

What Is a Person?
A Critique of Both Reductive and Non-Reductive Naturalism

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What is a person? A simple question? Hardly! Especially from the standpoint of contemporary science! Persons, viewed as physical entities, is no problem, e.g. "Capacity 45 Persons." But from the standpoint of physics, chemistry or neuroscience what is the first-person awareness that we have of ourselves? What is a conscious desire, feeling or thought? What is the "I" in "I decided to write the paper," or in "I hope this paper will be helpful"?

Neuroscience continues to make significant strides in understanding the brain and neural events that underlie mental events; but science, as it now stands, seems categorically unable to deal with personhood in the sense of the life of the mind as experienced by the person. The character of the experiences we have, be it our perception of colors, of sounds, tastes, or of emotions of love, joy, anger, or of conscious desires, intentions, and thoughts—none of this conceptually equates with what science is able to observe. Thus, even if we knew exactly what is going on in the brain when there are conscious experiences, there would seem to be a categorical gap between any description of what transpires neurologically and the fact that these neurological states (and their connections to behavior) give rise to the conscious states with the felt character that they have for the person in question. We continue to learn more and more about the neural bases for such conscious mental states, but the fact of how any of this feels to us seems categorically distinct from our knowledge of the brain and/or of human behavior.

Likewise scientific knowledge seems categorically unable to account for the awareness that we seem to have of ourselves as agents. Study of the brain reveals no single control center that might be physiologically identified with the self. This leads many naturalists (materialists, physicalists) to doubt that there is any common self behind the various decisions we make. What one chooses to have for lunch is a different part of the brain holding sway over what might be called the theater of conscious awareness. When I am deliberating over this paper another part holds sway. Likewise for the emotions that I feel. Is there a common person or agent behind any of these things, or is there just a brain where different parts of it hold sway at different times?

I once had a conversation with a philosophy grad student at the University of Michigan, and he asked me, "Why shouldn't I only believe in that which I can demonstrate to exist?" So I asked him, "Do you believe that you exist?" Being in philosophy, he knew what I was asking and pondered it a bit. I then said, "Although you can never observe yourself, the possessor of all your experiences, and you cannot observe a common agent who is the one having the various thoughts you have or a common agent who makes decisions throughout your day, nonetheless it seems both reasonable and practically important to believe that the 'I,' the self, exists." He neither rejected what I had said nor affirmed it, but said, "I see your point."

This past March I gave a series of Veritas Forum lectures in Finland on "What Is a Person?" The talk focused on five common beliefs that people have about persons, beliefs that are held by most people regardless of the religious beliefs or lack thereof. All of these beliefs are important to our sense of identity and or sense of worth as people, but all of them are at best problematic from the standpoint of the materialist, the naturalist, view of the world. It is easy to see how to justify such beliefs if all that is real is matter and energy in space-time. (If one is a non-reductive naturalist—more on this in a moment—there is an acceptance of the reality of conscious experiences, that, for instance, something like the feeling of pain is real and is not reducible down to behavioral or neural states, but the non-reductive naturalist has problems with the other beliefs on the list.)

The five common beliefs:

1. *Persons endure over time.*

E.g. 5 yr old in a photo: Q: "Is this a photo of you?" A: "Yes, that is I."

2. *Persons bear conscious experiences.*

"Qualia" (sing. "quale") — the character of experiences as felt by the subject

3. *Persons are causal agents.*

Does the conscious "I" "self" do anything? Is it the cause of intentional actions?

4. *Persons bear moral responsibility.*

Entails: I could have done otherwise. But does the conscious self have any directive control?

Does the conscious self have any influence on the course one's life takes?

5. *Persons are of great value.*

For naturalists value has to be simply what people/animals value.

Again, it is important to underscore that these are not just academic issues. Intellectually, one can drop some of the above, but the meaning that we find in our lives is hugely impacted when we drop them.

Many avowed naturalists continued to hold on to the above beliefs even though their naturalism would seem to run contrary to them. A friend once loaned me a "Course on tape," on the philosophy of mind by John Searle. He is a non-reductive naturalist but is adamant that there is nothing but the physical world. One of the lectures was "Free Will," and in it he said that he believes in free will even though he grants that he does not know how to explain in it his naturalistic worldview. He said that it just seems to him from his experience that he has free will. (Without getting into it, it is hard to see how feeling uncoerced shows that the choices and thoughts were not determined by causal chains of neural events.)

Likewise, many naturalistic atheists believe in objective morality, despite a worldview in which values can have no reality beyond people valuing what they do. (There is some objectivity to what contributes to and detracts from human welfare. [E.g. torturing another person does not contribute to their welfare.] However, this neither entails that people *ought* (unconditionally) to care about everyone's welfare; nor does it get one the amount of content that any satisfactory ethics.

But, of course, not liking the consequences of the naturalist worldview does not tell us that naturalism is false. There are many who have grown up in the church and who in college have become persuaded that naturalism is true, and, for a number of these people, they are deeply anguished in having to give up the faith that they grew up believing. The problem as they see it is that science—or so they think—has revealed to us a totally physical world. And, of course, this is the conviction of large numbers of professors and students. For most atheists I know, the Christian faith is not taken seriously because they are convinced that naturalism is true. Further considerations are therefore superfluous.

Now, when it comes to the problem of how to account for consciousness, for qualia, for such things as the feeling of pain, the thoughtful naturalists—those who have thought some about the problem—typically grant that it remains a major unsolved puzzle. But they do not take it as seriously challenging the truth of naturalism. Their assumption is that some day, perhaps with fuller knowledge of the brain, we will surely come to see how it fits with naturalism.

In 2012 the philosopher of mind, Thomas Nagel came out with a book by Oxford Univ. Press entitled, *Mind and Cosmos* with the subtitle *Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*.¹ Nagel is a staunch atheist and a highly regarded philosopher; so to contend that materialism (naturalism) is almost certainly false has created quite a stir.

I would stop short of saying that naturalism is almost certainly false,² but I would concur in the conclusion that in the problem of qualia, of mind, of personhood there is good reason to think that naturalism is not true. That does not imply that theism must be true, but—as I will contend toward the end of this paper—if mind must somehow be rooted the character of nature itself, the theistic explanation—I would contend—makes more sense than Nagel's proposal.

How then do naturalists treat the status of persons and mental states? This varies. Three options are *eliminative naturalism*, *reductive naturalism* and *non-reductive naturalism*.

Eliminative naturalism: *Conscious mental states don't exist at all.*

Reductive naturalism: *What we think of as conscious mental states are real but they are not as we typically think of them. Upon analysis they turn out to be identical with neural or behavioral states.*

Non-reductive naturalism: *Conscious mental states are genuinely real and are not reducible down to, or merely identifiable with, neural or behavioral states. They are high-level emergent properties of certain complex physical systems, and as such are physical properties even though seemingly quite unlike properties that we typically label as "physical."*

Eliminative Naturalism: I have not studied carefully eliminative naturalism, but one reflection:

¹ Nagel, Thomas, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Concept of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012)

² If a person is so thoroughly convinced that naturalism is true, then it is not demonstrably unreasonable to believe that even though we have not been able yet to account for qualia and personhood, there must be some resolution to the problem consistent with naturalism. The problem of qualia and personhood should, however, at least shake one's confidence that naturalism is obviously true.

If one interprets this position as asserting that people have no feeling of pain, joy, etc., the position seems quite absurd. It would mean that we are automatons; we just don't realize it. But if they admit that people do feel pain, etc. then their claim has to be that, although we have such experiences, we mistakenly think that there is a reality to them other than the reality of neural states or of behavior or dispositions to behave. And this makes eliminative naturalism a form of reductive naturalism.

Reductive Naturalism: The reductive naturalist does not want to deny that people experience pain, conscious desires, etc., but analysis, they contend, reveals that they are in fact identical with neural and/or behavioral states.

This thesis has taken various forms. On some versions there is a desire to preserve the reality of the phenomenal/experiential while establishing it as being identical with overtly physical states or events. On others, the identification does not seek to preserve the reality of the phenomenal/experiential. (The latter might equally be called a form of eliminative naturalism.) I'll first address this latter position.

Philosopher Daniel Dennett in his 1991 book *Consciousness Explained* has a chapter entitled, "Qualia Disqualified." "Qualia" (sing. quale), again, is the philosophical term for how something experientially feels. Hence, the quale, pink, is what it is like to experience something that is pink, and this abstracted from light wave frequencies or any physical entity. The quale is the qualitative character of the experience. In the chapter on qualia Dennett contends that although "there seem to be qualia," they do not in fact exist. All that exists are "discriminative states,"³ physical states of the brain brought about by sensory input such as light of a particular frequency striking the eye, and "dispositional properties," the disposition to engage in particular behaviors in particular contexts. For example, when one is asked about color, there is the disposition to "...express verbal judgments alluding to the 'color' of various things"⁴. In Dennett's words, "'Qualia' have been replaced by complex dispositional states of the brain."⁵

Note, Dennett does not deny that qualia *seem* to exist. A problem here is that normally when we say something doesn't exist though it *seems* to, we are contrasting appearance with reality, but qualia are the appearances, the *seemings*. To deny that they exist is like saying that "Seemings don't really exist, they just seem to," or "Appearances don't really exist, they just appear to." But I am quite sure that Dennett would object to this by saying that, when he says they "seem to exist," he simply means to say that *we think they exist, but they don't*.

But this raises another problem. If there are no subjective experiential appearances or seemings, then what can one possibly mean when one denies that they exist. Normally to deny the existence of something one needs to know what it is that one is denying. But if there really are no qualia, then what intelligible content is there to the idea of qualia. If there is no subjective appearance then what intelligible content could there be to a denial of the existence of subjective appearance. For Dennett meaningfully to deny the existence of qualia, both he and the reader must know what he is talking about, but how could he or they know what he is talking about if there are no subjective appearances, no qualia.

Now, in contrast to Dennett, there are reductive naturalists who do affirm the reality of qualia. They don't deny that there is an experience of pain, of joy, etc., with the felt qualities experienced. When they claim that mental states are identical with physical states, they want to maintain that both are real. The analogy of water and H₂O may help. Initially they can seem quite different, but we have come to discover that water really is H₂O. The discovery of the identity does not render water unreal. In a similar way a feeling of pain can still be acknowledged as real even though it is discovered to be some combination of neural and/or behavioral activity.

Part of the problem, however, with the water example is that once one understands that water is H₂O, there is no quality of "waterness" that is left out, whereas, when one says that a conscious mental state is a neural or behavioral state, the distinctively experiential part of the experience, the qualia, is left out.

Another problem here is that to support the claim that mental states are physical states the naturalist needs to do more than simply assert the identity of mental states with the neural and/or behavioral states, he needs to give an analysis revealing how it is.

³Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1991), p. 372.

⁴Ibid. p. 373.

⁵Ibid. p. 431.

An example: While living in Ann Arbor I got to know Eric Lormand, a professor in philosophy of mind. His contention was that we do have conscious experiences, qualia. They don't seem to be physical states, but he proposes that mental states can first be seen to be representational states. The character of these representational states then get further analyzed into something like functional or dispositional states, ultimately ending up with what is purely physical.

The difficulty is that the phenomenal aspect of the experience has to get dropped somewhere along the way, and at whatever point it is where it is dropped, it seems that the identity claim collapses. In Lormand's proposal it is unclear whether a representational state has the character of the qualia in it. Does, for instance, the representation in the mind for pink objects preserve the pink character of the quale, pink? If it does not—say if the representation is just a functional role without experiential content—then the experience is not identical to a representation in the mind for pink. If the experiential character is preserved in the representation, then the difficulty for the analysis is that the felt character gets dropped in the next step or a some subsequent step. In short, this multiple-step analysis does not succeed in showing that the experience itself (of pink, or pain, or whatever) is identical to a neural or behavioral state (including dispositions to behave).

Thus, when one claims that a mental state is a physical or behavioral state, the how-it-feels part of the mental state, the qualia, either gets eliminated at the start (as in Dennett) or it illegitimately gets dropped along the way. If the how-it-feels, the qualia is present even at the end of the analysis, then naturalism seems to be abandoned. If the ultimate reality is not just physical, but in some way includes the phenomenal/experiential content, then it seems that it is not the case that all that is real is matter and energy in space-time. This might be put by saying that the ultimate reality can seem, depending upon the perspective, to be just phenomenal or just physical, but actually these are facets of the same reality. This is not naturalism, but a position closer to what Nagel is advocating.

Non-reductive Naturalism

This brings us back to non-reductive naturalism. Here John's Searle's position will be considered. In his book *The Rediscovery of the Mind* Searle writes:

Consciousness is a higher-level or emergent property of the brain in the utterly harmless sense of “higher-level” or “emergent” in which solidity is a higher level property of H₂O molecules when they are in a lattice structure (ice), and liquidity is similarly a higher-level emergent property of H₂O molecules when they are, roughly speaking, rolling around each other (water). Consciousness is a mental, and therefore physical, property of the brain in the sense in which liquidity is a property of systems of molecules.⁶

The difficulty, however, with examples like solidity and liquidity is that they seem analyzable into the relative motion and positions of molecules over time. As properties they are reducible to such motions, just as air pressure is. Yet consciousness does not seem reducible or understandable simply in terms of the motions of molecules—in this case, electrochemical processes—in the brain.

Searle does suggest other examples of properties which he claims do not fall into either the category of being obviously mental or obviously physical: “...balance-of-payment problems, ungrammatical sentences, reasons for being suspicious of modal logic, my ability to ski, the state government of California, and points scored in a football game.”⁷ But nearly all of the examples seem to be entities or properties which are either easily analyzed purely in physical terms,⁸ or they depend on having conscious significance in them minds of people.

Consider the score of a football game. Imagine a football game played by robots and watched by a stadium filled with robots. Imagine that they all do what people are supposed to do but have no conscious experiences or thoughts. Would there be in such a scenario such a thing as *the score* of the game? It seems there would not. The reality of the score of the game is one that is relative to beings for whom the notion of the score has conscious significance.

But there is another problem for the non-reductive naturalist, and it has to do with the causal power, or lack thereof, of conscious mental states. The problem can be expressed by asking whether

⁶John R. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 14.

⁷John R. Searle, *op.cit.*, p. 25.

⁸For example what constitutes having the ability to ski is partly relative to the standards we as humans establish regarding what is to count as competence in skiing. But, apart from that, the ability to ski is largely a dispositional property, namely the propensity and capacity to do specified things under specified conditions. For example, the fragility of a glass is its tendency to break under specifiable conditions. Dispositional properties which do not involve conscious states of agents are physical properties in a fairly non-controversial way.

having the feeling of pain plays any causal role for organisms. If the feeling of pain is just a high-level property of certain kinds of neural states and has no substantial reality to it other than its physical components and the spatio-temporal relations of those components, then it seems that the conscious mental state per se has no causal power in itself. All the actual power, on the naturalist position, has to lie in the physical components and their configuration. They are what possess matter and energy. The configuration is important but the configuration is not the same as the feeling of pain. The feeling of pain, possessing no matter or energy, adds nothing to the causal power of the neural components and their configuration.

Now, it is not impossible that sentience, including feelings of pain, could be accidental byproducts of neural "programs" that elicit pain behavior, e.g. retracting a part of the body upon the onset of an injury or potential injury, or favoring an injured leg, or fleeing from something causing bodily harm. But, of course, apart from having some reason for thinking that such neural programs must have as a byproduct the appearance of the quale of pain, the possibility of it simply being a byproduct doesn't seem likely.

Plus, we know that the brain performs a variety of control and reflex responses that do not involve conscious awareness. Given this, there does not seem to be any necessity that behavioral repertoires for avoiding further injury must also manifest an experience of pain.

Finally, as Nagel points out, if conscious states, e.g. pain, played no causal role, then why is it that sentience seems to be a feature of all higher forms of life, mammals, birds, reptiles, etc.? (There is no proof that nearly all higher forms of life have sentience, but nearly everyone now grants it to be the case. And when, say, my dog is sleeping but is making muffled barks and small bodily jerks and quivers, it certainly seems she is dreaming.) Now, if sentience is a universal feature of higher forms of life, surely there must be some survival value in it. But survival value, implies playing a causal role. And, of course, this reinforces the quite natural assumption that having the feeling of pain is important in our pain reflexes and reactions.

Thus, coming back to Searle's non-reductive naturalism, he grants a reality to conscious mental states but his naturalism and his account of them as simply being high-level properties deprives them of being able to play any causal role.

Nagel's conclusion from this is that the naturalist conception of nature cannot be true. It either leaves out or renders impotent conscious mental states. (Surprisingly he makes no reference to Searle and does not even raise the category of non-reductive naturalism. It even appears that he assumes that any non-reductive acceptance of the reality of conscious mental states will involve an abandonment of naturalism, or as he puts it, materialism. His own view is naturalistic in the sense that he thinks that there is nothing but the natural world, but he rejects the other part of what is usually included in naturalism, namely that it is thoroughly materialist or physicalist.)

On Nagel's Proposal and the Relevance of a Negative Assessment of Naturalism

If naturalism is false, then a metaphysical alternative is needed. Nagel suggests that part of the tenacity with which people have defended naturalism is that it is hard to come up with a viable alternative. (Nagel acknowledges that it is not easy, and he expresses some tentativeness about the proposal that he himself will give.) Because Nagel rejects both theism and naturalism, he is looking for a middle position or third alternative, one that includes mind in some way in one's fundamental understanding of nature. He rejects the idea that there is anything supernatural, and he rejects the idea that the element of mind in the fundamental character of nature consists of personal agents. His proposal is that there is something like a "natural teleology" in nature.

A significant problem, however, for Nagel's proposal is that it is difficult to see what sense can one make of *natural teleology*—an aiming towards certain goals—apart from a being that understands alternatives and prefers those goals—i.e. a personal agent. For nature to be aiming towards something, it seems that there must be some awareness of a goal. This seems to imply the presence of personal agency.

The British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead was a pan-psychist believing that even hydrogen atoms possess a mental pole and physical pole and that they have some capacity for determining their future states. Again, such self-determination seems indistinguishable to me from indeterminacy for I can make no sense of a hydrogen atom opting for one state over another when it has no capacity to entertain the options. (It should be noted that in Whitehead's metaphysical system God does play a role in providing direction, but he doesn't think the God unilaterally makes

even hydrogen atoms "opt" for one option over another.) Nagel does not at any point affirm panpsychism, but he does think that a guiding teleology must be at work even before the emergence of the first forms of clearly sentient life.

Now, given the problems with being able to make any sense of natural teleology apart from personal agency, it seems quite reasonable to suppose that personal agency must be present. The question then becomes, Is this personal agency within nature or transcendent of it? When we look at the natural world and its pre-biological past, one does not find any structures or phenomena that hint at mind within nature as, say, one would expect if pantheism were true. This raises the reasonable speculation that mind within nature is due to something that transcends nature itself. This, of course, is theism in its broadest description. Thus, the failure of naturalism together with the need to provide some account as to why nature would give rise to creatures with sentience and a conscious mental life—these two things, by themselves, make theism an alternative to be taken seriously.