

Prompt II. Nagel

According to Nagel, consciousness, or the mind poses a problem for those who take up a physicalist stance when explaining the mind. Physicalism argues that “mental states are states of the body”¹ Central to Nagel’s thesis is that consciousness is a subjective thing and taking on a physical stance to understand the mind fails means you are approaching a subjective thing from a solely objective perspective. This is not possible to do, for subjective, first-person experience cannot be understood from a third person, objective perspective. To support his argument, Nagel wrote an essay in 1974 titled, *What is it like to be a bat?* Nagel focused his paper around asking us to consider what it is like to be a bat to support his claim that we cannot understand subjective material from a purely objective perspective.

Bats are obscure creatures who have no similar characteristics to humans, it is very difficult for us to fathom what a bat’s experience may be like. Bats are nocturnal creatures who move about the world blindly, mainly through echolocation. Their experience is so far from ours, yet they are still mammals and closer related to us than say, a wasp. Under these conditions, Nagel finds the experience of a bat to be solid ground for supporting his argument that we cannot understand subjective material through a solely objective lens. It is akin to saying that an alien species from another planet who does not have the sense of hearing as we do can have the subjective experience of knowing what it is like to hear Chopin’s Nocturne No.3, after objectively learning all there is about the piece from studying classical music theory. Additionally, even humans experience subjectivity in different ways. Consider the many preferences we have towards food, for example. I enjoy the taste of sauteed mushrooms as a side dish, we can say that my subjective experience of mushrooms is positive. However, I know many

¹ Nagel, *What is it like to be a bat?* Chalmers Anthology, p.223

people who despise the taste and texture of mushrooms. In this case, the subjective experience of humans towards eating mushrooms is varied and unique and cannot be understood objectively. Nagel argues that our varied experience of subjective understanding is what makes physicalism an unsuccessful theory for understanding the mind.

Considering this interpretation of Nagel's paper, I agree with his stance that trying to understand the mind solely through a physicalist framework is limiting and is not possible to fully grasp the full nature of consciousness. Because of the varied subjective experiences between living beings, a human can only understand a bat by putting on bat glasses and even then, the glasses can only immerse you in a visual bat experience, you will still not know what it feels like to be a bat. This is how it is to investigate the mind through physicalism.

Prompt IV. Jonas

When it comes to understanding the dynamic between humankind and machine, the relation between the two have become and continue to become more and more blurry. Who is in charge? Intuitively, it's a no-brainer, the human is in charge of course. However, upon closer investigation, defining who is in the seat of power becomes more difficult to parse out because of our inclination to anthropomorphize machines (i.e. 'horse powered' vehicles) and in reverse to speak of humans or animals in mechanistic terms (i.e. the brain as a computational processing machine). One theory to understand the dynamic between human and machine is through the cybernetics model.

The cybernetics model intends to serve as a theory which relays the circular causality, or feedback loop, "where the outcomes of actions are taken as inputs for further action"². The

² Mariel Goddu, Philosophy of Mind Guest Lecture, slide 46

cybernetic model considers the entire system of its subject, the input and output as means that the system is a whole thing. Take a torpedo for example, using the cybernetics model the torpedo and the sailor operating the torpedo are considered one whole entity. Additionally, under the cybernetics model, some may say that non-human animals are just machines. Hans Jonas rejects the cybernetics model and speaks on its shortcomings. In this paper I will explain the commonalities between non-human animals and machines, which is at the root as to why they can be compared, then I will outline Jonas' identification of the shortcomings of the cybernetical way of looking at non-human animals. Then I will conclude that Jonas' argument is successful and why it is.

If we look at non-human animal behavior, we can see the feedback loop which is central to cybernetics. Consider the chase between a cheetah and antelope. The cheetah has a need for food which triggers a sensation of hunger, at the root of this need for food is the drive for self-preservation. Similarly, the antelope has the same needs as the antelope, the need for food in order to fulfill self-preservation, The cheetah acts on that need by pursuing the antelope for food. The antelope pursues its need to self-preserve by running away from the antelope. Despite both of these creatures behaving in different ways, one chasing the other being chased, the root of both of their purpose comes from the intrinsic drive to live. The drive to fulfill its purpose is what the cybernetician refers to as, sentience and the action taken to fulfill that drive refers to motility. Sentience and motility is what make up the feedback loop. If we consider an animal's behavior as strictly a feedback loop (sentience and motility), then it is justifiable to regard an animal as a machine. However, according to Jonas, the feedback loop is where the cybernetics model falls short.

Animal behavior is not limited to just sentience and motility. This is where the cybernetics model falls short; it fails to acknowledge a key component to animal's behavior, which is emotion. According to Jonas, an animal's behavior consists of three parts, perception, emotion, and motility. Emotion is a key element which "binds together"³ perception and motility. Living things have needs and my interpretation of Jonas' connection between needs and emotions is that they are necessary conditions of an animal's behavior which sets animal apart from machines.

Considering this interpretation of Jonas' paper, I agree with him that the cybernetics model cannot be applied to animals. Think of the torpedo for example, the torpedo has a purpose, to hit its target, yet this purpose is void of intrinsic needs. The needs that drive the torpedo are external, they come from the sailor operating it. The torpedo is simply a tool for the human operating it to meet its goal, which there are many goals that the sailor may have, such as following orders, patriotism, or defending his country. These needs from the sailor are tied with emotion, which also have a various range such as pride or vengeance. These examples of intrinsic needs and emotions are what set apart the machine and human or animal. Where the animal and human have an intrinsic motivating drive to continue living, the machine lacks and only has the goal of serving its purpose from an external source. Jonas points out this important distinction between having a purpose and serving a purpose, which Jonas uses as additional support for rejecting the cybernetics model⁴.

³ Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p.126

⁴ Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p.122