no such hum myself and therefore reject that there is something that it is like to be human in that primitive sense. This, in turn, undercuts the analogy that is supposed to convince one that there is something it is like to be a bat, or any other kind of creature.

3

In the previous section, we considered two extreme proposals about what it is like to be an F and its connections to experience. The first posited an analytical equivalence between there being something it is like to be an F and an F's having conscious experience. The second denied any analytic connection and let what it is like to be an F stand as a primitive. Neither of these is plausible. The first legitimates beyond a doubt the existence of something it is like to be an F but at the cost of eviscerating it and depriving it of interest. The second leaves what it is like to be an F of interest but makes its existence highly doubtful. We should look, then, for some middle ground on which there are some analytic connections between what it is like to be an F and an F's conscious experience, but not so tight a connection as to collapse the first into the mere having of conscious experience.

It is noteworthy that in arguing that humans cannot know what it is like to be a bat, Nagel makes much of the fact that (some) bats experience

the world by means of echolocation, or sonar. Bat sonar, “though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine” (1979, 168). This suggests that what it is like to be a bat is somehow *related* to what it is like to perceive through the various sensory modalities available to a bat. What is the nature of that relation? I shall suggest two ways in which what it is like to be an F might be related to what it is like to Φ , where Φ ranges over the sensory modalities of an F—by extrapolation and by aggregation. For the time being, I shall simply assume that there is something it is like to Φ . Subsequently, however, we shall take up that question directly and see that the four approaches considered in trying to understand the notion of what it is like to be an F can all be applied to understanding the notion of what it is like to Φ . An account of what it is like to be an F that seeks to analyze the notion in terms of what it is like to Φ will thus comprise two levels: an upper level, in which what it is like to be an F is related, by extrapolation or aggregation, to what it is like to Φ ; and a lower level, in which an account is given, along one of the four lines already mentioned, of what it is like to Φ . But for the moment, let us continue to pursue an account of what it is like to be an F in terms of what it is like to Φ , starting with extrapolation.

If M is related by extrapolation to the Ns then (i) the relation obtains in virtue of something about the intrinsic nature of the Ns and (ii) M is not identical to the aggregate of any of the Ns. The point of insisting on the role of the intrinsic nature of the Ns is to obtain a kind of analytic relation between the extrapolandum and its base, the things from which it is extrapolated. This characterization of extrapolation is consistent with many relations; hence, extrapolation comprises a family of operations. A salient member of this family is abstraction, in which M is some common element of the Ns, and for the most part I shall discuss extrapolation in terms of abstraction. However, by employing the wider concept I leave the door open for integrating other possible relations into the discussion.⁶ Corresponding to the ontological relation of extrapolation, there ought to be an epistemological counterpart by means of which one can move from one’s knowledge of the Ns to knowledge of M. In the case of abstraction, this would be a process by which one moves from one’s knowledge of a set of things to knowledge of some element they have in common, a process itself called abstraction.

If we now deploy this apparatus in relation to our present problem, the suggestion we are to consider is this: that what it is like to be an F is extrapolated from what it is like to Φ , where Φ ranges over an F’s sensory modalities. If extrapolation were abstraction, that would mean that what

⁶ Here would be the appropriate place to take up a discussion of what Bayne and Chalmers (2003) mean by “subsumption” and whether it is a variety of extrapolation.

it is like to be an F is some element common to all the “what it is like to Φ ”s. Knowledge of what it is like to be an F, where that is possible, could be obtained by coming to know the element common to those “what it is like to Φ ”s.⁷

Note that the attempt to get to what it is like to be an F by extrapolation from what it is like to Φ does require that the extrapolandum have some relation to each of the Φ s (perhaps, as in the case of abstraction, being something in common to each); it does *not*, however, require that the extrapolandum not have that relation to other types of experience not had by an F. So, what it is like to be a human would have to have some relation to what it is like to see, to hear, and so on; but as far as the method of extrapolation goes, it might bear the same relation to what it is like to perceive by sonar, even though this is not a mode of perception enjoyed by humans. The method of extrapolation would thus be consistent with the very liberal result that what it is like to be an F is the same for all values of F, regardless of the differences in their perceptual capacities. At the same time, although this is allowed by the method of extrapolation, it would clearly be inconsistent with the epistemological points made by Nagel and others that (a) we cannot know what it is like to be a bat and (b) we cannot know this precisely because we cannot know what it is like to perceive by sonar. The liberal consequences of extrapolation as such would be consistent with denying (a). If what it is like to be a bat were identical to what it is like to be a human, and we knew the latter, then we would know the former—though we might not know that the two “what it is like”s *were* identical, and hence we might not know that we knew what it is like to be a bat. But more important, the liberal consequences would, regardless of one’s stance on (a), imply the falsity of (b), since we might know what something is like that is common to seeing and to perceiving by sonar without knowing what it is like to perceive by sonar. Thus, our inability to know what it is like to perceive by sonar would not imply that we could not know what it is like to be a bat, or any other creature that perceives by sonar. We must conclude that if what it is like to be an F is understood by extrapolation from what it is like to perceive as an F does, there is no particular reason to think that the kinds of epistemological barriers that Nagel thinks exist do in fact exist.

In the light of this observation, we should also note that there is little reason to think that something that is common to, or that can be otherwise extrapolated from, all the types of experience of an F will be

⁷ Such an epistemic process is *not* the kind of epistemic process that Nagel denies the existence of in his paper. It would be needed, on the present suggestion, to yield us even the knowledge of what it is like to be human from our knowledge of what it is like to see, hear, and so on. The epistemic limits Nagel posits would hinder us from knowing the “what it is like”s from which the extrapolation is made, where those were not either experienced by us or imaginable by us on the basis of our experience.

adequate to capture a notion of what it is like to be an F that is sufficiently rich to be of interest. For example, Hume thought that impressions were distinguished from ideas by their force or vivacity. It might be that all perceptual experience (as opposed to imaginative or conceptual experience) has a high degree of vivacity. Then at least part of what it is like to be a human (or a bat, or any other creature with perceptual experience) will be what it is like to have experience of that degree of vivacity. But unless this could be greatly supplemented, it would hardly seem to constitute a notion of what it is like to be an F that is of interest to us.

Finally, it must be remembered that the extrapolation must be to something that qualifies as a bona fide “what it is like.” We may be able to take the various “what it is like”s of an F’s sensory modalities and move to some *description* that covers them all. Such a description will, in some sense of the phrase, say something about what it is like to be an F, but it will not provide one of the kind of “what it is like”s that are at issue, which, as it is often noted, defy mere description and must be experienced, or be imaginable on the basis of what we can experience, if we are to have knowledge of them. For example, suppose for the sake of argument that all perceptual experience is of objects. We might then say that what it is like to be a creature that has experiences of various perceptual modalities is to have objectual experience. In one sense, this is (part of) what it is like to be such a creature. But it is not “what it is like” in the sense at issue.

Given these remarks, it is difficult to suppose that there is anything to be extrapolated from the “what it is like”s of a creature’s types of experience that will fill the role of what it is like to be a creature of that type. Let it be granted that I know what it is like to see, to hear, to smell, and so on. I cannot from this knowledge move to any thing that could count as knowledge of what it is like to be a human. I cannot, for example, conceive, imagine, or intuit anything that the “what it is like”s of seeing, hearing, and the rest have in common. And if one remembers that I have focused on perceptual experience alone merely for convenience, and that all other kinds of conscious experience ought to play a role in the extrapolative process, the existence of an appropriate extrapolandum becomes even more fanciful. Consequently, I reject extrapolation from what it is like to have the kinds of experience of an F as a method of making sense of what it is like to be an F.

The second option as to how what it is like to be an F might be related to what it is like to have the various kinds of experience of an F is by aggregation: what it is like to be an F is simply the aggregate of the “what it is like”s associated with the perceptual modalities of an F.⁸ The

⁸ It is sometimes held that the operations of the various sensory modalities may be affected by the presence or absence of other sensory modalities. For example, someone lacking sight may compensate with more acute hearing or touch. More generally, it might be thought there is no reason to suppose that what it is like for, say, a dog to see is the same as

aggregative approach has the advantage over extrapolation in that it treats what it is like to be an F as ontologically complex, thereby allowing a very clear account of how it relates to the “what it is like”s of an F’s perceptual modalities. Aggregation thus seems to provide the clearest and best avenue for understanding what it is like to be an F, leaving it just as well (or badly) understood as our grasp on what it is like to Φ , for the various relevant Φ s.

One epistemological consequence of identifying what it is like to be an F with the aggregate of what it is like to Φ , for each sensory modality Φ of an F, is that an individual F that does not know what it is like to Φ , for one of those Φ s, will not know what it is like to be an F. Thus, for example, if, as many have thought, a person blind from birth cannot know, in the relevant sense, what it is like to see, but what it is like to be a person is understood as the aggregate of what it is like to see, to hear, and so forth, then such an individual person will not know what it is like to be a person. This is a liability for the aggregative approach, though not necessarily a decisive one. Two responses that a proponent of the aggregative approach could avail herself of are the following. First, one might give up the notion that there is something that it is like to be an F, *simpliciter*, and fall back on the notion of what it is like to be an F that has such-and-such sensory modalities. Second, one might seek to make a virtue out of necessity and exploit the fact that knowledge of what it is like to be an F may be partial. Whichever option one takes here, as we shall see, the problem reproduces itself at what I have called the lower level, where the consequences of these responses will appear more starkly.

Before we move on to take up the issue of the lower level and consider whether there is something it is like to Φ and, if so, what its nature is, let us pause to reflect a little on aggregation and extrapolation in general. Implicit in the foregoing discussion is one great advantage that aggregation has over extrapolation. For any group of Ns, there is something M which is their aggregation, but it is not equally certain that there is something which is their extrapolation. Thus, the main problem with analyzing what it is like to be an F in terms of extrapolation from what it is like to Φ was that it seemed doubtful that that route would actually result in something that it is like to be an F. No such problem afflicts the aggregative approach. However, aggregation, unlike extrapolation, is extremely sensitive to its base. Any difference in elements to be aggregated yields a different aggregation. The same is not true of

what it is like for a human to see. These observations, even if true, would not undermine the aggregative approach to what it is like to be an F. That approach seeks to understand what it is like to be a given kind of creature (or a given individual, for that matter) in terms of the aggregate of the “what it is like”s of that kind of creature’s (or that individual’s) various sensory modalities. What determines the “what it is like”s of those modalities, and whether that is affected by the presence or absence of other sensory modalities, is a different question altogether, on which the aggregative approach need take no stance.

extrapolation. One may extrapolate the same thing from two different sets of elements. Thus, if there were something that could be extrapolated from the various “what it is like to Φ ”s, that same thing might equally well be extrapolated from all but one of those “what it is like to Φ ”s. Thus, the epistemological problem with aggregation just discussed need not arise on the extrapolative approach. Nonetheless, owing to the certainty of the existence of an aggregation of the relevant “what it is like to Φ ”s, and the doubt as to whether there exists any appropriate extrapolandum from them, I shall proceed on the assumption that a plausible analysis of what it is like to be an F must be along aggregative lines.⁹

4

The aggregative analysis of what it is like to be an F (and the extrapolative, too) sought to understand the notion in terms of what it is like to Φ , for the various sensory modalities Φ of an F. The approach thus engenders a two-level analysis of the original notion, since we must now tackle the question of whether there is anything it is like to Φ . I suggest that the four approaches identified above with respect to the original question, What is it like to be an F?, will all apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to our lower-level question, What is it like to Φ ? This notion may itself be understood minimally, primitively, extrapolatively, or aggregatively.

The minimalist option suffers the same objection as was made to the minimalist option at the upper level. If “there is something that it is like (for a human) to see” introduces an ontologically minimal “what it is like” via pleonastic transformation of “humans see,” it is far from clear that it will be robust enough to sustain the kind of discourse in which it must feature.¹⁰ What will be the non-ontological claims that can be pleonastically transformed into such sentences as “Humans cannot know what it is like for a bat to see” and “What it is like for a human to see is more like what it is like for a fly to see than to what it is like for a human to hear”?

⁹ Though everything in the following section would apply to a view that endorsed extrapolation at the upper level rather than aggregation. Only the primitive and minimalist approaches to what it is like to be an F would render the following section moot.

¹⁰ It will be noticed that I have introduced here the relativizing clause “for an F” into our “what it is like” locution. This is for grammatical reasons connected with the minimalist approach—we need a subject for the sentence of which “there is something it is like to Φ ” is supposed to be a pleonastic transformation. But even where there is no grammatical need for the relativization, nothing in the following depends on there being a non-species-specific “what it is like” for any given sensory modality. It may well be that what it is like for a fly to see is quite different from what it is like for a human to see. (See also footnote 8 in this connection.) Relativization thus plays a useful role in “what it is like to Φ ” claims. In this respect, it differs markedly from its use—advocated by Nagel—in “what it is like to be an F” claims. For a good critique of relativization in these latter cases, see Hacker 2002.

The primitive approach to what it is like to Φ supposes that there is a simple quale associated with seeing as such or hearing as such and that this stands in need of no further analysis or explanation.¹¹ I find it no more plausible that there is any such simple thing that it is like to see, to hear, and so on than that there was any such simple quale associated with being a bat or a human. I therefore reject a primitive account at the lower level, as I rejected it for the upper level.¹²

This brings us to a consideration of extrapolative and aggregative approaches at the lower level. On these approaches, what it is like to Φ would be seen as the aggregation of, or as extrapolated from, some further “what it is like”s. What will these “what it is like”s be? And will they, in turn, require some further analysis? Aggregation and extrapolation, by definition, cannot feature in understanding a *lowest* level of analysis. Hence, to avoid an infinite regress, we must reach a level of X s such that “what it is like to X ” is simply and unarguably primitive. What will this level be? Something it is like to see red? To see a determinate shade of red? And is what it is like to see some determinate shade of red the same if it is seen while sipping orange juice, or after having seen a determinate shade of blue, as it is without those accompaniments or precedents? Is what it is like to see a red dot of a determinate shade the same as what it is like to see a red square of that shade?

I have no answers to these questions, but let us distinguish two broad hypotheses under which we might proceed. Qualia may attach only to completely specific types of experience, such as seeing a red dot of a particular shade while thinking of Nagel’s paper “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” on a hot afternoon, after having eaten gorgonzola cheese. . . . Or, they may attach to somewhat general types of experience such as seeing red, hearing middle C on a clarinet, and so on. I call these the Specific and the General Hypothesis, respectively. We can now say something about how extrapolation and aggregation at the lower level fare under each of these hypotheses.

Under the Specific Hypothesis, the prospects for extrapolation seem dim. Extrapolation requires some complexity or generality from which to extrapolate. Although the description of a completely specific experience is complex, the fact that, under the hypothesis, it is only to such maximally specific descriptions that a quale attaches means that the

¹¹ Or a single, primitive quale associated with seeing for a type of creature that also hears, and another for a type of creature that does not, and so forth. See footnote 8.

¹² O’Reagan and Noë (2001) do argue that there is something it is like to see (and analogously for other modalities), but, despite their use of the term “experience,” it is clear that they do not take seeing to involve conscious experience in the sense in which Nagel and others do. They write: “Visual experience . . . does not consist in [and I assume, therefore, still less *is*] the occurrence of ‘qualia’ or suchlike. Rather, it is a kind of give-and-take between you and the environment” (80). Their extremely interesting views, therefore, fall outside the parameters of this article.

quale itself cannot be complex. If it were, its elements would be somewhat general, thus contradicting the hypothesis.

Under the General Hypothesis, extrapolation may do better. Perhaps, from what it is like to see red (or whatever level one thinks one should extrapolate from) and to see green we can extrapolate to something it is like to see. I am doubtful, however. I cannot understand the nature of any type of extrapolation that would permit me to reach what it is like to see from what it is like to see red and to see green (supposing for the sake of argument that there is something primitive it is like to see red or green). Still, I do not wish to rule out this possibility altogether. Thus, one route to what it is like to be an F, what I will call the Mixed Theory, since it mixes aggregation at the upper level and extrapolation at the lower level, might be this. Let Φ range over the types of sensory modality had by an F (to see, to hear, and so forth). Let $\Phi(x)$ range over the determinations of Φ such that what it is like to $\Phi(x)$ needs no further analysis (to see red, or to see scarlet, or to see scarlet having just seen green, or whatever you think is the right level of specificity to do the job). Then, from the what it is like to $\Phi(x)$, for given Φ and various values of x , we extrapolate to what it is like to Φ , for each Φ . We then aggregate what it is like to Φ , for each Φ of an F's sensory modalities, to arrive at what it is like to be an F. What is necessary to make the Mixed Theory work is for there to be a level of $\Phi(x)$ s such that (a) no further analysis need be given of what it is like to $\Phi(x)$, and (b) from these "what it is like"s, we can extrapolate to what it is like to Φ . These two conditions seem to pull in opposite directions. The more likely (a) is to be true, the more specific must be the level of $\Phi(x)$ s. But the more specific this is, the less plausible it is that there is some way of extrapolating from what it is like to $\Phi(x)$ to what it is like to Φ . Still, there is no decisive objection to this avenue to understanding what it is like to be an F, so I leave the Mixed Theory as a possible, though not highly plausible, way of understanding what it is like to be an F.

Let us now look at the prospects for aggregation at the lower level. As usual, the existence of an aggregate is secure (so long as we have the things to be aggregated) where that of an extrapolandum is not. The problems for aggregation lie in the sensitivity of the identity of the aggregate to what is aggregated. Under the Specific Hypothesis, no two individuals are likely to share exactly the same $\Phi(x)$ s. Hence, the aggregate with which what it is like to Φ is identified will be different for each individual. There will be no what it is like to Φ as such; only what it is like for this one to Φ or for that one to Φ . As a result, there will be no what it is like to be an F, for any F that has more than one member. Instead, we will be able to reach a "what it is like" associated with each individual.¹³ Furthermore,

¹³ From which, as noted in section 1, we could uninterestingly construct what it is like to F as the disjunction of the "what it is like"s for each member of F. But I ignore this construct in what follows.

for a theory based on aggregation at both levels (what I shall call a Pure Aggregative Theory) under the Specific Hypothesis, what it is like to be an individual will be literally nothing more than the sum of what it is like to have each of that individual's experiences. This seems to leave the notion of what it is like to be a particular individual theoretically redundant. As for epistemology, the view has the consequence that no one (except under the oddest of twin-earth-like scenarios) can know what it is like to be another person. While this consequence, by itself, may be welcome to some (perhaps to Nagel), it is surely plausible to hold that a person's ignorance of what it is like to be another person is a lot shallower than her ignorance of what it is like to be a bat (or to be any particular bat). The Pure Aggregative Theory, under the Specific Hypothesis, would seem to leave no way of understanding why that was so.

This last claim might be challenged as follows. Cannot we be reasonably sure that what it is like for me to see red while thinking of Nagel's paper is pretty similar to what it is like for you to see red while thinking of *Moby Dick*? By contrast, nothing in my experience can be assumed to be pretty similar to what it is like for a bat to perceive something by sonar. But it is not clear whether, under the Specific Hypothesis, this response is really available. The thought that what it is like for me to see red while thinking of Nagel's paper is pretty similar to what it is like for you to see red while thinking of *Moby Dick* seems to rely on the view that each of these is somehow a complex of which what it is like to see red is a common element. But this is inconsistent with the Specific Hypothesis.

Like extrapolation, aggregation does better at the lower level under the General Hypothesis. If there is something it is like to see red and something it is like to see green, then what it is like to see might be just the aggregate of these. What is necessary for this approach to be successful is that (a) we can identify a level of $\Phi(x)$ s such that what it is like to $\Phi(x)$ needs no further analysis and (b) the $\Phi(x)$ s thus identified form a kind of inventory of all the types of experience available to a given kind of creature. Unlike the extrapolative approach, there is no intrinsic tension between satisfaction of these two conditions, though (b), even by itself, seems as if it would be hard to satisfy.¹⁴

Suppose, then, that we identify some range of $\Phi(x)$ s such that what it is like to Φ is the aggregate of what it is like to $\Phi(x)$, for every sensory

¹⁴ Several people, including A. J. Kreider and Charles Siewert, have urged at this point a weakened version of the aggregative approach, on which what it is like to Φ is seen as the aggregate of a set of $\Phi(x)$ s that, while not necessarily exhausting the range of experience of an F, are somehow suitably characteristic or representative of it. To make such a weakening plausible, one would need to have some account of what makes some experiences more characteristic or representative than others. I do not, myself, see how to do this, but for anyone who can, the weakened version may be substituted for the stronger version discussed in the text.

modality Φ of an F; and what it is like to be an F is the aggregate of what it is like to Φ for each of these Φ s. It may happen that not every individual F will have experiences of every type $\Phi(x)$. (This may happen even on the weaker version I mention in footnote 14.) In that case, it would seem to follow that a given F might not know what it is like to be an F. This is the same problem we broached above, where it was noted that an aggregative approach at the upper level would mean that an F completely lacking knowledge of what experience via some sensory modality of an F was like would not know what it was like to be an F. There, we saw two responses an advocate of aggregation might offer. The first was to give up on the notion of what it is like to be an F and confine oneself to analysis of what it is like to be an F with precisely such-and-such sensory modalities. Thus, a sighted person and a person who had no knowledge of what it is like to see would fall into different kinds, and the puzzling consequence that a member of a given kind might not know what it was like to be a member of that kind would be avoided. This move may have some plausibility at the upper level, where an initial kind, such as *person*, would be fragmented into a number of smaller kinds of the form *person-with-a-particular-combination-of-sensory-modalities*. But at the lower level, owing to the much greater number of items involved in the aggregation, the fragmentation into smaller kinds would be ruinously explosive. Although we might avoid the consequence of the Pure Aggregative Theory under the Specific Hypothesis, effectively that kinds never include more than one individual, we risk approaching it to a sufficient degree to put in doubt the interest of the notion of what it is like to be an F. The second response to the version of our problem at the upper level is, conversely, more attractive at the lower level than at the upper level. It is to embrace the idea of partial knowledge of what it is like to be an F. If what it is like to Φ (and via that, what it is like to be an F) is an aggregate of a variety of types of experience, such that an individual F may not have (or have had) experiences of all those kinds, then that F will have, at best, partial knowledge of what it is like to Φ , and hence partial knowledge of what it is like to be an F. The more (relevant) types of experience an F has, the better it knows what it is like to be an F. Assuming some value to knowing what it is like to be an F,¹⁵ this would explain why there is some value to having experiences of new kinds. (I say this is more plausible at the lower than at the upper level because failure to know what it is like to $\Phi(x)$, where this is some determination or other of Φ ing, is likely to be more remediable than failure to know what it is like to Φ *simpliciter*.) Nevertheless, there is something troubling about an analysis of what it is like to be an F on which an ordinary, healthy F does not, merely by being an F, know what it is like to be one.

¹⁵ Of course, this is a significant and controversial assumption.

5

We have identified two theories of what it is like to be an F that are at least somewhat viable. One is the Mixed Theory, and the other the Pure Aggregative Theory. Both require that there is something primitive it is like to $\Phi(x)$, where Φ ranges over the sensory modalities of an F and x over the relevant determinations of those modalities. In addition, the Mixed Theory requires the existence of some appropriate form of extrapolation. The Pure Aggregative Theory, by contrast, relies only on the mundane operation of aggregation. The payoff for the Mixed Theory is that it makes it possible to understand what it is like to Φ in a way that is not so sensitive to which $\Phi(x)$ s it is extrapolated from. The Pure Aggregative Theory is highly sensitive to differences between individuals at the level of the $\Phi(x)$ s, and this gives rise to certain troubling epistemological consequences. In addition, the Pure Aggregative Theory must, to get the right content of what it is like to be an F, have either a complete or (on the weaker version) a representative inventory of $\Phi(x)$ s to aggregate. It is not obvious that this can be provided. If it cannot, the Pure Aggregative Theory will face the same consequence it faced under the Specific Hypothesis. It will yield theoretically redundant “what it is like”s for each individual, but nothing more. In the face of these problems, I remain skeptical of the existence of anything it is like to be an F.

Or at least skeptical of the existence of anything it is like to be an F that is tied so closely to the conscious experiences of an F and what *they* are like. Perhaps the moral here is that if there is something it is like to be an F at all, this cannot be understood without appeal to the kinds of “existential” considerations I excluded from the analysis at the outset. If this is so, the notion of what it is like to be an F will no longer be especially germane to the study of consciousness; understanding it will be become a rather different kind of philosophical project. And the stories of the Wart’s transformations may indeed be the kind of imaginative exercise we shall have to undertake to know what it is like to be some kind of creature.

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