

Dualism & Reductionism: Thomas Nagel's "Panpsychism"

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11/11/2016

In the 13th Chapter of his 1979 essay anthology *Mortal Questions*, Thomas Nagel reviews the various premises and questions surrounding the proposal of panpsychism. He defines it in simplest terms to open the chapter, "By panpsychism I mean the view that the basic physical constituents of the universe have mental properties whether or not they are part of living organisms" (Nagel, 181). In short, panpsychism is a theory for the mind-body problem, an attempt to explain the roles of the physical and nonphysical as it pertains to consciousness. It stands on four pillars: material composition, nonreductionism, realism, and nonemergence. All organisms come from matter which is fundamentally universal, there is a boundary separating mental from physical states, both mental and physical states are real properties of organisms and not fabricated out of nothing, and both mental and physical wholes are no more than their mental and physical constituents. The material composition premise differentiates it from pure, Cartesian dualism, and the nonreductionism premise separates it from a true reductive theory of mind. So, it lies somewhere in between; accepting of the possibility of purely nonphysical states, but unwilling to disconnect those states from the physical world.

First needing to reconcile material composition with nonreductionism, Nagel proposes the idea of nonphysical components, which cannot be defined in terms of physical inference, which make-up nonphysical mental states. He extends this by introducing the ideas of even more basic properties from which both physical and nonphysical properties are derived. Only with the presence of these base properties can mental states be separate from physical states, yet still be comprised of matter.

Next, in regards to nonemergence, Nagel offers the distinction between causality and correlation. To bridge the gap between the aggregate of mental and physical state components and mental states themselves, there must be *causality*. That is, it does not suffice to simply say "every time physical state x occurs, mental state y occurs," because that merely implies a succession of events, or correlation. Instead, there needs to be an intrinsic compelling of mental state y by physical state x , in Nagel's words it must "necessitate" (Nagel, 187) y .

Finally, Nagel questions whether a cogent argument establishing that mental states are nonreductionist would necessarily discredit that mental states are real. For this, he reaches back to ideas from his previous essay *What is it Like to Be a Bat?* (1979), which establishes his idea of subjective consciousness. That is, the idea of qualities which are determined by the type of point of view from which they come. In Nagel's words, we cannot understand the subjective experiences of the mind by studying the physical brain because "no description or analysis of the objective nervous system, however complete, will ever by itself imply anything which is not objective, i.e., which can be understood only from one kind of viewpoint, that of the being whose states are being described" (Nagel, 188). The problem is: where did this subjective "point-of-view" come from?

Wittgenstein proposes that points-of-view are, in short, a created quality, in that it arrives from a context-based external ascription. This would satisfy the nonreductionist-realism conflict, but seems flawed because it relies heavily on the ability to express mental states; it leaves no room for mental states which cannot be ascribed because they cannot be expressed, either because we don't have the language or don't have the empathy necessary to ascribe them.

All in all, Nagel leaves conflicted and unsatisfied with panpsychism as a solution to the mind-body problem.

Personally, I left impressed with Nagel's writing and his arguments. The four premises are successful in establishing the inherent counterintuitiveness of panpsychism: reconciling nonreductionism with nonemergence. Furthermore, he skillfully navigates the difficulty of writing coherently about a concept which, from the start, is characterized by its

lack of ability to be defined by understood physical laws—mental states and nonphysical matter.

My major commentary, which is briefly touched on towards the end, is the role of experiences as a base property of subjectivity. There are physical properties of experience that are understood objectively, but the effect of a series of experience on the assessment of the world is definitively individual. The type, magnitude, and order of experiences for a given person most certainly shapes their conceptions and mental states. Nagel asserts in some capacity that establishing experience as a nonphysical property of point-of-view runs dangerously close to objectifying point-of-view. It offers a path to make point-of-view merely a concoction of experiences. In the case of that being a fatal flaw, there probably *is* no validity to panpsychism, at least in Nagel's sense of mental states being "real" via subjectivity, as it establishes an innate paradox between mental state material composition and subjectivity.

In the end, it seems as though panpsychism is discredited, or at least suspended, due to its inability to really establish proof of a coherent individual concept of mental states. Still, some legitimized beliefs are brought up within the overall assessment of panpsychism. Conceptions of a universal, nonphysical origin for physical and nonphysical properties, and of subjective mental state via unique type of point of view, are both interesting and applicable theories which deserve additional integration into dualist and semi-dualist philosophy.