

"What is it like to be a bat?" - Thomas Nagel

Task: Give a sketch of Nagel's argumentation! What consequences come out of it according to your opinion?

Introduction: The text "What it is like to be a bat?" was written by Thomas Nagel in 1974. According to Nagel, the philosophical discussions at that time gave little or no attention to consciousness. Because consciousness would complicate the mind-body problem in an unsolvable manner, but without consciousness, the problem seemed much less interesting.

Nagel says that reductionists often use analogies to explain the relation between mind and body, but he doubts that the current analogies will succeed in explaining this relation. He also gives the example of a bat to show that consciousness is based on subjective qualia and therefore is **not** similar for different beings, because of the big differences which occur in the experiences of these species and which finally build the consciousness.

In the following, I will give a short sketch on Nagel's argumentation and discuss possible consequences which could occur if his argumentation is correct.

Nagel's argumentation: Nagel's argumentation tries to point out that there are big differences in the consciousness of animals, humans and maybe aliens. These differences would be a result of the different experiences and sensory inputs which species receive.

To illustrate this, Nagel uses the example of a bat to explain how the perception can differ between diverse species, for example a bat and a human. Bats have a very weak visual sense but they are able to offset this drawback by their highly advanced sonar sense. It operates with high frequency soundwaves which are reflected by certain objects like walls or insects. The bat uses the small time differences between the return of the soundwaves to build an image of the surrounding.

The crucial point about this example is that a human does not have the slightest idea of how it could be to perceive this sense. We do not have any sense that is even similar to it and therefore no approach to imagine how it could feel.

People often make the mistake to describe unknown things with things they know, but to imagine the sonar image as maybe a 3D polygonal image would be as different from the truth as if we would try to describe a color by a sound or a smell by a temperature. We will never be able to get an idea of a bat's consciousness, because of this lack of information which is necessary to experience what it would be like to be a bat.

Nagel says that even if we would try to behave like a bat and if we would be able to transform ourselves into something like a bat, for example by implanting a sensory organ which is able to emit, receive and process high frequency sounds to give us an idea of

the surrounding, we would still do not know what it is like to be a bat **for a bat**. What we would know is what it is like to behave like

a bat **for a human**. This is the major problem which Nagel outlines! Consciousness is species specific and therefore not understandable for other species more will one be able to duplicate his own consciousness into a computer, machine or anything that is not like himself.

Consequences: If we would fully accept Nagels arguments, we would have also to accept that it is not possible to understand consciousness which is not similar to our own. Consciousness would be fully dependent on the species. But at least there would be the hope to find certain features like rules or facts which build the scaffold of consciousness and will give us a hint on the way to understand our own consciousness at least.

There is also the question if we would be able to ascribe "*normal human*"¹ consciousness to a person who is for example blind or deaf. For sure: such a person has not the same perception than most other persons, but I think the persons consciousness would not be different from those of people who are able to see or to hear, even if that does not perfectly fit to Nagels argumentation. If we would construct this further and assume a human being who is born without any sensory perception, would this person, according to Nagel have consciousness which is compareable to "*normal human*" consciousness at all, because the consciousness of this person would fully be based on its thoughts, which then again would probably differ from those of other humans in an unknown way because of the lack of a complex language to formulate this thoughts into a non simulative structure²?

We would furthermore have to restructure the goals of the strong artificial intelligence. It would no longer be its task to duplicate and understand human consciousness because this would not be createable using a host for consciousness which is not human. The new task for strong artificial intelligence would be to create consciousness of computers or robots which is specific for them and differs from the human consciousness. However, maybe the task to find out how consciousness works in its basics would still be there due to the features of consciousness which I mentioned before.

1 Consciousness of average human beings which is based at least on all human-usual sensory perceptions

2 I assume that if one would lack of any language, his thoughts would only consist of visual and causal assumptions which I'd like to call „simulative“ at this place.