Is Nagel Davidsonible?

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1. Are Phenomenological Factors Non-Physical?

In "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", Nagel holds that if we attribute "conscious mental states" to some organism, inevitably we are also committing ourselves to the claim that "there is something like to *be* that organism – something it is like *for* the organism" (Nagel 1991, 422)[1] So, according to his view, an organism's consciousness and the *subjective* way in which that organism copes with its environment – the phenomenological element – are conceptually dependent. Therefore, every explanation of the mental must take into account the presence of these phenomenological properties. However, Nagel continues, physicalist approaches are unsatisfactory, since the subjective factors of organisms' experiences are not liable to be explained physically. Any physical approach will leave out these phenomenological properties. Inner experiences, the product of the relation with the world, are not identical to physical structures.

The Nagelian reasons to follow this path stem from his conception of experience. For him, inner experiences are necessarily restricted to a certain point of view. There are no experiences without particular "systems of representation". As he himself comments, bats and ourselves have different points of view because we have a different physical apparatus to answer to the world than bats. For bats have structures as sonars and wings which do not exist in human bodies. Therefore, the variation in points of view is promoted by physical distinctions. Since we have not the physical structure of bats we will never take up the bat's point of view and, accordingly, we will never know what it is like to be a bat.

Nagel also states that our knowledge of the physical world, in contrast to the way we grasp mental states, is free from any point of view. A physical description of an organism tells us how this organism is without any particular lens. And, for this reason, it leaves out phenomenological elements and, consequently, its conscious mental states. For inner experiences can only be seen with particular lenses. Thus the subjective character of experiences is not identical to physical structures.

That mental phenomena cannot be identified with physical events implies that human beings are their bodies plus something else. The problem, therefore, is to explain satisfactorily what this "something else" is. A way of doing this is to appeal, as Descartes did, to a dualism of substances. That is to say, this "something else" would be a substance different from the physical substance. Therefore, according to that view, human beings would be "mental substances" plus "physical substances". To hold the existence of two substances in turn means to hold also that these substances are self-sufficient. Then our knowledge of mental states does not require any knowledge of physical states. So, if we are disposed to accept the plausibility of an externalist conception of mind – the thesis that the specification of some mental state must involve the environment too or, as Putnam (1975) puts it, "meanings just ain't in the head" – this path will appear untenable.

The mental and the physical appear to be in constant interaction. Mental states depend upon physical structures to occur – without brain processes there is no room for mental states – as well as many bodily movements are caused by mental states. So, an account of the mental must be compatible with these interactions. However, while the dualistic account appears to ground the intuition that there is a deep contrast between the mental and the physical, it seems that it leaves us without an answer to the question of how the mind and the world are related. For how can something non-physical interfere with something physical and vice-versa?

In addition, we could be suspicious of the very idea of substance and, therefore, doubt whether it gets us further concerning the attempt to explain the mental/physical contrast. Another distinct problem we could have with the Cartesian approach is that it refuses the causal closure of the physical world. For the acceptance of the existence of a mental substance entails that we can have two systems being physically equivalent such that in one of them the physical laws work very well whereas in the other they do not – in virtue of the presence of mental states in the latter.

An attempt to save the intuition that there are phenomenological elements of the mental which cannot be grasped by a physical description suggests strongly a dualism of substances. However, as we tried to point out in the last paragraphs, this route appears to be not an alternative easy to swallow. And, if we reject the Cartesian landscape, the only route apparently available is a materialistic view according to which all that exists is physical. This perspective in turn leaves us with the alternative that if there is something special to the mental domain – as phenomenology – it must be physical. But, if we accept as a whole the Nagelian reasoning, this is false. So, would it be possible, in opposition to Nagel, to save the phenomenology of our mental states in front of a materialistic background? Or can there be a background which is neither materialistic nor dualistic?

2. Can Phenomenology Be Non-Conceptual?

As we stated earlier, Nagel holds that the way we know physical states, in opposition to mental states, is free from whatever particular point of view. As he himself says, physical events are

> a domain of objective facts *par excellence* – the kind that can be observed and understood from many points of view and by individuals with differing perceptual systems (p. 425).

So, he seems to accept the idea according to which the world is itself without a point of view. Accordingly, someone's point of view should be understood as the product of one's contribution plus the world's contribution. Otherwise, the distinction between the world without and with some point of view would not make sense. In addition, since phenomenological factors are understood as the world with a particular point of view, they will have no

[1] All quotes here are to page numbers of Nagel's paper unless indicated otherwise.

objectivity. They will not reach the world as it is in itself but with some dust, so to speak.

Davidson (1984) argues against this Nagelian image, according to which the world is free from points of view but accessible through many points of view. In his own terminology, this image is committed to the dualism between conceptual schemes and empirical content. Davidson says that this image depends on the presupposition – which he believes to be false – that we can be justified in holding that an organism has a different point of view without having beliefs in common with it. So, if this assumption is false, the same will happen with the Nagelian notion of the world as free from points of view. In short, the reasons to hold this thesis is because in a situation where we have no shared beliefs with some organism, we will never recognize this organism as having any point of view.

The rejection of the dualism between empirical facts and conceptual schemes seems to entail the following restriction: if we can say something about the subjective way organisms cope with their external environment it has to be inside the bounds of the conceptual. That is to say, we cannot explain inner experiences appealing to a relation which comprises an authority outside our concepts[2].

In the first section we tried to suggest that the Nagelian conception of phenomenology as non-physical prompts us in the direction to the complicated notion of dualism of substances. In this present section in turn we suggested that Nagel's view hangs on a false premise: the dualism between conceptual scheme and empirical content. But does that mean that we have to give up any notion of phenomenology?

3. Why not Phenomenology?

It seems that the intuition which instigates the talk about phenomenology is the feeling that conscious states have something which cannot be grasped by any physical explanation. It is the belief that there is some difference between the physical description of, for instance, someone's perception of the colour red and the very experience of redness. One strategy, the Nagelian one, is to suppose that the way organisms cope with the world includes something outside the conceptual domain. It would be something non-conceptual which defines the experience of redness. So, if the defense of a notion of phenomenology depends on this supposition, the very idea of phenomenology seems to vanish together with it. But would not there be an alternative route? Why not a phenomenology understood as inside the bounds of the conceptual? It is exactly this path that we will suggest in the next paragraphs.

Let's consider a particular situation where one person asserts that another is acting. That assertion commits itself to the idea that there is something in advance of the bodily movements – the mental states – which are responsible for the observed bodily movements (it would be strange to hold, for example, that heart beats are genuine actions). When we ascribe mental states to an agent we are also ascribing to it the ability to envisage different alternatives and to choose to act according to one of them. Of course in many situations in virtue of an external impediment – as, for instance, a physical barrier – it is not possible to act upon the choice. However, even so, the ability to be conscious of different alternatives remains and, in a situation where there is not an external impediment, it will enable the agent in question to behave in a specific way. So, those conscious states will ground the idea that persons are responsible for their actions and, accordingly, the fact that many times we are free to act.

It seems that this way of thinking can be extended to our practices of justification as a whole. Because, as in the case of actions, the very assumption that there are reasons in favor or against some statement only makes sense to agents which are free to hold different statements. So, as in the case of actions, since believing is always believing some particular statement and not another, beliefs necessarily endorse responsibility. Then freedom seems to be a central notion to understand the functioning of our conceptual practices. If we remove this notion, our very ability of recognizing world states seems to vanish. The notion of freedom in turn has no room in our explanation of physical behaviour. For physical objects behave according to physical laws and, therefore, in a deterministic way. Thus, the fact that mental states are conceptually dependent on the notion of freedom entails an image according to which the world is sharply divided into mental and physical events. So, it seems we save the idea that inner experiences involve something non-physical without going outside the conceptual domain.

To say that we cannot understand mental processes without the notion of freedom is equivalent to the thesis that we can only understand the way we cope with the world with the mediation of the notion of freedom. That is, we have inner experiences about the world in so far as it is tenable to attribute some degree of freedom to us. Otherwise, there would be nothing distinctively mental and, therefore, we would be deterministic beings or, in other words, automata. There is a fact about what it is like to be a human being because we can make choices and be responsible for them. But does not appealing to the idea of something distinctively mental have the risk to fall in a dualism of substances?

A tempting way to follow in order to get away from a charge of dualism is to embrace a type identity between mental and physical states. So, according to this view, for each mental type (as desiring) there would be a unique physical type identical to it (as the discharge of a certain kind of nerve cell) and vice-versa. In other words, this reductionist view holds that we can know psychophysical laws between mental and physical events. However, a reductionist route does not take into account the intuition that there is a difference between perceiving and the respective physical description of it. Because for a reductionist landscape any peculiar mental feature is always a certain peculiar physical structure.

Another way to be a monist is to accept the plausibility of Davidson's anomalous monism (Davidson 1980). This route in turn appears to be at hand if we are disposed to reject the idea of non-conceptual content. For the notion of non-conceptual content seems to presuppose the notion of psychophysical laws. When someone asserts that conscious states are constituted by non-conceptual contents, one is holding that there is some object outside the conceptual sphere which gives us some specific mental representation. So, this way of conceiving subjective experiences hangs on the idea that we can know nomic relations between the mental and the physical. We can know, given some physical state, what conscious mental state will appear in a person after the

[2] In Pedroso (2003) is suggested a way of understanding the belief in non-conceptual contents as committed to the dualism between institution and application of rules which appears false if we accept the plausibility of Wittgensteinian remarks concerning rule-following.

perception. Therefore, it becomes clear why Nagel cannot accept Davidson's anomalous monism since it rejects the very idea of psychophysical laws.

But if we jettison the idea that what is distinctive in the phenomenological domain is devoid of non-conceptual factors, a Davidsonian route appears tempting. For if we repel the idea of psychophysical laws then we can also hold that mental explanations have their own place. Physical descriptions will never replace mental descriptions once and for all. The difference between the physical description of the experience of a red patch and the very experience of redness is maintained. However the rejection of the notion of non-conceptual contents entails something Nagel was not apt to accept. It is the idea that animals don't have conscious states[3]. Can we afford this?

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[3] Cf. Davidson (2001) where he makes exactly this move.