

# Nature of the Mind: Perspectives From Philosophy



**What is this  
course about?**



# Goals for first session



The background is a solid orange color. In the top-left corner, there are three vertical bars of varying heights, each composed of several overlapping semi-transparent orange circles. In the bottom-right corner, there are four vertical bars of varying heights, also composed of overlapping semi-transparent orange circles.

**Nagel: What is it like to  
be a bat?**

**Initial Thoughts?**





# Some Definitions

- Materialism/Physicalism
- Dualism
- “Qualia”
- Mind-Body Problem
- Consciousness?



# Nagel's Objections

Nagel thinks that reductionists approaches to consciousness (some version of physicalism) fail to capture mental phenomenon

“Any reductionist program has to be based on an analysis of what is to be reduced. If the analysis leaves something out, the problem will be falsely posed” p.437

“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” p.437



# Nagel's Reasonings

Organisms have conscious mental states: There is something it is like to be that organism (p.436)

Bats are one such organism, but we cannot imagine at all what it is like to be a bat. We can imagine behaving like a bat, or seeing through echolocation, but that would be us imagining what it would be like for **us to be a bat**, but not what it would be like for a **bat to be a bat**





## Nagel's Reasonings (2)

We would only know **types** of experience, i.e pain, hunger, etc because we can observe them, but the **flavor** of that experience (what is it like to taste chocolate?) would be lost on us

Imagine the reverse case with “Martians”: they would also only know the general **types** of behavior, but they would not know our rich inner world



## Nagel and “Point Of View”

“The more different from oneself the other experiencer is, the less success one can expect with this enterprise” (p.442) (sharing an experience with another)

Nagel claims that what it is like **for the organism** experiencing some phenomenon, can only be described from a single point of view; the organism experiencing it



# Point Of View + Objectivity

Materialism seeks to make an explanation that can be “observed and understood from many points of view”

There is an objective nature to phenomenon; i.e. lightning, such as the chemical/physical processes that give rise to it, that can be looked at from many different perspectives. The phenomenon may be observed from many different view points, but it exists outside of those view points.

In the case of subjective experience, its entire existence has to do with the view point through which it is made

“After all what would be left of what it was like to be a bat if one removed the viewpoint of the bat?”

**“Any shift to greater objectivity -that is, less attachment to a specific viewpoint -does not take us nearer to the real nature of the phenomenon: it takes us farther away from it.”**



# Nagel: What To Do Next?

Not a complete denial of physicalism: “It would be a mistake to conclude that physicalism must be false” (p.446)

“It would be truer to say that physicalism is a position we cannot understand because we do not at present have any conception of how it might be true” (p.446)

X is Y (brain is mind) but we do not know HOW at all.

Matter is Energy Analogy

Objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or imagination -> is something still left out?



# Discussion

Is there really something it is like to be a bat? (Dennett objection)

Does consciousness have a causal role in our behavior? I.e. does it change how we act, etc?  
Or is it merely a byproduct to which we witness events?

Could language help explain all of this? Is there sufficient language to tell you what it is like to see the color red, if you could not already see it?

After reading Nagel's paper where do your intuitions fall closer to; that of dualism or physicalism, or something else?

Is there really something over and above physical matter when it comes to consciousness?



## Joe Ash

For me the Nagel piece (quite famous in the annals of philosophy, I guess) was a very heavy slog, not having read much philosophy in 50 years. I'm sure I haven't fully reassimilated all the concepts on which the essay is based (e.g., materialism, reduction, psychophysical identification, phenomenology, physicalism, neobehaviorism, logical positivism).

I'm understanding him to say that materialistic analysis can't lead you to a subjective truth - what it's "like" to be in a certain state, what some other entity (a bat or a Martian) is experiencing. But, as I think he acknowledges, the "what it's like" can totally be the product of objective physical realities. A Martian may not know what it's like to be a human in a euphoric state, but it can know that it is the result of a purely physical process involving endorphins, etc. I'm not sure I fully get the point.



# Martha Gallagher

ALL of these articles were a slog and all suffer from the authors' lack of up-to-date knowledge of neuroscience. I found it difficult to engage in the fascinating, controversial, but difficult issues raised when the basic premises of many of their suppositions are wrong. ("Suppose we split the brain of A into 2 identical half brains and place each..." Each half of our brains is NOT identical. This fact was known at the time of these articles ). The authors are requiring me to suspend disbelief in order to make their points. I shouldn't have to do this in order to reasonably consider their arguments.





## John Dooley

Of the three readings, the one of most interest to me is Nagel's famous early (1974) challenge to the prevailing doctrine of physicalist or functionalist reductionism as an account of mental events, particularly, consciousness. Of even greater interest to me is Nagel's extension of his argument in his 2012 book, "Mind and Cosmos", which has the provocative subtitle, "Why the materialist neo-Darwinian conception of nature is almost certainly false". Other examples of similar argumentation include John Searles' critique of functionalist accounts of such mental behavior as language translation (i.e., the Chinese Room paper). These two writers, and others, such as David Chalmers, articulate my own unease with purely materialist/physicalist/functionalist accounts of mind, of mental events, and of the "hard problem of consciousness".



# Ann Dooley

I ended up reading the three articles because I found them all of interest, and ended up wondering if anyone - my self included - knows anything about anything that is being talked about.

It started with cloning which seemed easy since there was an Abstract with clearly defined terms. However, McMahon then directly addresses the term "identity" which now to me might just be a code word for a belief. Nagel's observation in 1974 concerning terms got me wondering if 50 years later in 2020 we are any nearer to getting out of the quagmire.

I do have many thoughts, ideas, and observations concerning these issues which I would like to and will share with the group if the flow of conversation seems to be moving toward this being appropriate.



# Rory O'Connor (1)

I have read most of the three articles, and found them interesting. Nagel's piece about the bat was the most insightful of the three (the occasional humorous aside helped!).

Each of the three formidable authors took a somewhat different tack to address the mind-body-identity problem. Since we have so little in common with the bat, it's almost impossible to imagine what their experience is like, but we can't dismiss that they have an experience as they use echolocation to make their way to their prey. While we cannot identify with their point of view (pov), there is little question that bats have a pov. Bats have the same difficulty understanding our pov. There is no relationship between a bat's pov and the collection of objective facts about their wings, their echolocation, their dexterity. We can never get to the bat's pov by studying their flights etc etc.



## Rory O'Connor(2)

I guess my reaction to all three papers is this: That we can ask questions in very clever ways, and dream up scenarios - divided brains transplanted into different people, of killing a clone to harvest their organs - does not mean the questions have meaning. Anselm in 1078 offered as proof for the existence of God the very definition of God: "a being than which no greater can be conceived". Such a being must exist at least in the mind, because if it didn't, then it wouldn't be as great as a being that did.

So I question whether the mind/brain/identity questions asked by our three authors are real, or just exercises in mental agility. Just like Anselm.

Admirable, but pointless.

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# Parfit: Personal Identity

**Initial Thoughts?**





# Parfit: Questions About Identity

There may be situations regarding personal identity to which our usual way of thinking of identity fail us

We feel as if the question “Would it be me” must have an answer

We will not have an answer surrounding the status of whether or not one entity is identical with another

Parfit thinks this **poses no problem**

What’s more, personal identity holds less importance than we usually ascribe it. “Certain [other] important questions do **presuppose a question about personal identity**. But they can be freed of this presupposition” p.4



# Parfit: The Division Case

To illustrate the main points behind his theses, Parfit centers the entire article around a thought experiment.

My brain is divided and each half is housed in a new body

What happens to me?

1. I do not survive
2. I survive as only one of the two people
3. I survive as both





# Parfit's Initial Responses to the Division Case

1. I survive if only one half of my brain is transposed. How can it be that if there are two, I do not survive?
2. Each is a resulting person. If I survive as only one, what makes one of them "me" and not the other?
3. I survive as both: but in the cases of identity, there can only be one!



# Parfit Reconciling the Division Case

We could then say that there are two people (avoiding the identity problem)

Gives the analogy where the brain is divided to handle separate computational tasks

“A person’s mental history need not be like a canal with only one channel. It could be like a river, with islands, and with separate streams” (p.7)

This picture is still incomplete: The mind is soon reunited in the above thought experimtn, and there is only one body. The Division case still eludes us.



# Parfit: Casting Away Identity

“I shall argue [to] give up the language of identity. We can suggest that I survive as two different people without implying that I am these people (p.8)

There **is no** answer to this question of identity. In this Division case, an answer regarding personal identity is implausible.



# Parfit: Secondary Questions

There are other questions that presuppose a question about personal identity; the Division case puts us in a bind in those situations because we no longer have a conceptual framework surrounding it

“Will I survive?”

We typically turn to our usual models of identity to be able to answer this question

The rest of the paper is dedicated to trying to flush out this point in more detail



# Parfit: What Matters?

Parfit argues that what matters with secondary questions, such as those regarding survival, are things like **psychological continuity**

“Judgements of personal identity have great importance. What gives them their importance is the fact that they imply psychological continuity. This is why, whenever there is such continuity, we ought, if we can, to imply it by making a judgement of identity” (p.12)

He claims that when we **can** talk about identity, we are using psychological continuity as the grounds for any statement regarding identity. It is the criterion for identity that we can now use for situations where talk of identity seems implausible.



## Parfit's Three Aims:

1. Suggest a sense of “survive” that does not imply identity
2. What matters in survival are relations of degree
3. None of these relations need to be described in a way that presupposes identity



# Parfit And Relations That Presuppose Identity

Q memory

I can have memories, intentions, or any other sort of relations with another entity, and have those not necessarily be my own

“Have you heard this music before”

“I am sure that I q-remember hearing it. I am not sure whether it was I who heard it, or the original person.

This would be the sort of situation that happens in the Division Case for one of the transplanted people

**“Many different relations are included within, or are a consequence of psychological continuity. We describe these relations in ways which presuppose the continued existence of one person. But we could describe them in a new way which do not.”**





# Parfit And Survival As A Matter Of Degree

Uses the example of Fusion: inverse of the Division case

I hate red hair and always vote Labour

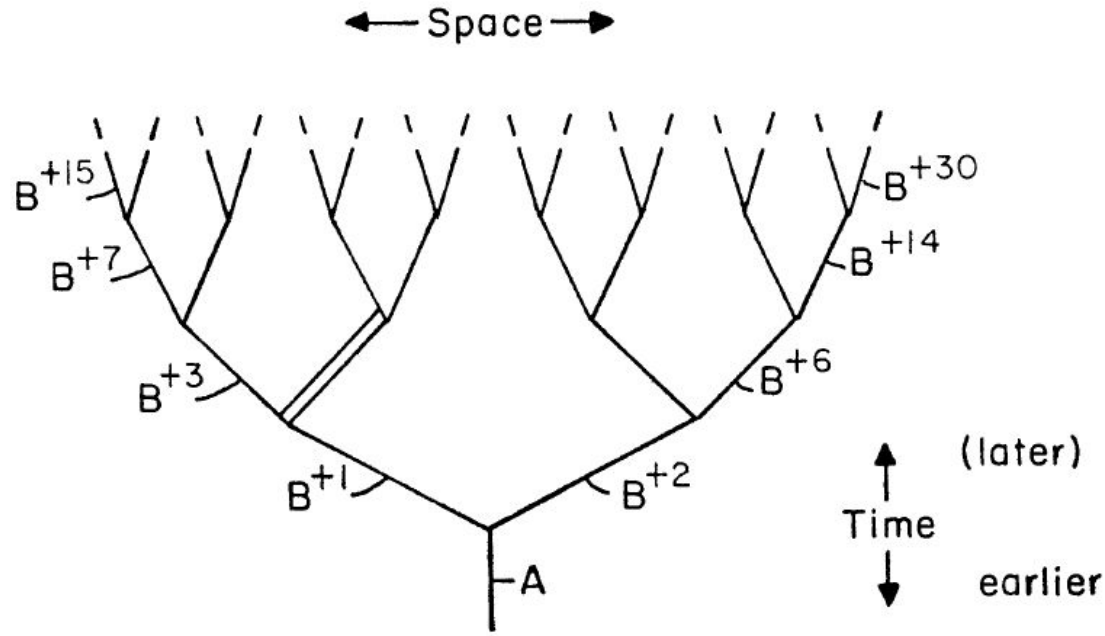
I love red hair and always vote Conservative

New person will be indifferent red hair, and occupy a middle ground politically.

Other situations where more or less of one of the person's traits become more predominant in the new fused person

Suggests that while I most certainly “survive” it would be a matter of degree. Would not be **death** because I would merely be changing traits slightly, something that happens often

# Parfit And Imaginary Beings





# Parfit And Imaginary Beings

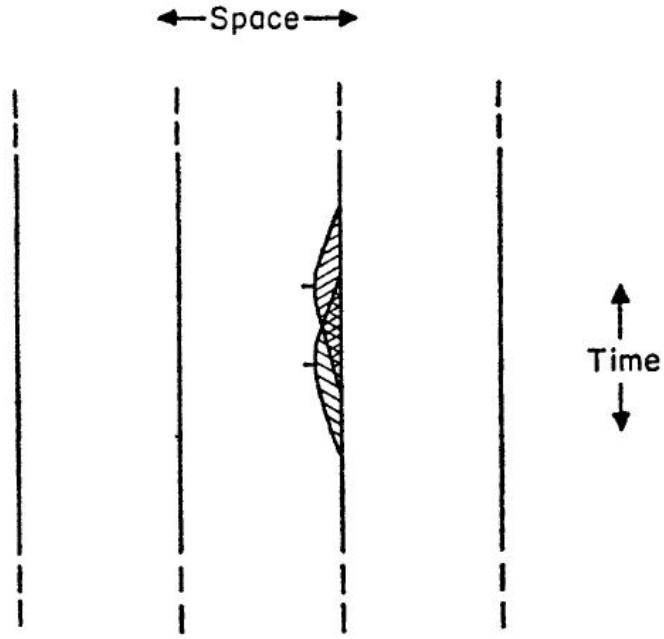
Parfit's claim with regards to the picture above is that there is psychological continuity between all of the beings, but only those that are closer to the original A have greater psychological connectedness (the first case of the Division).

I.e. if we ran more and more experiments with the Division, the person several iterations later would be less like the original than the people from the first iterations

Supports his claim of survival as a matter of degree, not binary as identity would suggest.



# Parfit: Other Imagined Beings





# Parfit: Other Imagined Beings

In the previous picture, we see now that “Direct psychological relations hold only between those parts which are close to each other in time. This gives our beings a reason for **not** thinking of each ‘line’ as corresponding to one single life... The distinction between successive selves can be made by reference, not to the branching of psychological continuity, but to the degrees of psychological connectedness. Since this connectedness is a matter of degree, the drawing of these distinctions can be left to the choice of the speaker”



# Discussion

What are some different possible conceptions of self that we hold personally?

How do we view mental experiences (phenomenon such as pain, hunger, etc) differently from awareness itself? I.e. the medium to which consciousness presents itself to us?

Is a notion of “self” a prerequisite for conscious experience? I.e. do I need to have an understanding of “me” having said experience, in order to have any experience?