

What Is Beyond Our Perspective?: Posthumanism and Subjectivity in Thomas Nagel's "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?"

Alex Laugalis

Alex Laugalis
W2605 Kammel Coulee Rd
Coon Valley WI, 54623
alexlaugalis@gmail.com

How much of our existence do we actually control? A humanist might put emphasis on the supposed “human nature” and the rationale we possess that dictates all things human. But a posthumanist might find that our actions are beyond our control and are entirely contingent on our perspective. Posthumanism could propose an alteration in the perception of our being, a look at what it means to be human or it could be a discussion of the nonhuman. From all three points one could come to the conclusion that posthuman studies takes the enchantment and uniqueness out of being human. It acknowledges human uniqueness but doesn’t place it “above” or as “better” than the existence of the nonhuman in any way. In his essay “What Is It like to Be a Bat?” Thomas Nagel questions our beliefs about the perspective of the nonhuman. No human can really know what it is like to be a bat except that we can know that the bat is experiencing “something.” So, what do we make of our subjective experience? Is it possible to understand this phenomenon? If it is, as Nagel says, “we have at present no conception of what an explanation of the physical nature of a mental phenomenon would be” (435-6). So then, where does it come from if it can’t be physically explained? I will focus my discussion of posthumanism and Nagel’s essay on whether or not our subjective experience can be explained from an objective perspective and if we can understand the subjective experiences of the nonhuman.

Nagel finds that the human condition allows us only to understand our own subjective point of view. For example, we can imagine the perspective of a bat but we cannot say that our imagination was accurate. Also, Nagel finds flaws in reductionism and other philosophical ideas that would use their subjectivity to make objective conclusions. He finds that thus far “the most important and characteristic feature of conscious mental phenomena is very poorly understood” (436). For now, subjectivity is the only true human perspective. What can we understand about the bat if we can only see the world from our human perspective? Nagel finds that it is impossible to really understand these questions since “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” (437). What we are left with then must be rooted firmly in that which we can actually know. So far, this can only come from our own perspective. Nagel calls this notion the “subjective character of experience” and finds that the nonhuman must have some sort of an experience. He bases this on “the fact that an organism has conscious experience at all means, basically, that there is something it is like to be that organism” (436). Yet he does acknowledge that we can’t know what type of experience it is or anything about it other than that it “is.” The experiences of the nonhuman is completely alien to us.

To show the differences in subjective and objective perspectives; the “alien” that Nagel focuses his comparison on is the bat. The bat is a mammal like us and from a distance we can believe it to have a similar subjective experience to ours in so much as it “is” just how we “are.” But scientifically, their mode of perception is quite different from ours. Nagel uses the example of how their use of sonar “is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine” (438). Since we can’t experience or imagine its perspective then our entire understanding of the bats experience is based off of our belief that it “is” actually existing similarly to us. But why must it be similar? Nagel reminds us that “our own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited” (439). With this in mind, our only real option is to imagine that the bat feels what we feel, sees what we see. We must know this cannot be the case. But, what other perspective can we attach to the bat when we have never existed as a bat?

The subjective has the influence of our experience and is completely rooted in the human perspective. On the contrary, the objective does not have this influence and attempts to look at things for what they are when stripped of the human condition. Nagel wants us to focus on the difference between

subjective and objective thought when we begin to consider the bats perspective. A question that arises is what might bats think our perspective is like? Nagel finds that “we are in much the same position that intelligent bats or Martians would occupy if they tried to form a conception of what it was like to be us” (440). He is pointing out that no matter which creature is creating the hypothesis, it would most definitely be subjective and highly inaccurate.

To further illustrate the conceptual split between the subjective and objective Nagel ponders a comedic situation that exemplifies our differences: “Anyone who has spent some time in an enclosed space with an excited bat knows what it is to encounter a fundamentally alien form of life” (438). This difference isn’t limited to just our experiences with the nonhuman. For example, a group of people of varying physical capabilities and intelligence levels could be told “Red is like the sound of a trumpet” (449). They might objectively agree but subjectively they would all have variations in their meanings and images of “red,” a “sound,” a “trumpet,” and what it means to “like.” An example could also be made between humans and, if they exist, aliens. Nagel states “if there is conscious life elsewhere in the universe, it is likely that some of it will not be describable even in the most general experiential terms available to us” (439-40). All of these examples illustrate a flaw in our subjective method of thinking. We are trying to grasp what it is like for “us” to be “them.” This is the mistake that Nagel is trying to point out: “it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. But...I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat” (439). He may be saying that the problem all along has been with inserting ourselves into the experiences we are trying to describe. In an object oriented ontology this is impossible. Nagel is encouraging us to reconsider the methods that have been presented by scientists and philosophers thus far since they are limited and biased. They limit us to trying to put ourselves into the experiences of the non human *as it would experience existence*. Yet, we cannot possibly do this. Rather, we should deduce that the only experience we can ever truly understand is our own.

Nagel's reflection of what the non human's perspective is like could be said to show that there are parts of existence that are truly incomprehensible to humans. He reminds us that "it is possible for a human being to believe that there are facts which humans never will possess the requisite concepts to represent or comprehend" (441). So does Nagel leave us with more questions than before? His posthuman take on subjectivity shows us what it is that we cannot know and doesn't exactly provide concrete answers. But we can conclude that we cannot explain our subjective experience from an objective perspective. We can only understand the subjective experience of the nonhuman in so far as we know that they must have them. Nagel puts humans, nonhuman, objects and everything on the same playing field. No creature or object is seemingly "better" than another nor can it better understand the other. Nagel is reminding us that we really cannot truly know anything. The universe is just full of creatures and things that can only attempt to understand their individual self.

Works Cited

Nagel, Thomas. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review* 83.4 (1974): 435–50.