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## **Writing on the page of consciousness**

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### Abstract:

I identify one particular strand of thought in Thomas Nagel's 'What is it like to be a bat?', which I think has helped shape a certain conception of perceptual consciousness that is still prevalent in the literature. On this conception, perceptual consciousness is to be explained in terms of a special class of properties perceptual experiences themselves exhibit. I also argue that this conception is in fact in conflict with one of the key ideas that supposedly animates Nagel's argument in 'What is it like to be a bat?', which is the idea of an intimate connection between the idea of consciousness and that of a point of view.

## Writing on the page of consciousness

“Sensation”, writes Charles Sanders Peirce, “is, as it were, the writing on the page of consciousness” (Peirce, 1866/1982, p. 473). One way of framing the issue I will be concerned with in this paper is in terms of the question as to whether, or in what sense, it is right to say that conscious perceptual experience is a matter of sensation. One way of unpacking Peirce’s metaphor in this context construes ‘the writing’ as a gerund: Sensation, on this way of unpacking the metaphor, is simply the continuous process of things registering in consciousness through the operation of our senses, however this is to be elucidated further. This gives us a relatively undemanding sense in which perceptual experience might be understood to be a matter of sensation. Another way of unpacking Peirce’s metaphor, on which ‘the writing’ is construed as a noun, is metaphysically more loaded: On this reading, it makes sense to speak of perceptual experience as involving the having of sensations, where these are understood as something like intrinsic properties of our experience itself, or of us as subjects of experience: just as the page acquires certain properties when we write on it, experience exemplifies different ‘conscious properties’ over time, and it is (at least partly) in virtue of its doing so that we are perceptually conscious of things, and perceptually conscious of them in the way we are.<sup>1</sup>

It is something like this second conception of sensation, I believe, which has caused a great deal of trouble in the literature on consciousness over the last forty-

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<sup>1</sup> A paradigmatic recent example of this sort of approach to perceptual experience is encapsulated in Ned Block’s (2003) notion of ‘mental paint’. I should stress at the outset that my focus in this paper is specifically on conscious *perceptual* experience, such as visual or auditory experience. Other aspects of experience such as bodily experience are outside the scope of this paper.

odd years, though it has not always been discussed under the name of sensation, but under other names such as ‘qualia’ or ‘the phenomenal qualities of experience’. The general assumption embodied in the use of these terms has been that consciousness is to be explained in terms of a special class of properties perceptual experiences themselves possess. The main worry in this context has typically been that the relevant properties do not seem to admit of a physicalist reduction. I on the other hand worry whether the conception of experience at issue so much as makes sense in the first place, although a full consideration of this issue goes beyond the concerns of the present paper.<sup>2</sup>

Rather, my more specific aim in this paper is to uncover what might be seen as a wrong turn taken early on in the literature that set some of the terms in which debates about consciousness are still framed, which I think has played a crucial part in shaping this conception of experience as exemplifying a special class of properties in virtue of which it is conscious. I believe that it is no coincidence that some key ideas in the rest of the literature in which this conception figures – whether expressed in terms of the notion of sensation, qualia, or phenomenal qualities – can ultimately be traced back to Thomas Nagel’s article ‘What is it like to be a bat?’ (Nagel, 1974), for it is hidden in Nagel’s argument that we can find a crucial assumption on which the relevant conception of experience can be seen to turn. Yet, as I will also try to show, there is ultimately also something deeply ironical about Nagel’s role in this

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Snowdon at one point suggests that “[i]f this [i.e., whether a physicalist reduction of experience is possible or not] remains a live question, one suspicion, which I am inclined to hold, is that it does so because we have a tendency to characterize or think about experience (which is the primary psychological side of the equation) in a way that makes it a phenomenon of which it is impossible to give a consistent account” (Snowdon, 2010, p. 14). See also Williams (1978, p. 295f.), Martin (1998) and Johnston (2007) for expressions of a similar view.

conception of experience coming to prominence, because it is in fact in conflict with one of the key ideas that supposedly animates Nagel's argument in 'What is it like to be a bat?' (as well as his work on consciousness generally), which is the idea of an intimate connection between the notion of consciousness and that of a *point of view*.

### **I. Points of view and the 'subjective character' of experience**

Nagel's ultimate aim in 'What is it like to be a bat', which I will largely set to one side for the purposes of this paper, is to argue that conscious experience resists integration into an objective, physical world view.<sup>3</sup> In his argument to that effect, the notion of a point of view can be seen to play a key linking role connecting two other notions: that of *consciousness* and that of a *subjective character* or *subjective features* that individual conscious experiences possess – which I take to be Nagel's particular way of framing the conception I alluded to previously, of experiences as exemplifying a special class of properties that make them conscious.<sup>4</sup> I will consider what Nagel has to say about each of these notions in turn.

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, the precise claim Nagel wants to argue for is slightly more nuanced than this. As Jackson (1982, p. 131 fn. 10) points out, "the emphasis changes through the article, and by the end Nagel is objecting not so much to [p]hysicalism as to all extant theories of mind for ignoring points of view". More specifically, Nagel's argument at the end of the article is that, because conscious experience essentially involves a point of view, we cannot understand what it would be for physicalism to be true.

<sup>4</sup> An important exegetical question in this context is whether Nagel's particular version of this conception also includes the idea that an experience's having a particular 'subjective character' or 'subjective features' constitutes what is sometimes referred to as an irreducibly perspectival or subjective *fact*. If so, this would be in tension with Nagel's (1986, p. 4) own insistence that "[o]bjectivity is a method of understanding. It is beliefs and attitudes that are objective in the primary sense. Only derivatively do we call objective the truths that can be arrived at in this way". I am

Nagel starts from the intuition that the central explanatory challenge for any philosophical theory of the mind is to come up with an account that takes conscious experience seriously. The first sentence of ‘What is it like to be a bat?’ is “Consciousness is what makes the mind-body problem really intractable” (Nagel, 1974, p. 435), and a little later Nagel claims that “[w]ithout consciousness the mind-body problem would be much less interesting. With consciousness it seems hopeless” (ibid., p. 436).

A second, connected, intuition that Nagel trades on is that getting right what it is for a subject to have conscious experiences is crucially a matter of getting right the sense in which conscious experience involves the subject of that experience having a point of view. In this context, Nagel is of course also famous for coining a specific piece of philosophical terminology: for him, a subject’s having conscious experiences involves there being *something it is like* to be that subject.<sup>5</sup> In his words, “fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something it is like to *be* that organism – something it is like *for* that organism” (ibid.

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inclined to agree with Moore (1987) and Peacocke (1989) that Nagel seems to commit himself to a version of the idea of ‘subjective facts’ and that (*pace* Fine (2005), perhaps) this idea is deeply problematic, or at any rate of no help in explaining consciousness. Whilst I will not deal with this exegetical question directly in this paper, my discussion bears, I think, on the substantive issue at stake in it.

<sup>5</sup> As Nagel himself points out (1986, p. 15), the ‘what it is like’ terminology had previously also been used by Farrell (1950) and Sprigge (1971). However, I think it is fair to say that it owes its place in contemporary discussions in the philosophy of mind to Nagel’s article. Snowdon (2010) questions the usefulness of this terminology in talking about consciousness, and according to Güzeldere (1997, p. 37), “it seems that the notion of ‘what it is like to be’ has become the *wild card* of consciousness problems”. I have some sympathy with such views, but will leave them to one side for present purposes, as my main focus is on Nagel’s use of the notion of a point of view.

p. 436). What it is like to be an organism, however, in so far as there is some such, is essentially connected to that organism's point of view. After all, as Nagel (*ibid.*, p. 443) says, what, for instance, "would be left of what it is like to be a bat if one removed the viewpoint of the bat?"<sup>6</sup>

The crucial final step in Nagel's argument is the claim that explaining the sense in which conscious experiences essentially involve a point of view requires recognising the existence of what he calls an irreducibly 'subjective character' or 'subjective features' of experience. An experience's embodying a particular point of view, for Nagel, is a matter of it having a particular type of subjective character, and capturing what it is like to be a particular organism is a matter of capturing the subjective character of that organism's experiences. This is where Nagel sees the key problem with our ability to give a satisfying explanatory account of the mind in objective, physical terms. As he explains,

[i]f 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. The reason is that every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view, and it seems inevitable that an objective, physical theory will abandon that point of view (Nagel, 1974, p. 437).

As I have already indicated, my main focus in what follows will not be on Nagel's argument against physicalism as such, but rather on the construal of the nature of

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<sup>6</sup> See also *ibid.*, p. 441: "Whatever may be the status of facts about what it is like to be a human being, a bat, or a Martian, these appear to be facts that embody a particular point of view."

consciousness that informs that argument, in particular the idea that an experience's being conscious is a matter of its having a particular subjective character or features. How exactly does Nagel get from the idea that conscious perceptual experience essentially involves a point of view to this idea of a subjective character or subjective features that such experience possesses, which constitute its being conscious (and which are supposedly beyond the reach of a physicalist account)?

There are in fact two senses in which conscious experience can be said to involve a point of view, which I will call an *individual point of view* and a *type point of view*, respectively.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes Nagel emphasises in particular the connection between consciousness and the idea of an individual point of view, for instance when he writes, in the passage just quoted, that “every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view”. Basically, the idea here is that, in so far as you and I are different individuals, each of us has his or her own conscious perspective on the world. Consciousness always has an individual subject with his or her own point of view. Arguably, this understanding of consciousness as involving a point of view is also at the forefront when Nagel uses the demonstrative ‘that organism’ in writing that “fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something it is like to *be* that organism – something it is like *for* that organism” (*ibid.*, p. 436).

Yet, the main notion of a point of view that Nagel puts to work in ‘What is it like to be a bat?’ is in fact a different one.<sup>8</sup> In advancing his argument against

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<sup>7</sup> On this distinction, see also Biro (1991, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> In Nagel's own words, “the point of view in question is not one accessible only to a single individual. Rather it is a *type*” (Nagel 197, p. 441). Below I will criticize attempts to frame claims about the viewpointness of experience in terms of the notion of access, as Nagel himself does it here.



physicalism, Nagel himself soon leaves considerations about what constitutes having an individual point of view behind, and instead his argument turns on what different such individual points of view can have in common in virtue of belonging to the same *type*. In particular, the idea is that there is a sense in which an organism has a certain conscious point of view on the world also qua the type of organism it is, endowed with a particular type of sensory apparatus. In so far as different types of organisms are equipped with quite different sensory organs, their conscious experiences will correspondingly be different. This is of course precisely the point Nagel wants to drive home by getting us to consider how different a bat's experiences must be from ours. Qua type, human experiences are similar to each other, and bats' experiences are quite different from those of humans.

At least on the face of it, it is not at all clear what exactly the relationship is between the idea of an individual point of view and the idea of a type point of view, and whether they involve the notion of a point of view in anything like the same sense. There is therefore a danger that Nagel, in effectively moving from the idea of an individual point of view to that of a type point of view (or in not distinguishing them clearly to begin with)<sup>9</sup> gets it wrong about where exactly the connection between consciousness and the notion of a point of view lies. By focusing on the differences between different species, as Nagel does, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that conscious experience always has an individual subject, and that this is what ultimately

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<sup>9</sup> Above, I have read the text of 'What is it like to be a bat?' in the first of these ways. As Hemdat Lerman has pointed out to me, it is also possible to read Nagel as using the type-understanding of the notion of a point of view throughout. This does not affect my overall argument, and I also note that it is unlikely that it is the type-understanding that readers will primarily have in mind when first coming across statements such as "every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view" (Nagel, 1974, p. 437).

makes it a ‘subjective’ phenomenon, essentially involving a point of view.<sup>10</sup> This is what I believe happens in ‘What is it like to be a bat?’. To see exactly how it happens, though, we need not just a distinction between two different notions of a point of view, but also a distinction between two ways of thinking of what might be involved in attempting to understand experience from outside the point of view of the experiencing subject.

## II. Two types of objectification

It is interesting to note that, at the point in ‘What it is like to be a bat?’ at which Nagel turns his attention in particular to considerations about what I have called the idea of a type point of view, a distinction between the *general idea of experience* as such and the idea of ‘*specific qualities*’ that experiences exemplify also emerges. His claim is that, with respect to creatures whose type point of view is quite different from our own, because they are endowed with rather different sensory organs, all we may be able to do is ascribe to them the general capacity to have experiences,<sup>11</sup> but the ‘specific qualities’ of their experiences will necessarily elude our grasp. It is these

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<sup>10</sup> A similar point is expressed by Ronald de Sousa when he writes as follows about a related strand in *The View from Nowhere* (Nagel, 1986): “[Nagel] seems to identify the merely ‘idiosyncratic’ character of individual tastes with the ‘essentially perspectival’ (p. 168). That identification is surely a mistake. For even if we all had identical tastes, the irreducibility of perspective would be untouched” (de Sousa, 1987, p. 342 n. 2). See also Biro (1991, p. 123): “[W]e can always go chauvinist and limit the range of the properly mental to human beings; would there then be no problem [as to how to account for consciousness]?”

<sup>11</sup> One interesting issue, which I do not have space to discuss here, is how this squares with Nagel’s epistemology of other minds. See Peacocke (1989) for a critique of Nagel on this score.

‘specific qualities’ that, for Nagel, constitute what he otherwise refers to as the particular subjective character or features of the relevant experiences.

Nagel also frames the issue at stake here in terms of a question about the extent to which experience can be ‘objectified’, i.e. characterized exhaustively and understood from without the point of view of the experiencing subject itself. His claim, as he explains elsewhere, is that “[i]f we try to understand experience from an objective viewpoint that is distinct from that of the subject of the experience, then even if we continue to credit its perspectival nature, we will not be able to grasp its most specific qualities unless we can imagine them subjectively” (Nagel, 1986, p. 25). The latter, however, – that is, the ability to imagine having the relevant experiences – requires sharing at least broadly the same type point of view as the individual whose experiences we are trying to understand. In so far as we do not do so, a full understanding is ruled out. As Nagel claims, “[w]e know there’s something there, something perspectival, even if we don’t know what it is or even how to think about it” (ibid., p. 21).

Nagel illustrates these claims, and the distinction between the general idea of experience and the idea of ‘specific qualities’ of experience, with an example that is basically the inverse of that of his central example of our ignorance of what it is like to be a bat. Just as it is difficult for us to conceive of the mental life of bats, because their sensory organs are so different from ours, so we can envisage a species of Martians, again equipped with rather different sensory organs from ours, struggling to conceive of the nature of our mental life. As Nagel explains:

The structure of their own minds might make it impossible for them to succeed [in forming a conception of what it is like to be us], but we know they

would be wrong to conclude that there is not anything precise that it is like to be us: that only certain general types of mental state could be ascribed to us [...]. We know they would be wrong to draw such a skeptical conclusion because we know what it is like to be us. And we know that while it includes an enormous amount of variation and complexity, and while we do not possess the vocabulary to describe it adequately, its subjective character is highly specific (Nagel, 1974, p. 440).

How exactly are we to conceive of Nagel's argument here? There are in fact two quite different ways of conceiving of what is involved in objectification that Nagel can sometimes be seen to be oscillating between.<sup>12</sup> As I want to argue, once we distinguish clearly between them, and think of the Martians in Nagel's example as attempting to achieve either one or the other form of objective understanding of the

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<sup>12</sup> That Nagel runs together two different conceptions of objectification is also noted by Jonathan Dancy in a critical study of Nagel's book *The View from Nowhere* (Dancy, 1988). Dancy characterizes one of them as 'Hegelian objectification' (with no particular pretense at historical accuracy, I believe) and the other as 'Absolute objectification' (because it turns on something like the idea of an 'absolute conception of reality' as discussed by Bernard Williams (1978, pp. 64-68)). The distinction I will draw does not line up completely with Dancy's, partly because Dancy's primary interest is in the process of coming to have a more objective understanding of one's own point of view. If we conceive of this process along the lines of Hegelian objectification, he claims that "[e]very aspect of each succeeding view is retained" in objectification, and also that "on our first step away from our initial, most subjective point of view, we change our view of the world" (Dancy, 1988, p. 2). As I explain below, by contrast, on what I call 'embedding objectification', there may be aspects of other (type) points of view that necessarily get lost in our attempts to come to an objective understanding of them; yet, at the same time, it is not obvious why such objectification should be seen as changing one's own view of the world.

nature of our experiences, it becomes clear that there is a crucial further assumption in play in Nagel's adopting the specific characterization of consciousness in terms of a subjective character or subjective features that experiences possess.

We could call the first conception of objectification at issue 'embedding objectification'. This conception of objectification seems to be at issue in claims made by Nagel such as the following: "To acquire a more objective understanding of some aspect of life or the world, we step back from our initial view of it and form a new conception which has that view and its relation to the world as its object" (Nagel, 1986, p. 4). The idea, in other words, is that we achieve an objective understanding of an individual's point of view, one that does not depend on occupying that point of view oneself, by looking at how that individual is embedded in the world, on the particular relations in which it stands to features of that world, and by explaining particular aspects of its point of view in terms of it standing in those relations to those features.

A second, quite different, conception of objectification that can be seen to be at work in Nagel's writings might be referred to as 'abstracting objectification'. This conception seems to be the one at issue in claims of Nagel's such as the following: "[T]here is a real world in which we are contained, and [...] appearances result from our interaction with the rest of it. We cannot accept those appearances uncritically, but must try to understand what our own constitution contributes to them" (Nagel, 1986, p. 68). In other words, the key idea behind this conception is that in framing an objective conception of the nature of an individual's perceptual experiences, we must necessarily abstract from certain features of that individual's point of view because they are in an important sense peculiar to that individual, qua individual endowed with certain sensory organs rather than others. As Nagel also puts it, on this

conception, “[h]owever often we may try to step outside of ourselves, something will have to stay behind the lens” (ibid.).

To flesh out these two conceptions of objectification further, and bring out what exactly the difference between them consists in, we might look at differences in how each of them bears out the distinction Nagel draws between grasping the general concept of experience and grasping the ‘specific qualities’ of particular experiences, and at the precise extent to which each of them supports the idea that objectification leaves us with a ‘bleached out’ (Nagel, 1986, p. 15) or ‘necessarily incomplete’ (ibid., p. 19) conception of the mind, as Nagel also maintains.

Why, on the embedding conception of objectification, might one think that there are aspects of conscious perceptual experience that objectification necessarily misses out on? It is not obvious why, on the embedding conception, coming to a more objective understanding of *one’s own* point of view, or of that of creatures who share the same type point of view as oneself, should be thought to involve leaving behind some aspect of experience. On the embedding conception, we can give an exhaustive account of the nature of our own experiences in terms of the features of our environment we are experientially related to, and certain factors about us as individuals such as our spatio-temporal position that determine our point of view on these features.<sup>13</sup> There is nothing in this conception that invites the idea that the

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<sup>13</sup> Counting amongst those factors are also what are sometimes referred to as the ‘enabling conditions of perception’ related to different sensory modalities. Because they involve such different enabling conditions, experiences in different sensory modalities will exhibit different structural features. For instance, in vision, one such feature is the presence of a field of vision, for which there is no straightforward analogue in touch. A detailed discussion of such structural features of experience goes beyond the scope of the present paper (for some discussion of this issue see Martin (1992), Richardson (2010), and Soteriou (2013)); what matters for present purposes is that such structural

resulting understanding of the nature of our own perceptual experiences is necessarily incomplete or leaves out something essential about those experiences.

Things look different, though, when it comes to forming an understanding of the nature of perceptual experiences of creatures whose type point of view is different from one's own. This is because the embedding conception provides for the idea that one may understand that there are some features of the world another creature has a point of view on, but without being able to grasp oneself what those features are, because one is not oneself equipped to perceive them. Thus, Nagel's Martians may be able to determine how factors about us as individuals, in particular our spatio-temporal position, and factors about us as members of a biological species, equipped with certain sensory organs, enable us to be experientially related to certain features of our environment.<sup>14</sup> But, in so far as those features themselves are beyond their own ken, because they do not possess the sense organs needed to perceive them, their attempts at coming to an understanding of the nature of our experience through the process of embedding objectification will necessarily remain incomplete.<sup>15</sup>

Contrast this with an even more radical way in which objectification necessarily leaves us with an incomplete understanding of conscious experience on

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features, too, seem to be within the scope of what embedding objectification can account for. Aspects of the work cited in the following footnote can, I believe, serve to make this vivid.

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Akins (1993a, 1993c) nicely illustrates the detailed work that carrying out this type of investigation involves, for instance, when it comes to us trying to form a conception of the experiences involved in bat echolocation.

<sup>15</sup> We can think, here, for instance, about inter-species variations in colour perception (Allen, 2009). The characterization of embedding objectification I give here of course implies that, e.g., colours are mind-independent properties. I will shortly turn to the pivotal role the question of perceptual realism plays in the context of Nagel's argument.

the abstracting conception of objectification. What the abstracting conception maintains, in fact, is that even in the context of trying to come to a more objective understanding of *our own* perceptual experiences we must necessarily leave their ‘specific qualities’ behind.<sup>16</sup> For on that view, once we think only about the features of the world around us that we are in fact perceptually related to, we are no longer in a position to account for these specific qualities. This is because the abstracting conception of objectification thinks of these specific qualities as “what our own constitution contributes” (Nagel, 1986, p. 68) to experience, as Nagel puts it.

In other words, what the abstraction conception of objectification trades on is the idea that, in so far as our perceptual experiences have ‘specific qualities’, there is a sense in which we do not see the world aright – that we do not simply perceive things as they are. Rather, due to our particular psychological endowment, there are elements in our experience that are specific to us, not just in the sense that our sensory organs make only certain features of our environment, and not others, perceptually accessible to us, but in the stronger sense that there are elements in our experience that are entirely due to us. The abstraction conception of objectification, in short, involves a rejection of common sense realism – that is, of the idea that we perceive things just as they are. Conversely, the embedding conception of objectification relies crucially on the truth of common sense realism. What makes it possible is the idea that the world really has the features we perceive it to have (or at least, that they are amongst the features it has), so that we can gain an understanding of the nature of our

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<sup>16</sup> This might explain a sense in which Nagel would consider the types of criticism I mentioned in footnote 10 beside the point. In so far as he uses the bat case as a device for arguing for the abstracting conception of objectification, he also arrives at a way of showing objectification to be problematic in our own case too.



own perceptual experiences – including their ‘specific qualities’ – by thinking of ourselves as embedded in that world and related it, from our specific standpoint, through experience.

This, then, is the crucial background issue on which Nagel’s argument turns. His move to the idea of a ‘subjective character’ or ‘subjective features’ of experience clearly involves adopting an abstraction conception of objectification and with it a denial of common sense realism: What does the crucial work in it is the thought that, because we perceive the world in a certain *way* – thanks to being psychologically constituted in one way rather than another – we must, in a certain sense, be misperceiving it. With respect to at least some aspects of experience, we are stuck in what is sometimes referred to as a ‘phenomenal bubble’ of our own making, which may be somehow causally sensitive to the way things are in our environment, but nevertheless actually prevents us from actually experiencing these things as they are. In a naïve frame of mind, we might mistake the qualities possessed by our own experiences for features of the world around us, but we are in fact in error in doing so, because they are the products of our own psychological make-up.

It is specifically in terms of this thought that Nagel construes the idea of what I have called a type point of view and the idea of differences between different such type points of view. The thought itself is of course a familiar one, connected also to the idea that perceptual experience merely presents us with ‘secondary qualities’ (at least in certain respects). My aim is here is not to investigate it in its full generality,<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Earlier I mentioned the idea that Nagel, in not distinguishing clearly between the idea of an individual point of view and a type point view, ends up losing out of sight the fact that consciousness always has an individual subject, and that this is what make it a phenomenon essentially involving a point of view. The thought discussed here also threatens to collapse the distinction between individual and type points of view in the opposite way: It is this thought that arguably opens up the

but rather to look specifically at the way it is in effect pressed into service by Nagel (as well as by other philosophers) to account for perceptual consciousness itself.<sup>18</sup> As I want to argue, this particular strand of thought implicit in Nagel's paper is in fact deeply at odds with Nagel's stated aim to take seriously the idea of a point of view inherent in conscious experience. Looking at the historical influence Nagel's paper has had is quite instructive in this respect.

### III. The historical influence of Nagel's argument

As a matter of historical influence, perhaps the main legacy of Nagel's article 'What is it like to be a bat?' is to be found amongst those philosophers who invoke the notion of *qualia* in connection with the thought that there is 'something it is like' to be in a conscious mental state or undergo a conscious mental episode. Explicitly referring to Nagel, David Chalmers, for instance, writes:

We can say that a being is conscious if there is *something it is like* to be that being, to use a phrase made famous by Thomas Nagel. Similarly, a mental state is conscious if there is something it is like to be in that mental state.

Equivalently, we can say that a mental state is conscious if it has a *qualitative*

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possibility of spectrum inversion and thus also of a form of scepticism on which we are as ignorant of the nature of other humans' experiences as we (supposedly) are of that of the experiences of bats.

<sup>18</sup> This should really strike us as an odd move, especially on the part of Nagel. When Nagel talks about there being 'something it is like' for the individual, he intends to capture something that is supposedly completely obvious from the subject's perspective. But, as is captured by the idea of an error theory of secondary qualities, the thought now introduced – that some features of experience are in fact down to us – expresses something that is far from obvious to the subject. For similar considerations, see also Campbell in (Campbell & Cassam, 2014, p. 21f.).

*feel*—an associated quality of experience. These qualitative feels are also known as phenomenal qualities, or *qualia* for short (Chalmers, 1996, p. 4).

Chalmers' words in fact gloss over what is actually a rather more intricate and far from straightforward reception history. On closer inspection, what those thinking of consciousness in terms of qualia really share with Nagel's position in 'What is it like to be a bat?' is the denial of common sense realism that I have suggested is implicit in the abstracting conception of objectification – that is, the idea that, in conscious perceptual experience, we do not simply perceive the world as it actually is, but that there are elements in our experience that are specific to us.<sup>19</sup> As the literature in which the notion of qualia figures also illustrates, though, what happens if we pursue that idea to its natural conclusion is that the conception of conscious experience as essentially involving a point of view – supposedly so central to Nagel's paper – in fact gets supplanted with a rather different conception of consciousness.

The particular kind of appeal to qualia that I have in mind, which I believe illustrates this, is exemplified by what is possibly the only other article with a comparable status to 'What is it like to be a bat?' in the literature on consciousness – Frank Jackson's 'Epiphenomenal qualia' (Jackson, 1982), featuring his thought-experiment involving Mary, the brain scientist.<sup>20</sup> Famously, Mary has acquired

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<sup>19</sup> For a particularly sophisticated elaboration on this general theme, see Chalmers (2006).

<sup>20</sup> Once again, my main concern in what follows is not with the question of physicalism, which, as with Nagel, has also been the main focus of discussions of Jackson's article. Rather, what I am interested in is the way in which the notion of qualia is being made use of by Jackson in trying to give an explanatory account of consciousness. For some key responses to the anti-physicalist aspect of Jackson's argument, see (Conce, 1985), (Nemirow, 1990), (Lewis, 1990), (Levin, 1986), (Loar, 1990) and also (Jackson, 2003).

exhaustive theoretical knowledge about the physical workings of the visual system whilst being confined in a black and white room. Now she steps outside this room for the first time and sees, for instance, a red rose. On Jackson's view, when Mary looks at the rose, she comes to instantiate a property – a quale – that she has never instantiated before and because it is a property of a type we can have access to only when we instantiate it ourselves she thereby learns something that no amount of studying brain science in her black and white room could teach her.

In the literature on qualia, Nagel's and Jackson's articles are often mentioned in the same breath, and one can find frequent references to a 'Nagel-Jackson argument', implying that their respective arguments come to the same thing. Yet, interestingly, Jackson's article contains a section in which he explicitly criticises Nagel's argument and specifically distances himself from Nagel's emphasis on the notion of a point of view.<sup>21</sup> And in this he seems to be quite right. In making the move to the idea of experience as involving qualia, as he understands them, Jackson in fact abandons the idea that ostensibly animates Nagel's argument – of a point of view inherent in conscious experience – and replaces it with the idea of consciousness as being constituted by properties of experience to which the subject of experience has a particular form of exclusive access (as an individual and as a member of a species endowed with a particular set of sensory organs).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Jackson (1982, p. 131n10) states that he is "much indebted" to Nagel's article, but one wonders what he thinks he has learnt from him, given the "dissociations" (Jackson's term, *ibid.*) that follow.

<sup>22</sup> As already indicated earlier on, Nagel himself sometimes uses the term 'access' in discussing what it is to have a conscious point of view. See, e.g., the following passage: "For if the facts of experience – facts about what it is like *for* the experiencing organism – are accessible only from one point of view, then it is a mystery how the true character of experiences could be revealed in the physical

It may perhaps be thought that the move here is primarily a terminological one, that talk about a form of exclusive access conscious subjects have to their own experiences is simply talk about such experiences as essentially involving a point of view under a new guise. But I think this would be quite wrong. Returning to the embedding conception of objectification for a moment, there is indeed a sense in which, on this conception, too, subjects of experience have access only to their own experiences, in so far as the experiences of subjects with different *type* points of view are concerned. Yet, having a point of view, on this conception, does not *boil down* to having such access. Rather, the latter is *explained in terms of* the idea that, from a subject's type point of view, only a subset of the ways the world is can be perceived. Furthermore, there is also a sense in which, on the embedding conception of objectification, not occupying the same point of view need not actually preclude having a form of access to another's experiences. As we have seen, on this conception, others' not occupying the same *individual* point of view as me does not preclude them from having access to it in the sense of understanding or forming a conception of it in terms of the idea of me being experientially sensitive, through the operations of my sense organs, to a particular set of features of my environment (which they are also familiar with in so far as they share my type point of view).

Thus, in order to avoid the charge of begging the question against the idea of embedding objectification and, in effect, simply conflating the idea of having an experience and the idea of having access to it, the defender of an analysis of consciousness in terms of the idea of properties of experience to which only the

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operation of that organism" (Nagel, 1974, p. 442). What I am suggesting is that passages like this blur an important conceptual distinction.

subject of those experiences has access needs to supply some form of alternative explanation as to why our access to certain properties of our own experiences – indeed, the very properties that supposedly make them conscious – is exclusive, and exclusive in the particular way entailed by that conception. Note that this is what philosophers such as Jackson and Chalmers in effect do by adopting a form of dualism.<sup>23</sup> There are qualities of our own experiences, on their view, to which our access is exclusive, because they are non-physical.

This is clearly not the kind of idea Nagel tries to articulate in terms of the claim that conscious experience essentially involves a point of view. As he puts it himself:

The broader issue between personal and impersonal, or subjective and objective, arises also for a dualist theory of mind. The question of how one can include in the objective world a mental substance having subjective properties is as acute as the question how a physical substance can have subjective properties (Nagel 1979, p. 201).

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<sup>23</sup> In a different way, Block (1995) recognizes this requirement by insisting on a distinction between what he calls *phenomenal consciousness* and *access consciousness*, respectively. Block's argument, in fact, further illustrates the difference between the idea of a point of view inherent in conscious experience and the idea of access. In contrast to what Nagel (1974, p. 443) is trying to get at when he raises the rhetorical question as to "what would be left of what it is like to be a bat if one removed the viewpoint of the bat", on a position such as Block's the question as to what it is like to have a certain experience is separate from the question as to what sort of special access the subject herself has to the experience (and indeed whether she does have any such access).

Nagel here frames the issue in his own, metaphysically loaded terms. Setting these aside, though, I take his basic point to be that the move to a dualist ontology does not help in explaining the sense in which experience essentially involves a subject and that subject's point of view.<sup>24</sup> The dualist essentially construes the relationship between the subject and the non-physical properties that supposedly constitute the experience in terms of the idea of ownership. Yet, as John Biro (1991, p. 122) has put it, “[m]ere ownership does not in general contribute anything to the nature or character of the thing owned”. The difference between material and immaterial properties notwithstanding, the dualists' picture of the state of your being conscious is a state in which you figure only in the same sense in which you figure in the state of your being thirteen stone, to use an example of Michael Martin's. Martin gives the following general characterization of the conception of experience that we have effectively arrived at here:

On [this] conception, we are to think of experience as simply being a state of the subject, a way of being modified. We are not to think of this event as

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<sup>24</sup> Note, for instance, that, even if it is true that our access to our own experiences is exclusive because they are constituted by non-physical properties, this seems to be just a contingent fact. If there are such things as immaterial parts or properties I possess, it is not clear what could rule out the idea of a form of perception that would allow you to perceive these immaterial parts or properties of mine. Of course, the way humans' sensory organs work, they are not capable of such forms of perception, but such forms of perception don't seem to be ruled out *a priori*. This, too, indicates that the idea of an essential connection between consciousness and the point of view of the subject has been left behind on the conception of consciousness at issue here. As we might put it, the fact that experience essentially involves a point of view does not entail that it is accessible only from that point of view (unless we simply equate the two terms); and the fact that it is accessible only from one point of view does not entail that it involves that point of view essentially, as part of its nature.

intrinsically involving the presentation of anything to the subject, [...]. Instead, experience is to be a modification in the way that being thirteen stone is a way of being modified. What marks the former out from the latter is just that this way of being is a way of being conscious (Martin, 1998, pp. 172f.).

In so far as there is an intuition that conscious experience essentially involves a point of view, that intuition cuts against such a conception. It is an intuition that experience is not simply a modification of the subject in the way that being thirteen stone is. The subject's point of view is inherent in experience in a way in which it is not in being thirteen stone, because facts about the subject constitutively contribute to the nature of the experience in a way in which they don't contribute to the nature of being thirteen stone.<sup>25</sup> In other words, in so far as there is an essential connection between the idea of conscious experience and that of a point of view, it is not captured by the conception of consciousness as a modification of the subject, no matter how we think of the subject as thus modified.<sup>26</sup>

Martin goes on to contrast the conception of consciousness just mentioned – on which experience is simply construed as a way of being modified – with an alternative conception that “places much more weight on the subject of experience, and the subject's viewpoint. On that conception, to have an experience is to have a viewpoint on something: experiences intrinsically possess some subject-matter which is presented to that viewpoint” (Martin, 1998, p. 173). In a footnote, Martin (*ibid.*)

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, facts about the subject will explain why they are thirteen stone, but that is a different matter.

<sup>26</sup> The initial passages of (Hellie, 2013) make what I take to be a similar point (though Hellie's response to it is rather different from mine), and something like it arguably also forms one strand in Ryle's (1949) rejection of the dogma of the 'ghost in the machine'.



adds that “[o]ne can see Nagel’s famous discussion of consciousness and physicalism [...] as principally employing the second conception”. Yet, if the reconstruction of Nagel’s argument that I have offered in this paper is along the right lines, it might perhaps be more accurate to say that, whilst Nagel might be seen to pay lip-service to something like the second conception with his emphasis on the notion of a point of view,<sup>27</sup> what he in fact arrives at is a version of the first conception.<sup>28</sup> The thought that leads him to adopt the conception of consciousness in terms of subjective qualities or features that experience possesses – the thought that the ‘specific qualities’ figuring in perceptual experience are qualities of our own making – in effect undermines the idea that the notion of a point of view plays a key role in the analysis of the very nature of consciousness.

#### **IV. Concluding Remarks: Consciousness and Common-Sense Realism**

In the larger narrative within which Nagel embeds his argument in ‘What is it like to be a bat?’, consciousness emerges as the philosophical mystery Nagel thinks it is because the progress of science is seen to consist in increasingly leaving behind the point of view on the world that experience provides us with. In doing so, Nagel thinks, science must ultimately relegate to conscious phenomena the status of the merely apparent, which it rightly considers to be outside its remit. Yet, at the same time, there is clearly no denying the existence of consciousness. Thus, a scientific understanding of consciousness seems ruled out.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> It is even possible to question the extent to which he in fact intends to do so. See, e.g., (Akins 1993c, p. 146) and Snowdon (2010, p. 11 fn. 2)

<sup>28</sup> This might explain Akins’ (1993c, p. 127) impression that ‘a point of view’, whilst being a “pivotal notion” in Nagel’s article, “is left largely undischarged”.

<sup>29</sup> See Nagel (1974, p. 444f.). For more on this theme, see also Nagel (1986, p. 14f.).

Nagel's rejection of common sense realism – of the idea that the world is as it is presented to us in perceptual experience – is made quite explicit in the context of this larger narrative:

What has made modern physical science possible is the method of investigating the observable physical world not with respect to the way it appears to our senses – to the species-specific view of human perceivers. [...] The result is an understanding of objective physical reality almost unrecognizably different from the familiar world of our theoretically unaided experience.

But it was a condition of this remarkable advance that the subjective appearances of things be excluded from what was to be explained and described by our physical theories. And what was done with those appearances instead was that they were detached from the physical world and relocated in our minds. (Nagel, 1994, p. 65f.)

I think the right response to Nagel's argument in 'What is it like to be a bat?' starts with challenging this rejection of common sense realism, i.e. the idea that, because we perceive the world in a particular way, the way we perceive things to be is not a way they objectively are. How it could be in the power of science to prove common sense realism wrong is anyway not obvious, though this is of course ultimately a much larger topic than I can do justice to here. As Peter Godfrey-Smith remarks, "if we sever scientific realism from common-sense realism, it becomes hard to formulate a general claim about how the aim of science is to describe the real world" (Godfrey-Smith 2003, p. 175). That is to say, we can never entirely leave experience behind in

trying to achieve a scientific understanding of the world – not because of some limitation on our part, but because experience is what enables us to think about that of which science supposedly gives an account.<sup>30</sup>

If what I have argued in this paper is along the right lines, though, it is common-sense realism, too, that is required if we are to give the right place to the notion of a point of view in our account of consciousness. What common sense realism provides for is the conception of experience implicit in the idea that experiences are amenable to what I have called embedding objectification. And it is the idea of embedding objectification that gets it right about how to account for the essential viewpointedness of conscious experience. By allowing that the world around us really is the way we experience it to be (or at least that this is one of the ways the world is), common sense realism also makes room for the thought that the nature of a subject's experiences can be captured simply by situating the subject of experience in the world – by giving an account of the features of its environment that that subject stands in an experiential relation to, and the standpoint from which it does so. Accounting in this way for experience makes concrete a sense in which aspects of the very nature of a subject's experience depend constitutively on facts – empirical facts – specifically about the subject, such as her spatio-temporal position, the environment in which she is embedded, and the sensory organs she is equipped with. It thus makes

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<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, this has as a corollary a claim that can also be found in Nagel, namely that our own experience is what ultimately furnishes us with the materials for understanding others' experiences, including those of other species. Yet, this should not be taken to imply, as Nagel thinks, that our understanding of experience is limited by what we can imagine. Rather, our grasp of the world in which embedding objectification situates other experiencing subjects turns on the fact that we are ourselves experiencers of that world (though we may differ from them in which features in that world we can perceive and how we do so).

concrete the sense in which the subject's point of view is a constitutive ingredient in her experience itself.

At one point, Nagel writes that "it appears unlikely that we will get closer to the real nature of human experience by leaving behind the particularity of our human point of view" (p. 444). What I have suggested, in effect, is that it is actually Nagel himself, who, in the course of his argument in 'What it is like to be a bat?', leaves behind the particularity of our point of view. He does so, first, by neglecting the fact that the point of view inherent in conscious experience is most fundamentally that of an individual, and instead putting the idea of a type point of view at the forefront of his considerations. And he does so, second, by construing the idea of a type point of view in terms of the idea of subjective qualities or features that our experiences allegedly possess, properties that constitute their being conscious and which are supposedly entirely the causal product of our own species-specific psychology.

Far from actually giving the idea of the particularity of our point of view its due, in other words, the view that Nagel actually ends up with is one that tries to explain consciousness in terms of the idea of a special class of universals. To do justice to the sense in which conscious experience essentially involves a point of view, by contrast, we need to give up the idea that such universals – special properties experiences themselves instantiate, which allegedly constitute their being conscious – can do the job of explaining consciousness. To return to the metaphor from Peirce I started off with and which gives this paper its title, there is, as it were, no writing on the page of consciousness. Consciousness itself is a blank page. In so far as properties

figure in it, these are the properties of objects in the world the experiencing subject is perceptually aware of.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Anybody who knows about Naomi Eilan's work on consciousness (Eilan, 1995, 1997, 2014) will recognize how deeply indebted the foregoing is to themes within that work. An important further influence I want to acknowledge is Moore (1997). For helpful discussion of earlier versions of this paper I thank Naomi Eilan, Hemdat Lerman, Martin Lipman, and Matthew Soteriou, as well as audiences at the University of York and the Aristotelian Society.

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