

## **Formulating the Explanatory Gap**

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Gilbert Harman (2007) purports to illuminate the intractability of the so-called 'explanatory gap' between the phenomenal aspect of consciousness and an objective physical explanation of that aspect by constructing a parallel situation involving translation from one language to another. While I agree with several points that Harman makes regarding the nature of phenomenal consciousness, I have a reservation about his formulation of the explanatory gap. In what follows, I explain my reservation.

Harman's formulation is based on Thomas Nagel's well-known example of a bat, which Harman describes as follows:

Nagel observes that there may be no such translation from certain aspects of the other creature's experiences into possible aspects of one's own experiences. As a result, it may be impossible for a human being to understand what it is like to be a bat.

Harman then explains the structure of a possible translation that would fill the explanatory gap:

Suppose we have a completely objective account of translation from the possible experiences of one creature to those of another, an account in terms of objective functional relations, for example. That can be used in order to discover what it is like for another creature to have a certain objectively described experience given the satisfaction of two analogous requirements. First, one must be able to identify one objectively described conceptual system as one's own. Second, one must have in that system something with the same

or similar functional properties as the given experience. To understand what it is like for the other creature to have that experience is to understand which possible experience of one's own is its translation.

Harman's description of the explanatory gap in terms of translation from bat experience to human experience seems to face the same problem that Nagel's description faces.

Nagel contends that it is difficult to know how physicalism could be true given that we cannot know what it is like to be a bat or, that is, that we cannot know the phenomenal aspects of a bat's sensory experiences. Nagel's bat example is often said to be so effective because, to any intelligent person, it seems so obvious that a bat's sonar is nothing like any sensory apparatus that we have.

But exactly why does a bat's having a unique sensory apparatus make it impossible to know what it is like to be one? There are two possible explanations here:

- (1) We have to be bats, or at least bat-type creatures that use sonar, in order to know what it is like to be a bat. However, we are neither bats nor bat-type creatures.
- (2) An objective, physical characterization of a bat does not tell us what it is like to have sonar, and hence what it is like to be a bat.

Consider (1). If (1) is true, it is difficult to see why physicalism is threatened by the fact that we non-bats cannot know what it is like to be a bat. While physicalism is the ontological thesis that, roughly speaking, everything in this world is physical in the relevant sense, (1) does not entail any significant ontological claim that could undermine physicalism or indeed *any other alternatives*. It implies only that no human theory, whether it is based on physicalism, dualism, or neutral monism, can

tell us what it is like to be a bat, merely because human beings are neither bats nor bat-type creatures. Hence, if (1) is the basis of Nagel's bat example, it is irrelevant to the cogency of physicalism.<sup>1</sup>

Consider (2). If Nagel and Harman rely on this explanation then, while (2) is relevant to the cogency of physicalism, ironically, the apparent vividness of the bat example and Harman's illustration about a translation turn out to be irrelevant. For the plausibility of (2) remains the same even if we replace the term 'bat' with, for example, 'human being'. We know perfectly well what it is like to be a human being *subjectively*, but we have no idea how to characterize it fully objectively and physically. This in itself creates the explanatory gap between the phenomenal aspect of consciousness and an objective physical explanation of that aspect.

The explanatory gap is a very general problem about characterizing fully objectively and physically the phenomenal aspect of consciousness. Thus, it does not really matter whether the phenomenal aspect in question is related to our own type of experience or to those of other animals. It is therefore misleading to say that the explanatory gap is a result of our lacking 'a completely objective account of translation from the possible experiences of one creature to those of another'. It is a problem of there being no completely objective account of *any* experience, whether it is bat experience or human experience.

Suppose we discover somehow that, surprisingly, there is a one-to-one correspondence between a bat's phenomenal experiences and a human being's experiences, and that what it is like to be a bat is identical to what it is like to be a human being. Alternatively, suppose that we are the only conscious creatures in the whole universe. The explanatory gap nevertheless remains unfilled because, again, we

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<sup>1</sup> See Nagasawa (2004, forthcoming) for related points.

still do not know how to characterize fully objectively and physically what it is like to be a human being.

Harman's formulation of the explanatory gap seems therefore to face the following difficulty: Either (i) it is irrelevant to the cogency of physicalism or (ii) if it *is* relevant, any talk of translation is otiose.<sup>2</sup>

## References

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Kaitlyn Patia for helpful comments.