

# Minds and Machines

spring 2003

Consciousness and  
its place in nature

# preliminaries

- final paper topics distributed in class #28

# “What is it like to be a bat?”

- “Without consciousness the mind-body problem would be much less interesting. With consciousness it seems hopeless.”
- Nagel argues that reductionist accounts of consciousness (namely the identity theory and functionalism) fail to “shed light on the relation of mind to brain”

# what is consciousness?

- “It occurs at many levels of animal life”
- “...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” (cf. Block on P-consciousness)
- “We may call this the subjective character of experience”
- it is this that the “familiar...reductive analyses of the mental” fail to capture

# subjective and objective

- why do the “familiar...reductive analyses of the mental” fail to capture the subjective character of experience?
- “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”
- Nagel illustrates this difference between the subjective and objective with the example of the bat

# microchiroptera: the main points

- imagining what it is like to behave as a bat behaves is not to imagine what is like to be a bat

# microchiroptera: the main points

- we can't imagine what it is like to be a bat—but that shouldn't lead us to conclude that bats' experiences do not have subjective character (see the example of the Martians on p. 221, and the remarks about “humanly inaccessible facts”)
- the example shows how “...the facts of experience...are accessible only from one point of view” (bats in general have one type of “point of view”, and human beings in general have another)

# reduction and objectivity

- “...the process of reduction [to the physical] is a move in the direction of greater objectivity”.
- that is, to reduce some phenomenon (e.g. lightning) to a physical phenomenon (e.g. flashes of electricity) is to give an account of the phenomenon that is not tied to particular points of view  
(or, at any rate, an account more loosely tied to particular points of view than the original commonsense conception of the phenomenon)
- a Martian scientist whose experiences were subjectively very different from ours would still be able to understand what lightning is—you don't need a special point of view to understand the theory of electricity



# the “general difficulty with psychophysical reduction”

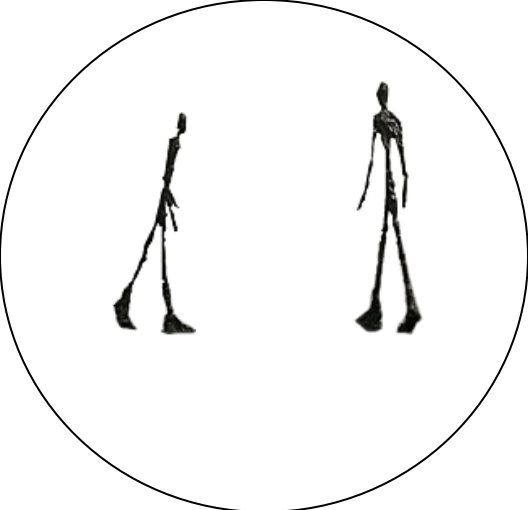
- “Experience itself...does not seem to fit the pattern. The idea of moving from appearance to reality makes no sense here.”
- that is, “a move in the direction of greater objectivity” takes us *further* away from understanding the subjective character of experience, and hence reductive accounts cannot explain consciousness

# the moral

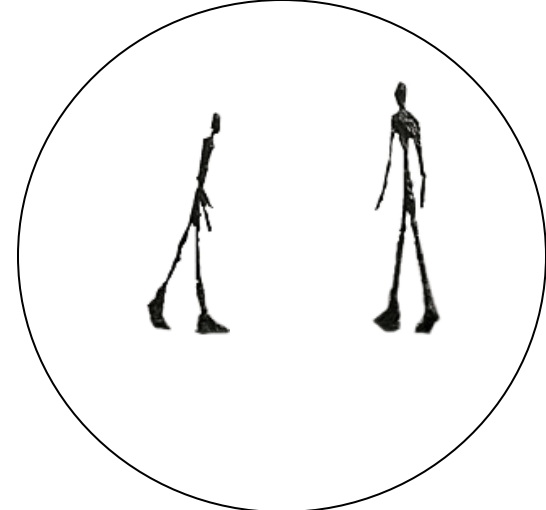
- Nagel does not think that this shows that physicalism is false
- rather, he concludes that we do not “have any conception of how [physicalism] might be true”
- even though we don’t understand physicalism, Nagel thinks we could have good reason to believe it, and he illustrates this with the example of the caterpillar and butterfly

# “Epiphenomenal qualia”

- sets out the “knowledge argument” against physicalism
- physicalism is the thesis “that all (correct) information is physical information”
- that is, more or less, all facts are physical facts
- it’s clearer to understand physicalism as a *supervenience* thesis



# physicalism



- suggestion 1  
any two possible worlds exactly alike physically are exactly alike mentally
- suggestion 2  
any possible world exactly alike our world (the actual world) physically is exactly alike it mentally
- the second suggestion is not quite right, but it will do for our purposes

# black-and-white Mary

- “Mary is a brilliant scientist...forced to investigate the world from a black and white room via a black and white television monitor”
- she “acquires, let us suppose, all the physical information there is to obtain when we see ripe tomatoes...use terms like ‘red’...and so on”
- “what will happen when Mary is released from her black and white room?”



“Will she learn  
anything or not?”

“It just seems obvious that she will learn something about the world and our experience of it...But she had *all* the physical information.  
Ergo...Physicalism is false”

# the knowledge argument

- 1 imprisoned Mary knows all the physical facts  
hence:
- 2 if physicalism is true, Mary (before her release)  
knows all the facts
- 3 after her release, Mary *learns* something—something  
she couldn't have known while imprisoned
- 4 if Mary learns something, she learns a *fact*  
hence (from 3, 4):
- 5 Mary learns a fact  
hence (from 2, 5):
- 6 physicalism is false



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- read Jackson, Lewis