

## NAGEL'S CASE AGAINST PHYSICALISM

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This paper is an attempt to understand and assess Thomas Nagel's influential case against physicalism in the philosophy of mind. I show that Nagel has claimed that experience is "subjective", or "essentially connected with a single point of view" in at least three different senses: first, in the sense that it is essential to every experience that there be something it is like to have it; second, in the sense that what an experience is like for its possessor cannot be *understood* by a radically different type of organism; and third, in the sense that an experience cannot be "apprehended" or "observed" from a third-person perspective. I also show that these three claims have entered into two different arguments for his view that experience cannot be accounted for in physicalist terms. By way of assessment, I suggest that physicalists have decent resources for responding to the second and third of Nagel's claims about the subjectivity of experience, but that they currently have less convincing things to say about the first claim.

Over the last 30 years or so, Thomas Nagel has argued that there can be no account of conscious experience in physicalist terms, and that in the absence of such an account, physicalism is a doctrine we do not fully understand and therefore should not believe in. His reason for thinking that there can be no physicalist account of experience is that experience is subjective, or "essentially connected with a single point of view", while any physicalist account must treat it as objective, or as detached from a point of view.

But how should one understand this claim of Nagel's, that experience is "subjective" while necessarily treated by a physicalist as "objective"? As far as I am aware, neither Nagel nor anyone else has to date given a clear and convincing account of this. In this paper, I shall try to supply one, or at least work towards one. I shall look closely at what goes on in the 1974 paper 'What is it like to be a bat?', which remains Nagel's most extensive and influential statement of his case against physicalism. Thereafter, I briefly review his later writings on the topic.

I will show that experience has been claimed by Nagel to be subjective in at least three

different senses: first, in the sense that it is essential to every experience that there be something it is like to have it; second, in the sense that what an experience is like for its possessor cannot be *understood* by a radically different type of organism; and third, in the sense that an experience cannot be "apprehended" or "observed" from a third-person perspective. I will also show that these three claims have entered into at least two different arguments or considerations for the view that physicalism cannot account for experience.<sup>1,2</sup>

In conclusion, I try to assess what resources physicalists have for dealing with the subjectivity – or alleged subjectivity – of experience, in the different senses distinguished. I suggest that physicalists can produce satisfactory responses to the second and third of Nagel's claims, but that they currently have less convincing things to say about the first.

### 1. The opening passages of 'What is it like to be a bat?' and the first subjectivity claim

The opening passages of 'What is it like to be a bat?' are famous and frequently quoted. Here Nagel draws attention to what he thinks is a characteristic but previously ill-understood feature of experience.<sup>3</sup> (p. 436.) He says that "no matter how the form [of experience] may vary, the fact

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<sup>1</sup> While I know of no exposition where either the three claims or the two arguments are clearly distinguished, I should mention McGinn's 1989 paper 'Can we solve the mind-body problem?'. In this paper, McGinn advances two arguments that bear striking resemblances to the two arguments of Nagel's. And while McGinn expounds his own views here, he also acknowledges that his "great debt to Nagel's work should be obvious throughout the paper" (p. 22). Thus, McGinn may have found in Nagel's writings what I think is there.

<sup>2</sup> In conversation, I have often met with the claim that Nagel does not try to *argue* that experience cannot be accounted for in physicalist terms, but merely illustrates an intuition. I think there is something true about this. I suspect that Nagel is ultimately moved by a strong intuition or feeling that some essential aspect of experience must be left out of any physicalist account. (In support of this reading, one could cite Nagel's declaration in the preface to *Mortal Questions*: "I believe one should trust problems over solutions, intuition over argument ... It is always reasonable in philosophy to have great respect for the intuitive sense of an unsolved problem", p. x-xi.) However, Nagel does try to articulate his intuitions about the unaccountability of experience, and these articulations constitute at least proto-arguments. What I will try to show is that he provides more than one such proto-argument.

<sup>3</sup> For the most part, Nagel talks as if it is only some mental phenomena, or some aspect of mental phenomena, which on his view cannot be accounted for in physicalist terms. And, again for the most part, he uses the term 'experience' to talk about these mental phenomena, or this aspect of mental phenomena. However, he also uses a number of other expressions, including 'conscious mental phenomena', 'consciousness', 'conscious mental states', 'conscious experience', 'subjective phenomena', 'phenomenological features', 'phenomenological facts', and 'facts of experience'. I shall present the claims and arguments of the paper by employing only the term 'experience'. This simplification does set some limits to the pretensions of my exposition: one should not take for granted that the exposition could very easily be adjusted to *any* of the other expressions listed above. Despite this, I have found the simplification both defensible and desirable. The text offers strong encouragement for the simplification. (In particular, I have in mind the ease with which Nagel shifts from one expression to the other: the transitions often occur from one sentence to the next, and they are never announced, let alone commented on. This suggests that Nagel has not taken the shifts of

that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism", and again that "fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to *be* that organism – something it is like *for* the organism". Experience has in this sense a "subjective character", he goes on to say, and it is that character which cannot be captured by reductive analyses. This series of claims terminates in the following formulation of the physicalist's predicament:

If physicalism is to be defended, the phenomenological features must themselves be given a physical account. But when we examine their subjective character it seems that such a result is impossible. The reason is that every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view, and it seems inevitable that an objective, physical theory will abandon that point of view. (p. 437.)

These passages, then, introduce the expressions 'subjective character' and 'essentially connected with a single point of view' to describe that feature of experience which according to Nagel obstructs its physical reduction. In addition, the passages offer one – and just one – suggestion for how these expressions should be understood. The suggestion is offered by this claim:

(1) An organism has experiences if and only if there is something it is like to be that organism.

(1) suggests that 'experience has a subjective character' should be understood as saying:

(1') There is something it is like for an organism to have experiences,

and, further, that 'every experience is essentially connected with a single point of view' should be understood as saying:

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terminology to be of great significance.) Moreover, formulating different versions of the claims and arguments for the different expressions would soon make the exposition unbearably cumbersome.

(1') It is essential to every experience that there be something it is like for its possessor to have it.

But while suggesting how we should understand the talk about experience being "subjective", or "essentially connected with a point of view", the opening passages do not say much to clarify *why* this subjectivity or connection with a point of view creates problems for a physicalist account of experience. I think it is fair to say that they provide only the slogan that the *subjective* character of experience conflicts with the *objective* character of physical theory.

At this point, Nagel seems to promise a clarification of this slogan. He says that he will next "try to state the issue somewhat more fully than by referring to the relation between the subjective and the objective". (p. 437.)

However, what he turns out to elaborate most immediately at least is that experience is "subjective", or "connected with a single point of view" in a quite different sense than what (1) suggests.

## 2. Bats and the second subjectivity claim

What follows is a reflection over the experiences of bats, and in particular the experiences that bats have when they perceive the world through their sonar. The first claim here is that we, humans, cannot conceive of what it is like to have these experiences. Thus, Nagel says that bat sonar "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" (p. 438), and again that the experiences of bats "have in each case a specific subjective character which it is beyond our ability to conceive". (p. 439.)

As a first generalisation of this point, Nagel observes that organisms radically different from us – such as intelligent bats or Martians, if there were such – could not conceive of what it is like for us to have our experiences, nor could we understand what it is like for radically alien Martians to have experiences. This point is summarised thus:

facts about what it is like to be a human being, or a bat, or a Martian, ... appear to be

facts that embody a particular point of view. (p. 441.)

From this claim it is but a small step to a wholly general point, which Nagel expresses by saying that phenomenological facts are "subjective" in the sense that

[to] know or say of another what the quality of the other's experience is ... is possible only for someone sufficiently similar to the object of the ascription to be able to adopt his point of view – to understand the ascription in the first person as well as in the third, so to speak. (p. 442.)

Being told here that facts of experience are "subjective" and "embody a particular point of view", it is natural to associate this reflection with the claims (1)-(1'') of the opening passages. However, the point illustrated by reflecting on bats and Martians is in fact a quite different one. The reflection over bats and Martians brings out something like this:

(2) For every type of experience, there are (actual or potential) organisms who, because radically different from the organism having the experience, could not understand what it is like to have it.

And (2) is obviously different from (1)-(1''). None of (1) through (1'') implies (2). It is somewhat less clear which implications might hold and not hold in the opposite direction. But we may at least notice that (2) does not imply (1''): even if experience-types are incomprehensible across species in the way that (2) claims, it does not follow that it is essential to every experience that there be something it is like to have it.

Thus far into the paper then, we have been offered two very different lines of interpretation for expressions like 'subjective' and 'connection with (or embodiment of) a point of view'. It is well to keep these different interpretations in mind when we now turn to the passages where Nagel spells out *why* he thinks its subjective character is an obstacle to a physical account of experience.

### 3. The official argument

Having completed the illustration of the species-specific character of experience, Nagel goes on to say:

This bears directly on the mind-body problem. For if the facts of experience – facts about what it is like *for* the experiencing organism – are accessible only from one point of view, then it is a mystery how the true character of experiences could be revealed in the physical operation of that organism. The latter is a domain of objective facts *par excellence* – the kind that can be observed and understood from many points of view and by individuals with differing perceptual systems. (p. 442.)

With the exception of one short passage, which I shall discuss below, the ensuing three pages (443 to the top of 446) are devoted to an elaboration of this argument sketch.

The general idea of this argument, which I shall call 'the official argument', emerges rather clearly both in Nagel's text and in many commentaries.<sup>4</sup> The idea is this: To arrive at a physical account or reduction of a given phenomenon, we proceed by disregarding, so far as we can, what things are like for us, or, more generally, what things are like for an organism of this or that perceptual make-up. The object under investigation is then described "not in terms of the impressions it makes on our senses, but in terms of its more general effects and of properties detectable by means other than the human senses". (p. 444.) In this way, our account comes to be comprehensible, at least in principle, to organisms of widely diverging constitutions. This reductionist strategy has been successfully applied in accounting for such phenomena as water, lightning and sound. But it will not provide us with a satisfactory account of experience. Since experience can be understood only from a point of view, we cannot disregard what experiences are like for their possessors without thereby disregarding the very thing we wish to account for:

If the subjective character of experience is fully comprehensible only from one point of view, then any shift to greater objectivity – that is, less attachment to a specific viewpoint – does not take us nearer the real phenomenon: it takes us farther away from it.

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<sup>4</sup> For a lucid presentation, see van Gulick (1985), pp. 51-4.

(pp. 444-5.)

As I said, the general idea of this argument has been well exposed. However, the details of the argument have not always been well exposed, I think. With Nagel as well as with many commentators, the contribution of the claim (2) to the argument is heavily emphasised, while any contribution that claims like (1)-(1') might make is correspondingly de-emphasised, neglected or even denied.<sup>5,6</sup> But as far as I can see, the argument must be understood as relying not only on (2) but also on (1'). Here is why.

On Nagel's view, there are phenomena that can be reduced, even though certain aspects of them cannot be fully comprehended across species. Lightning is one of his examples. Lightning presents itself to us in a certain way. And the way it presents itself to us is not fully comprehensible to a radically different organism, according to Nagel: "A Martian scientist with no understanding of visual perception ... would never be able to understand the human concepts of rainbow, lightning, or cloud, or the place these things occupy in our phenomenal world". (p. 443.) Yet, Nagel thinks we could share a physical understanding of these phenomena with the Martian scientist. This is because the phenomena are "external to" our point of view. Even though the appearances of the rainbow, lightning and clouds are crucial to our identifying them, these appearances are inessential to the real, objective nature of the phenomena:

The objective nature of the things picked out by these concepts could be apprehended by

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<sup>5</sup> One feature of Nagel's text that serves to emphasise (2) at the expense of (1)-(1') is the sheer length of the illustration of (2). While (1)-(1') are introduced in short space, the illustration of (2) takes up almost a third of the paper (pp. 438-442). Another feature that has the same effect is that the official argument is launched in immediate connection with the illustration of (2). As documented above, the completion of the lengthy illustration of (2) is followed by the sentence: "This bears directly on the mind-body problem".

This uneven emphasis on (2) and (1)-(1') is reflected in some of the commentating literature. Thus for example, van Gulick's explanation of Nagel's use of 'subjective' reflects none of the ambiguity found in the text, but only the spirit of (2): "a subjective fact is one which can be fully comprehended only by creatures whose experiences possess a particular phenomenal quality. ... It is in this sense that facts about what it's like to be a particular type of conscious organisms are allegedly subjective" (1985, p. 53). Similarly, Davies and Humphreys tell us in no ambiguous terms what 'point of view' means for Nagel: "intuitively, the idea [of a point of view] could be construed in more than one way. We might, for example, take a point of view to be something that is private to an individual; but this is not the notion that Nagel uses. He is concerned with a type: something that is shared by many individuals in virtue of their having similar perceptual systems" (1993b, p. 15). This account again seems to fit only the use of 'point of view' that figures in the elaboration of (2). The opening passages, and the claims (1)-(1') do not suggest that 'point of view' – as used in, e.g., 'every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view' – stands for "something that is shared by many individuals".

<sup>6</sup> At the same time, it is testimony to the diversity of interpretations of Nagel that some commentators have taken the claim (2) to not play an important role at all in Nagel's paper. See, e.g., Biro (1991).

him [the Martian scientist] because, although the concepts themselves are connected with a particular point of view and a particular visual phenomenology, the things apprehended from that point of view are not: they are observable from the point of view but external to it; hence they can be comprehended from other points of view also. (p. 443.)

The general lesson of this must be the following: if a certain phenomenon is "external to" the points of view of organisms, then that phenomenon may be reduced, even if its way of presenting itself to one organism could not be comprehended by a radically different organism.

But then it seems that experience cannot be irreducible solely in virtue of being subjective in the sense spelled out by (2). (2) says only that one organism must fail to understand what an experience is like for a radically different organism. Nothing said by (2) seems to exclude that, although perhaps crucial to its identification, what an experience is like for its subject is in fact inessential to its real, objective nature – a nature that might then be "comprehended from other points of view also".

So, Nagel's view of the irreducibility of experience, when taken in conjunction with his view of the reducibility of lightning, seems to require the support of a claim saying that its being like something for an organism is *essential* to an experience. (1') is, of course, just such a claim. And thus there is reason to understand the official argument as relying not only on (2) but also on (1').

#### **4. The unofficial argument and the third subjectivity claim**

In the midst of the elaboration of the official argument, a quite different argument or consideration against physicalism is inserted in the text. I shall call it 'the unofficial argument', since it is really just intimated in the text. The argument is in part made up of a third claim about 'the subjective character of experience'.

The unofficial argument occurs at a point where Nagel has just given one of his accounts of how some phenomena, e.g. lightning, can be reduced, since they are external to the points of view of organisms. Turning to explain how things differ when it comes to experience, he goes on to

say this:

In the case of experience, on the other hand, the connection with a particular point of view seems much closer. It is difficult to understand what could be meant by the *objective* character of an experience, apart from the particular point of view from which its subject apprehends it. After all, what would be left of what it was like to be a bat if one removed the viewpoint of the bat? But if experience does not have, in addition to its subjective character, an objective nature that can be apprehended from many different points of view, then how can it be supposed that a Martian investigating my brain might be observing physical processes which were my mental processes (as he might observe physical processes which were bolts of lightning), only from a different point of view? How, for that matter, could a human physiologist observe them from another point of view? [Here the following footnote: The problem is not just that when I look at the "Mona Lisa", my visual experience has a certain quality, no trace of which is to be found by someone looking into my brain. For even if he did observe there a tiny image of the "Mona Lisa", he would have no reason to identify it with the experience.] (pp. 443-4.)

The formulations of this passage call to mind the official argument. Here, as in the official argument, experience is said to be unequally accessible from "different points of view", and here too, an imagined Martian scientist is invoked for illustration. It may thus seem as if the argument against physicalism that is sketched here is the one with which we are already familiar.

This impression is deceptive, however. The unequal access to experience that is described here is not the one exploited in the official argument. The passage does not describe any difficulty that a certain *type* of organism may have in *conceiving* of what it is like to have the types of experience that a different type of organism has. Instead, the present claim is that any *token* organism other than myself must fail to, as it is variously put, "apprehend" or "observe" any token experience of mine. It is only consistent with this that Nagel in effect points out that the invocation of a Martian does nothing to contribute to the present consideration: a human physiologist could not, any more than a Martian, observe my mental processes by investigating my brain.

This passage contains, then, the following, third claim about the subjectivity of experience:

(3) An experience-token cannot be apprehended or observed from a third-person perspective.<sup>7</sup>

This claim is obviously different from (2). It is also different from all of (1)-(1''): (3) excludes, while all of (1)-(1'') allow, that two different organism-tokens could apprehend one and the same experience-token.

The passage intimates that physicalism, because of the truth of (3),<sup>8</sup> faces some obvious problem. Given the brevity of the consideration, it is not easy to say exactly what that problem is supposed to be, and I will not try to dig deep into this. Let me just remark that one could take the passage to outline an argument such as this: to be accounted for in physical terms, a phenomenon must be intersubjectively available; but given the truth of (3), experience is not intersubjectively available; hence experience cannot be accounted for in physical terms.

One may be inclined to assign a peripheral role to this argument since it appears to enter into the paper more or less as an accident. However, as I shall show when I now turn to Nagel's later writings, there is evidence that something like this argument has exerted a continuous influence on his thought on the mind-body problem.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. The later writings: A brief review

For the most part, Nagel's later articulations of the mind-body problem have deviated little from the statement of 'What is it like to be a bat?': the official argument has been prominent, and the

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<sup>7</sup> Note that (3) says only that *others cannot* apprehend my experience. It does not ascribe to Nagel the view each experience is apprehended by its subject. However, it may be observed that the passage and its context arguably provides some ground for ascribing this view to Nagel. In particular, the claim is suggested by the formulation, "It is difficult to understand what could be meant by the *objective* character of an experience, apart from the particular point of view from which its subject *apprehends it*" (last italics added). Lycan (1996, pp. 51-4) cites and criticises further instances of this kind of "slip into 'act-object' jargon".

<sup>8</sup>As in the case of the official argument, it could again be debated whether this argument relies in part on any of (1)-(1''). But I shall not discuss that question. The text provides very little guidance for answering it.

<sup>9</sup> Some commentators have suggested that – contrary to Nagel's own declarations – there is a strand in his thinking that points towards some doctrine of the *privacy* of experience. See, e.g., Malcolm (1988, pp. 149-50), and Wider (1990, p. 494.) I suspect that these commentators have sensed the presence of the unofficial argument. However, it is not clear that the unofficial argument commits Nagel to a doctrine of privacy. When Nagel emphasises the publicity of experience, he says that "one person can know or say of another what the quality of the other's experience is" (p.

unofficial argument has been intimated at least once. Thus, the official argument is stated or indicated in 'Panpsychism' (pp. 188-9), *The View from Nowhere* (section II.1), 'Consciousness and objective reality' (pp. 65-7), and 'What is the mind-body problem?' (p. 4), while a short passage in 'Subjective and objective' (p. 201) seems to express the unofficial argument (though it is easy to be deceived by the official argument-sounding formulations elsewhere in that paper; see pp. 206-7).

However, in a recent paper – 'Conceiving the impossible and the mind-body problem' from 1998 – Nagel departs from the beaten track. Most notably, the paper does not contain the official argument, nor the claim (2), so prominent elsewhere. I shall not try to determine precisely what the paper contains instead. I confine myself to making this observation: in the 1998 paper, the conclusion that experience is irreducible is supported by an argument which seems to presuppose the truth of (3) and which is, at least to that extent, akin to the unofficial argument of 'What is it like to be a bat?'

Says Nagel, in the 1998 paper:

The subjectivity of consciousness seems to block all reductionist proposals because, given any physicalist or functionalist description, however sophisticated, it *seems* logically possible that there should be an organism or system satisfying those conditions but nevertheless lacking any subjective point of view – a *zombie*, in current jargon. (p. 345.)

He goes on to illustrate this seeming logical possibility thus: "All we have to do is imagine the physical system from the outside, and then imagine it from the inside – as having no inside in the experiential sense". (Idem.)<sup>10</sup>

One may plausibly take this passage to say that reductionist proposals of experience are blocked because nothing we can establish by observation from a third-person perspective – or "imagine from the outside" – about a given system suffices to imply that the system has experience. Thus understood, the consideration seems to presuppose the truth of (3): if nothing we can establish by observation from a third-person perspective suffices to imply that a system

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442). And it is not clear that this announcement is contradicted by anything in the unofficial argument.

<sup>10</sup> The same consideration appears in Nagel (2000, p. 453). The claim (2) does return in this paper (p. 468), but does not play a prominent role.

has experience, then presumably we cannot "apprehend" or "observe" experience from that perspective. To that extent at least, the argument of 1998 seems akin to the unofficial argument of 'What is it like to be a bat?'

## 6. Assessment of Nagel's case

In conclusion, I will try to assess what resources a physicalist has for dealing with the subjectivity – or alleged subjectivity – of experience, in the different senses distinguished above. Though I shall not be able to provide any exhaustive accounts here, I will suggest that physicalists can produce satisfactory responses to Nagel's claims (2) and (3), but that they have, at present, less convincing things to say about (1)-(1'). I will discuss the claims in reverse order, starting with (3).

### *The claim (3)*

I believe the claim (3) – that an experience-token cannot be apprehended or observed from a third-person perspective – can be dealt with rather easily by a physicalist. A physicalist can plausibly just deny this claim, or at least insist that we have no reason to believe it is true.

On the physicalist's view, experiences are states of the brain. So on this view, you can observe my experiences insofar as you can observe states of my brain. For example, if I have a visual experience of the Mona Lisa, you could observe that experience by looking into my brain. If you don't have enough knowledge of the brain, you might not realise *that* you are observing this, but that is nevertheless what you do observe. (Just like you may observe liquid iron without realising that you are doing so).

As we have seen, Nagel suggests that a problem with this view is that "my visual experience has a certain quality, no trace of which is to be found by someone looking into my brain". But the physicalist can reasonably reply that we simply have no reason to believe that this is true. On the physicalist view, whatever qualities my experience may have *are* to be found by looking into my brain. Granted, these qualities won't be the qualities of the Mona Lisa, nor, most probably, anything much like those qualities. But there was no reason to expect that anyway. The experience is *of* the Mona Lisa. That is to say that the experience is a *representation*. Now it does

happen that the qualities of a representation are like the qualities of what is represented: a pink pig may be represented by pink paint, for example. But we are just as familiar with cases where the qualities of a representation are not remotely like the qualities of that which is represented. Thus, consider texts. A text can be of pink pigs, fair ladies or tasty wines. But the text (the representation) need not be pink, or fair or tasty to be of any of these things. Shapes of black on a white background will do. These are the qualities of the text; pinkness, fairness and tastiness are the qualities of that which the text is *of*. Similarly, it seems perfectly possible that a visual experience of the Mona Lisa is a state of the grey, sticky brain. That is what the physicalist thinks it is, and nothing that Nagel says in the context of (3) provides us with any reason to believe the opposite.

That, in brief, is how I think a physicalist could respond to this aspect of Nagel's case.

### *The claim (2)*

The claim (2) – that what it is like to have a given type of experience could not be understood by a creature very different from the one having it – demands more effort on the physicalist's part. But I think the physicalist has some resources for responding to this claim as well. I shall outline one approach to the claim.

To begin with, it is somewhat plausible to hold that:

(R) What it is like to have a given experience *e* is determined by what *e* is of.

Consider for example seeing a particular shade of green. There is something it is like to have this experience. Now could there have been any difference in what it is like to have it without there being any difference in what the experience is of? That is at least not easy to see. For there to be a difference in what it is like to have the experience requires, it seems, that there be some difference in what the experience is of. Or again, compare seeing a particular shade of green with seeing of a particular shade of yellow. There is a difference in what it is like to see the one shade and to see the other. And it seems plausible that this difference is determined by what the experiences are of, that is, green and yellow respectively. Had the experiences been of the same colour, then (everything else being equal) it seems there could have been no difference in what it was like to have them. But given that they are of different colours, there is bound to be a

difference in what it is like to have them. Indeed, it seems that there is bound to be exactly the difference there is.

Let me consider one alleged counter-example to (R). I have in mind the observation that some properties can, apparently, be experienced by more than one sense. For example, it seems that shape, location, size, orientation and movement can be both seen and felt. However, what it is like to feel, say, the shape of an object is not the same as what it is like to see that same shape. Thus, it may seem that we have a counter-example to (R): a case of two experiences being of one and the same property but differing in what it is like to have them.

However, this is not, as it stands, a counter-example to (R). For when I see a shape, I also see many other things, for example colours. Similarly, when I feel a shape, I feel other things, such as pressure.<sup>11</sup> And it seems perfectly possible that the difference in what the two experiences are like is due to what they represent *in addition* to shape.<sup>12</sup> At any rate, the case is not as it stands a counter-example to (R), because it is not a case of two experiences that are of the very same things (or properties) while differing with respect to what it is like to have them.

I am of course not claiming that the above constitutes a conclusive case for (R). But I hope it suffices to show that the claim has some plausibility.<sup>13</sup>

Given the case for (R), a physicalist can give the following response to Nagel's claim (2): Although (2) is true – we do not and perhaps cannot understand what it is like to be a bat – there is nothing *in principle* inaccessible about this fact, or any other such fact. Supposedly, we can find out what the experiences of bats collectively represent.<sup>14</sup> And if and when we do, we will have all the materials we need – indeed all the material anyone could have – for understanding

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<sup>11</sup> I am assuming here, for the sake of discussion, that we do feel shapes. This can be contested, however. Dretske (2000) points out that I may tell by experience that an object *o* is F without experiencing the property F. Instead, I may tell that *o* is F by experiencing the property G. For example, I may tell by sight that my enemy has resigned, without seeing his resignation. What I see instead is the white of a raised flag, and on that basis I tell that the enemy has resigned. Similarly, Dretske suggests, I can tell by touch that something has this or that shape, without experiencing shape. What I feel is, according to Dretske, an object's pressure, and on that basis I tell what the shape it has. (458-9.)

<sup>12</sup> This view on what it is like to experience one and the same property through different senses is defended by McGinn (1991), Dretske (1995, 81-95), and Campbell (1996).

<sup>13</sup> (R) and close kin of it have received a lot of attention in the philosophies of mind and perception in recent years. For further discussion, see e.g. Peacocke (1983, chapter 1), Harman (1990), Dretske (1995), Block (1996), Tye (1995) and (2000).

<sup>14</sup> To be sure, it is not enough for the physicalist to make plausible that we can "find out" what the experiences of bats represent. The physicalist must also make plausible that, ultimately, we can understand this in physicalist terms. I set this problem aside here, though. This is not because I am assuming that the task is trivial, but because I am considering Nagel's case against physicalism. And that case does not, so far as I can see, rest on any objection in principle to a physicalistic understanding of what experiences are of.

what it is like to be a bat. We may still be incapable of using this material to project ourselves into the existence of bats. But this is a mere *practical* shortcoming on our part; it is just the inability to put ourselves into a state where we experience, or imagine experiencing what the bat experiences and – equally important – nothing else.<sup>15</sup>

On this response then, (2), though true, is harmless from the physicalist's point of view. The fact stated by (2) is no more significant than, say, the fact that we can't run the way leopards do. They do what we can't do, namely put certain parts of their body – and no other parts of the body – in motion in a certain co-ordinated manner. But we can still give a description of what doing this amounts to – a description that "leaves nothing out". Similarly, we are unable to collect, into one state of mind, all and only the experiences that a bat may have at a given point in its life. But we can still describe what these experiences are of. And to do so is to describe, exhaustively, what it is like to be the bat at that time.

That, then, is one approach a physicalist could take to (2).

#### *The claims (1)-(1'')*

Finally, I turn to the claims (1)-(1''). I think these are the claims on Nagel's part about which physicalists at present have the least satisfactory things to say. To illustrate this, it will suffice to assume the weakest of the claims, i.e., that (whether it is essential to experiences or not) there is *as a fact* something it is like to have experience.

In the discussion of (R) above, I assumed *that* there is something it is like to have experience. Given that there is, I think it is plausible that *what* it is like is determined by what the relevant experience is of. But what makes it the case that there is something it is like at all? I will consider three suggestions to illustrate the difficulty of answering this question.

(i) Given the plausibility of (R), one might have thought that what makes it the case that there is something it is like to have an experience is that experiences are of *something*. But this seems not true: There are mental states that are of things, but that are not like anything to have. I may admire a certain person, for example, but (for the most part at least) there may be nothing it is like for me to do so. There are even *perceptions* that there is nothing it is like to have.

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<sup>15</sup> Recall that it often seems just as hard to imagine what it is like to *not* experience things that one regularly does experience, as it is to imagine experiencing things that one does not experience. Thus, it is hard to imagine what it may be like to lack proprioception, or be blind to motion, or colour blind, or blind or deaf. In fact, it may be that the difficulty of understanding what it is like to be a bat is solely a difficulty of this kind. As far as I am aware, there is

Blindseeing is an example. Blindseeing occurs with subjects who suffers a certain type of brain damage. These subjects will deny seeing anything in a part of their visual fields. Yet, if prompted to guess, they can report remarkably accurately about features in this field. While blindseers differ in what they detect, features that have been detected in blindseeing include light, spatial location, orientation, movement, colour and form.<sup>16</sup> There is, it seems, nothing it is like for these subjects to see in the "blind" part of their visual field. Nevertheless, they perceive features of it. So, it seems not true that a state's merely being of something makes it the case that there is something it is like to be in it.

(ii) A more plausible suggestion is that what makes it the case that there is something it is like to have an experience is that experiences have particularly *rich* representational contents. This idea naturally comes to mind if one reflects on normal visual experiences. Thus, my visual experience at this moment seems extraordinarily rich in what it represents. It is of very specific colours, shapes, locations and orientations of numerous things. Still, the suggestion does not seem right: there seem to be many states that are like something to be in without being particularly rich in representational content. For example, I may have a visual experience, which there is something it is like to have, of just a blue expanse.<sup>17</sup>

(iii) Yet another suggestion is that what makes it the case that there is something it is like to have an experience is that the representational contents of experiences are available to the subject in a particularly effortless way, which could, presumably, be described in physicalistic terms. This suggestion may again seem plausible if one reflects on some ordinary experiences. Thus, consider the visual experience of a blue expanse. Though this experience is not particularly rich in content, it certainly makes what it is of effortlessly available: one can easily use what one is thus seeing to guide one's actions and deliberations.

While I don't think this suggestion can be dismissed, it faces a difficulty which one may reasonably doubt can be resolved. The difficulty is to specify a sense in which, or degree to which the contents of phenomenal states (that is, states that there is something it is like to be in) are *available* to subjects. And what one may suspect is that any specification will turn out to be either too demanding (and thus fail to explain the phenomenal status of some experiences) or too liberal (and thus falsely imply that there is something it is like to be in some non-phenomenal

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no evidence that bats experience any features of the world in addition to those that we represent.

<sup>16</sup> Weiskrantz (1997, 130).

states). I will illustrate the difficulty by considering two different states.

Consider first hearing the faint buzz of a refrigerator while being intensely occupied with something else. It seems that there is something it is like to hear this buzz. Nonetheless, its content is not available for use to a very high degree. For the buzz to guide my actions and deliberations, it seems I need to direct my attention to it, or have my attention directed to it. And that, it seems, takes at least a minimum of effort or triggering. But now consider, secondly, my belief that there is at least one cup in the building where I am in. Until a moment ago, this was one of the many things I believed without actively thinking about. It is very doubtful that there was anything it was like for me to believe this until I started to think about it. Nevertheless, it took but little effort or triggering for me to start to think about it. And when I did think about it, what I believed became, it seems, as available for use in action and deliberation as any content of experience. But now we have the following problem: The hearing of the faint buzz seems to push us to qualify the present suggestion in something like this manner: what makes it the case that there is something it is like to have an experience is that the representational contents of experiences are available for use by the subject in action and deliberation *given, at most, a little effort or triggering*. However, the content of my merely dispositional belief that there is a cup in the building was highly available for use given just a little effort or triggering as well. Thus, according to the suggestion, there should have been something it was like to have that belief. But it seems that there was not.

Obviously, these remarks are very far from an exhaustive discussion of the physicalist's resources on the current issue. But hopefully they serve at least to illustrate – if not justify – my claim that physicalists have less convincing things to say about this issue than about the other two of Nagel's subjectivity claims.

It may seem surprising that physicalists should have more to say about *what* it is like to have an experience than about there being something it is like *at all*. I grant that this is surprising. I'm afraid I have nothing to say to explain why this should be so. That just seems to me to be the way things are at present.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> This point is made, and supported by many other examples, in Block (1995, 273-4).

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