

DISCUSSION ARTICLE

Subjective Character of Experience in Medical Ethics: A Reply to Atkins

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ABSTRACT *In a recent issue of this Journal Kim Atkins argued that Thomas Nagel's argument regarding a bat's phenomenal experience is important for understanding the value placed on patient autonomy in medical ethics. In this reply to her paper, I demonstrate that Atkins's argument (a) is based on her misinterpretations of Nagel's argument, and (b) can be established without appealing to such a controversial assumption as that which she makes.*

1. Introduction

Thomas Nagel, in his famous paper, 'What Is It Like To Be a Bat?' [1], discusses an apparent threat to the physicalist approach to phenomenal consciousness by introducing a vivid example of a bat's sensory apparatus. A bat presents a range of activities and a sensory apparatus that are radically different from ours. In particular, it has a unique perceptual system: sonar. While bat sonar is 'clearly a form of perception', Nagel says, 'it is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess' [2]. Nagel considers a bat, rather than a bird or a fish, as he explains it, for the following two reasons. First, since a bat is a mammal there should be no doubt that it has consciousness, just as much as a dog or a chimpanzee. Second, a bat's extremely unusual sensory apparatus enables it to have its own, very special, point of view. Since 'every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view' [3], Nagel says, we, who cannot have a bat's point of view, appear to be precluded from knowing what it is like to be a bat. Therefore, Nagel concludes, we seem unable to know the subjective character of a bat's experience.

In a recent issue of this *Journal* Kim Atkins [4] argued that 'Nagel's insight is important for understanding the value placed on patient's autonomy in medical ethics' [5]. In this reply to her paper I do the following two things. First, I show that Atkins misrepresents Nagel's argument, in that what he intends to show is much weaker than Atkins thinks. Second, I demonstrate that even if Atkins's misrepresented view of Nagel's argument were right, it would not be helpful in establishing her argument, because it can be established without appealing to such a controversial assumption as the one she makes.

2. Atkins's Misinterpretations

Atkins's main goal is to show the importance of an 'epistemological humility with respect to the lives of others' by appealing to Nagel's argument [6]. In particular, she aims to show the importance of the difficulty of knowing the subjective character of a patient's experience, knowledge of which is important for medical ethics. However, her argument is based on misinterpretations of Nagel's argument. In what follows, I point out her three most important misinterpretations.

(1) The aim of Nagel's argument is to show the difficulty of our, that is, human beings', knowing a bat's phenomenal experience. Thus, his main concern is the difficulty of knowing the subjective character of experience between different species. However, Atkins thinks that she can equally apply Nagel's argument to cases between individual subjects in a same species, in particular, between individual human beings. Her claim is based on the following interpretation of Nagel's argument:

This 'something that it is like' is what Nagel calls the 'subjective character of experience'. This feature of experience not only holds between creatures of different species and with different perceptual apparatus, but also between individual subjects of the same species. It is, Nagel argues, a feature of experience *per se*. (p. 73)

It is true that there are various kinds of subjective experience that certain subjects know, but others do not, even within the same species. For instance, while a sighted person knows what it is like to see colours, a congenitally blind person does not. In this sense, it is correct to say that the special feature of experience may hold between subjects of a same species. However, Atkins derives much more than that from Nagel's argument. She continues:

This is a direct result of the fact that perceptions are attached to a specific individual perspective; every experience embodies a first-person point of view. The specificity of the first-person perspective means that, in the case of humans, even though I can know that other people perceive and experience in a similar way to me, there is always something unique about each person's experience, something that cannot be made fully explicit. Thus, it is each subject's particular point of view that underlies the subjective character of experience and constitutes 'what it is like to be' that subject [7].

This is *not* Nagel's argument. For Nagel's argument concerns not a *token*, but a *type* of phenomenal experiences. Thus, Nagel writes:

I am not adverting here to the alleged privacy of experience to its possessor. The point of view in question is not one accessible only to a single individual. Rather it is a *type*. It is often possible to take up a point of view other than one's own, so the comprehension of such facts is not limited to one's own case [8].

Hence, Atkins cannot simply rely on Nagel's argument in order to motivate her claim.

(2) Atkins seems to assume that Nagel intends to show that we can *never* know what it is like to be a bat. She writes, 'even though we could never know what it is actually

like, we are nonetheless capable of thinking that there is *something* that it is like to be a bat' [9]. However, again, this interpretation is mistaken. Nagel writes:

My point, however, is not that we cannot *know* what it is like to be a bat. I am not raising that epistemological problem. My point is rather that even to form a *conception* of what it is like to be a bat (and a fortiori to know what it is like to be a bat) one must take up the bat's point of view. If one can take it up roughly, or partially, then one's conception will also be rough or partial. *Or so it seems in our present state of understanding* [10]. (The last sentence is italicised by Nagasawa.)

What Nagel means in the above passage is the following. The extent to which we can know what it is like to be a bat depends on the extent to which we can understand statements that purport to state what it is like to be a bat; and the ability to both formulate and understand such statements is limited by our present knowledge. Hence, Nagel is not committed to any thesis about whether or not it will ever be possible to know what it is like to be a bat. He is laying out conditions for the possibility of such knowledge, which may, or may not, be realised in the future.

(3) Atkins seems to think that Nagel's argument is supposed to defeat physicalism. She writes:

Nagel argues against a reductive physicalist account of consciousness. . . . For Nagel, the approach to explaining our experiences in terms of physical processes alone cannot succeed because the objectivity appropriate to explanations of the physical world can only move us away from a fuller understanding of an experience rather than close to it [11].

Again, this is a misinterpretation. Nagel does not show, and does not even intend to show, that physicalism is false. He explicitly writes, 'It would be a mistake to conclude [from his bat case] that physicalism must be false'. What the bat case shows is, according to Nagel, that 'physicalism is a position we cannot understand because we do not at present have any conception of how it might be true' [12]. He notes that perhaps contemporary physicalists' hypothesis that a mental event is a physical event is analogous to the pre-Socratics' hypothesis that matter is energy [13]. Just as pre-Socratic philosophers needed a concept that enabled them to understand how matter could ever be energy, according to Nagel, perhaps we need a concept that enables us to understand how a bat's phenomenal experience can ever be physical.

3. Problems with Atkins's Argument

One might claim that whether or not Atkins's interpretations of Nagel are correct is not a crucial issue. One might say that the really crucial issue is the cogency of Atkins's argument itself. However, even if we set aside Atkins's misrepresentations of Nagel, her argument still does not convince, because it is based, unnecessarily, on a controversial thesis.

To illustrate her argument Atkins introduces an imaginary case of a patient, Henry, who needs a right ventricular assist device (RVAD) so that he can recover quickly from a massive right ventricular infarction. In order to understand Henry's situation fully,

Atkins says, we need to imagine not only what it is like for *us* to be on an RVAD but also what it is like for *Henry* to be on it [14]. However, Atkins claims, once we realise the irreducible, subjective character of Henry's experience we can grasp the difficulty, for us, of knowing fully what Henry's situation is like. Atkins generalises her point as follows:

If we accept that the subjective character of experience is irreducible and that it is grounded in the particularity of our points of view, then we are bound to realize that our respect for each other's differences and autonomy embodies a respect for the particularity of each other's points of view. Respect for autonomy is at the same time recognition of the irreducible differences that separate us as subjects [15].

In sum, according to Atkins, in order for us to realise that understanding the subjective character of experience is essential to respecting patient autonomy we need to accept the following:

(i) The subjective character of a patient's experience is irreducible.

However, it is not necessary to make such a controversial assumption as (i) in order to establish her claim. Consider Henry's case. When we realise the difficulty of fully understanding what Henry's situation is like, we need only recognise how hard it is to imagine what it is like for Henry to be on an RVAD. There is no need to commit to the claim that the subjective character of Henry's experience is *irreducible*. Put this point in a different way. If Atkins's argument is sound then it follows that reductionists, who sincerely believe that the subjective character of experience *is* reducible to physical properties, cannot realise the difficulty of understanding Henry's situation. However, reductionists *can* hold that the subjective character of experience is reducible to physical properties and still be able to realise the difficulty of understanding Henry's experience. This is because they might realise that, as a matter of fact, Henry's experience has not been reductively characterised. Thus To establish her conclusion she need only assume the following:

(ii) The subjective character of experience is extremely hard to characterise.

(ii) is strong enough to derive her conclusion — 'understanding the subjective character of experience is essential to respecting patient autonomy' [16] — but significantly weaker than (i). For even reductionists can accept (ii). Furthermore, (ii) is more encouraging than (i). Atkins says that (i) entails that it is a *logical* problem that we cannot characterise the subjective feature of someone else's experience [17]. That is, there is a necessarily unbridgeable logical gap between our effort to know what it is like to for Henry to be in such a situation and what actually it is like to for Henry to be in such a situation. However (ii) leaves open the possibility that, at least in principle, the gap can be filled.

4. Conclusion

I agree with Atkins's claim that it is important, for issues in medical ethics, to recognise the difficulty of understanding the subjective character of a patient's experience.

However, in order to advance her claim, as I have shown, she does not have to assume that the subjective character of experience is irreducible or physically uncharacterised. She need assume only that the subjective character of experience is extremely hard to characterise, which is almost uncontroversially true and which, in fact, is exactly what Nagel tries to show with his bat argument.

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NOTES

- [1] THOMAS NAGEL (1974) What Is It Like To Be a Bat?, *Philosophical Review* LXXXIII, pp. 435–50.
- [2] NAGEL op. cit., p. 438.
- [3] NAGEL op. cit., p. 437.
- [4] KIM ATKINS (2000) Autonomy and the subjective character of experience, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 17, pp. 71–79.
- [5] ATKINS op. cit., p. 71.
- [6] ATKINS op. cit., p. 70.
- [7] ATKINS op. cit., p. 73.
- [8] NAGEL op. cit., pp. 441–442.
- [9] ATKINS op. cit., p. 73.
- [10] NAGEL op. cit., ft. 8.
- [11] ATKINS op. cit., p. 71.
- [12] NAGEL op. cit., p. 446.
- [13] NAGEL op. cit., p. 447.
- [14] ATKINS op. cit., p. 78.
- [15] ATKINS op. cit., p. 75.
- [16] ATKINS op. cit., p. 71.
- [17] ATKINS op. cit., p. 73.