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Rosa Turrisi Fuller

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A Philosophical Critique of Cognitive Psychology's Definition of the "Person"

ROSA TURRISI FULLER

Wilmington, NC

Thomas Nagel and What It Is Like to Wonder What It Is Like to Be a Bat

THOMAS NAGEL'S PAPER "What is It Like to Be a Bat?" is a response to reductionist physicalist theories that attempt to reduce all of the phenomena of mind to matter or a function of matter. Such theories necessarily shift their focus from the individual feeling subject to the physical object. Nagel counters 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" (437). Quite simply, a subjective feeling is not, in itself, a physical object. It is more akin to a point of view, a way of looking at things, perhaps a method of experiencing—and a method is not the same as an object.

Nagel, therefore, makes a serious effort to take on a perspective other than his own. He chooses his example carefully, also considering the perspective of his readers. "I have chosen bats instead of wasps or flounders," he explains, "because if one travels too far down the phylogenetic tree, people gradually shed their faith that there is experience there at all" (438). Though bats are mammals, their sensory apparatus is fundamentally different from ours. If our sensory apparatus were transformed into that of a bat and we somehow managed to retain our human memories and cognitive capacities, we would still be experiencing things from the point of view of a human experiencing things from the point of view of a bat, not from the point of view of a bat as *bat*. We cannot have the subjective experience of what it is like to be a bat, from the point of view of a bat.

This fact is apparently significant to Nagel, but how significant should it be to us? To have a first person human experience of being transformed

into a bat is distinct from attempting to reduce bat experience to the laws of physics. While Nagel is correct that we are thoroughly cut off from the sensory experience of the bat, it is plausible that even the bat is less interested in what it feels like to be a bat than the *interpretation* of this experience for its own ends; and it is very likely that bats do interpret their sense data. We can draw a variety of inferences from the behavior of bats. The name we have given a bat's primary mode of sensation already gives away our interpretation of how bats interpret their world. We call what they do echolocation. We have inferred that they have something like a sound radar, which allows them to find food and mates and to avoid predators. We infer that they can hear all of these things in three dimensions, much like we are able to see in three dimensions. Any particular experience of echolocation on the part of a bat is conceptual insofar as it relates not just to a qualitative feeling but to a specific *kind* of goal that a specific *kind* of animal has in a specific *kind* of situation. The bat does not merely experience particular, disorganized sensations; it experiences a kind or type of purpose in accordance with those sensations. It experiences recognition and purpose as rational rather than sensory categories. Its singular point of view is not limited to sensation alone. It has *this* hunger and *this* fear which resemble the hunger and fear of other bats in similar situations. Its objective species nature and its subjective point of view correspond.

The universality that can be found in the subjective singularity of bat experience highlights something interesting about the difference between human and animal ways of judging reality. It seems very unlikely that any other species besides our own has members who are so deeply fascinated by their own subjectivity. At their most basic level, human and animal sensations and emotions usually indicate physical need and prompt some kind of urgent action. If we ignore the connection between subjectivity and objective physical need, then we will indeed never understand what it is like to be a bat. It is a remarkable feat of human observation and reason (two of our most astounding skills) that, without experiencing things as a bat does, we are yet able to infer a bat's mode of inference, through the medium of scientific investigation. Let us not sell ourselves short.

Chalmers and What It Is Like to Be a Chalmersian Creature

David Chalmers splits the human mind into two separate parts. One of his definitions of mind belongs to cognitive psychology:

Cognitive science deals largely in the explanation of behavior, and insofar as it is concerned with mind at all, it is with mind construed as those states relevant to the causation and explanation of behavior. Such states may or may not be conscious. From the point of view of cognitive science, an internal state responsible for the causation of behavior is equally mental whether it is conscious or not. (11)

Cognition, or thought, by this definition, is not conceptual thought but any internal functional state (seemingly analogous to that of a computer, though Chalmers does not say so) that leads to an observable behavior. He terms this version of the mind the "psychological concept of mind." Chalmers's other definition of mind is Thomas Nagel's definition of consciousness. Conscious experience is limited to purely subjective, emotional, or sensory conscious experience. Chalmers warns that his use of the term consciousness excludes other commonly employed meanings of the term, including "the ability to introspect or to report one's mental states" (6). Chalmers terms this the "phenomenal concept" of mind. He assures us that the two concepts of mind, psychological and phenomenal, are not in competition since "they cover different phenomena (functional versus conscious), both of which are quite real" (6). The most striking aspect of this division is that it takes for granted that a subject must confront its own objective nature as an alien thing.

According to Chalmers, thought is only conscious insofar as it is juxtaposed with feeling. Any thoughts that do not have a qualitative feel associated with them are not conscious. While a thought is never an object of consciousness, it can be an object of *awareness*. Awareness is broadly defined as having access to information, internal or external, that can be used to determine behavior. Chalmers defines voluntary action vaguely as action "caused in the appropriate sort of way by an element of prior thought" (27). Despite his attempts to reserve judgment concerning the relationship between phenomenal and psychological minds, he has made it impossible to interpret that relationship as anything other than a juxtaposition. This begs the question: why should any juxtaposition occur at all, ever? Why should some thoughts have negative emotions associated with them and other thoughts have positive emotions associated with them?

While a discussion of zombies per se is not relevant here, this description illuminates Chalmers's notion of a real person: he argues for the logical possibility of "zombies," creatures with psychological minds but no phenomenal consciousness. To make his concept of a person more concrete, let us assemble all of Chalmers's descriptions and name the result a Chalmerian Creature, so

that we may reserve judgment as to whether Chalmers's description deserves to be termed a person. Consciousness, for a Chalmersian creature, is the ability to passively feel, to have subjective sensations and emotions. Awareness is the ability to gain access to information that can be used to control behavior. A Chalmersian creature may blend its phenomenal and psychological capacities to passively examine its own internal states. It may also translate these states into language so that it may passively report them to others.

Sensing Velvet Versus Sensing Self: Is a Chalmersian Creature Even Possible?

Phenomenal mind is conscious only of sensations and internal states of feeling. Chalmers claims that all states of consciousness are also states of awareness. If this is true, it might mean that there is no such thing as pure consciousness, though this may not be the message he intends to convey. One of the forms of conscious experience Chalmers discusses is tactile experience. He charges us to "think of the feel of velvet, and contrast it to the texture of cold metal, or a clammy hand, or a stubbly chin. . . . All of these," he concludes, "have their own unique quality" (8). Yet their uniqueness does not enable us to understand tactile experience; rather, their lack of uniqueness does. The feel of velvet differs from the texture of cold metal, but the feel of *this* velvet does not differ substantially from the feel of *that* velvet. Nor do we suppose that my experience of velvet differs substantially from your experience of velvet. Furthermore, the faculty of making distinctions, in general, is a faculty of conceptual thought, not of sensation. In sensation there is no distinction; there is only sensation. Any act of comparison is an act of memory, of holding in mind the idea of something already experienced while experiencing something new. To experience softness as softness, I must have an idea of hardness to which to compare it. This is not an act of pure sensation but an act of sensation together with thought, aided by memory.

If my thoughts are like your thoughts—and I can communicate my idea of softness to you, or my idea of hardness to you—if there is any objective component at all to subjective experience, this is surely something remarkable and difficult to explain. Chalmers no doubt assumes there is *some* objective component to subjective experience or he would not bother to write about the *nature* of subjective experience. At the very least, he assumes that we all experience subjectivity unless we have the misfortune to be zombies. He infers, on the basis of his own subjective experience, that it is likely that others have

subjective experience as well, and he writes a book in language, which refers to concepts, on the basis of his implicit belief that others will understand the concepts in his mind and relate these concepts to their own subjective experiences. We each experience only particular sensations. I have felt only a limited collection of velvet objects in my entire lifetime, and Chalmers has felt only a limited collection of velvet objects in his entire lifetime. Yet, somehow, when he speaks of velvet, I know precisely what he means. He is communicating through the medium of concepts symbolized by words, which are not confined to either his or my experiences but cover all possible experiences of velvet till the end of time. If Chalmers were willing to admit the existence of conceptual thought, he would likely be forced to place it under the heading of psychological mind. However, the inescapable conclusion that analysis of the concept of phenomenal mind reveals is that it is incoherent without conceptual thought.

Chalmers would like to reserve a place for self-consciousness, but he does not seem to be aware that his limited definition of consciousness makes this impossible. He notes that one sometimes *feels a sense* of self, but this sense of self is *insubstantial* and therefore at times seems illusory. So he cannot decide whether there is "nothing over and above specific elements" of consciousness or "something to conscious experience that transcends all these specific elements" (Chalmers 10). Perhaps a Chalmerian creature could have some subjective feeling simultaneously with an awareness of an idea of selfness or of *its* self, but it can have no sensation which is specifically a self sensation, since there is no sense organ which is specifically a self-sensing organ.

Descartes and What It Is Like to Be a Cartesian Creature

Chalmers is opposed to Descartes' conception of the conscious mind as comprising all of the thoughts, imaginings, volitions, passions, and sensations of a person insofar as this conflates psychological and phenomenal mind. Since the experience of conscious mind is in reality likewise comprised of these elements, perhaps we might pardon Descartes for conflating psychological and phenomenal mind. Descartes discovers that there is nothing he knows with greater certainty than the fact that he is a thinking thing. He can doubt everything else, but not that he thinks, because doubting is a kind of thinking; therefore he must exist and must be a thinking thing. At this early stage of his meditations, he cannot trust any of his feelings or sensations because he knows that he has drawn false conclusions from them in the past. He posits the possibility of an evil demon who might have caused him to have

these sensations. To translate this possibility into contemporary language, we might say that his body was like a computer and some creature like a computer programmer had decided to program him with these feelings and sensations (Descartes 108–9).

If there are remaining states or processes within the organism that have external, behavioral, or functional effects, and yet are not conceptual thoughts, these do not belong to the person *qua* mind insofar as the mind is “only a thinking and unextended thing” (Descartes 190). “I think, therefore *I* am” only applies to those thoughts of which the mind is aware. “It processes, therefore it is” might apply to some part of my brain or my body, some part of this physical apparatus to which I find myself, my critically thinking conceptual self, shackled. If I do become aware of these processes, I confront them as an alien thing—something horrifying, disconnected from my will and my critical faculties. At the same time, I do not doubt that human reason could find a way to master them, in time, should the need become sufficiently pressing.

It seems that a Cartesian creature is very different from a Chalmersian creature. Chalmers’s characterization of introspection as “the process by which we can become aware of the contents of our internal states” is oddly mechanical (26). It is not the contents of our own minds of which we simply *become aware* but the sensations and emotions, which he believes alone constitute consciousness. Some of us may be haunted by unpleasant conceptual thoughts that will not require much introspection to unearth, but we are lucky enough to be Cartesian creatures. We can also take charge of our own thoughts; we need not merely observe them. Chalmers posits an ability to control behavior on the basis of so-called information, but not an ability to be critical of this information or to refute it. To merely observe our own thoughts as if they were a printout of the progress of a computation is very zombie-like or computer-like but not very person-like. In any case, it is not what the Cartesian creature would do.

Conclusion: What It Is Like to Wonder What It Is Like To Be Another Person

Both Nagel and Chalmers assume there is *something it is like* to be a singular subject—*this* bat or *this* person—but when I stop and try to think to *myself* what it is like to be me, I find that I do not think it is like anything in particular. I have never been anyone else. I am not aware of any unique quality

that defines my conscious experience. Without difference, there is no differentiation, no definition. However, when I am faced with the necessity of explaining myself to another person, I discover all manner of somethings it is like to be me that are different from what it is like to be this other person. What I took for the fundamental structure of experience is apparently only the fundamental structure of *my* experience. I might as well be talking to a bat, except that this other person is encouraging me to speak and is continuing to listen as if an ability to recognize the concepts embodied in my words, a second sight far stranger than echolocation, allowed this person to actually envision the landscape of my subjective personal experience. Experimentally, I determine that whenever I am in a situation where I must "report the contents" of my mind, as Chalmers phrases it (26), both the cognitive content and the subjective state of my mind are dramatically altered. I do not simply translate preexisting thoughts into language. I put myself in the place of another, looking at me, trying to understand me. No other species has such a sophisticated structure in place for the communication of ideas among its members—or such a far-reaching capacity for cognitive empathy. No theory of the person that ignores these two outstanding human capacities—conceptual thought or cognitive empathy—should be given a second thought.

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