Commentary on "Nagel, Jackson, and Physicalism"

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nature of man, which is the ultimate goal of studying the mind and mental states. He must consider though, that as attractive as finding one clear answer might be, the question of the nature of the mind might not be so simple. As Nagel so aptly puts it, “Philosophers share the general human weakness of explanations of what is incomprehensible in terms suited for what is familiar and well understood, though entirely different” (311). It is difficult for us to understand consciousness because it is so tied to subjective experience, which, by definition, cannot be understood in scientific terms. Although physical processes can help us understand mental states, they can only help us understand them to a point. Refusal to also acknowledge subjective experience yields an incomplete picture of the nature of the mind and mental states.

Armstrong acknowledges that science cannot tell us about God or morality or justice. Why then, should it be able to tell us about something as complex as consciousness, something that is so undeniably unique to every living thing that experiences it? In other words, the question of the nature of the mind may not have one simple truth. If the physicalist wants to employ scientific reason, he should ask a scientific question. Nagel and Jackson’s thought experiments do not deny that mental states cause behavior, and function to perform physical events. Rather, their experiments demonstrate that the human mind does more than this. Both experiments reveal the limitations of objective knowledge. If we are to gain a complete understanding of the nature of the mind, it is essential to look beyond science, and recognize that subjective experience cannot be separated from the mental state. Thus, physicalism can give neither a full account of the mind, nor an explanation of the true nature of man.

Works Cited


In this essay Sarah is careful to avoid a major pitfall of philosophy papers – an inadequate or burdensome summary – and instead takes multiple philosophical ideas to support an understanding and objection to the physicalist view of the mind. This paper is an exemplary model of a philosophy paper – summary, argument, counter-argument, conclusion – and incorporates each necessary aspect while presenting a clear and thorough understanding of the topics at hand. In incorporating summarized examples of both Nagel and Jackson’s arguments Sarah avoids a heavy handed summary and instead ties in her examples directly to the point she wishes to explore. This not only directs the reader to her purpose, but leaves the reader with a clear outline of where the paper is headed and how each philosopher’s arguments are taken into account in her objection. In analyzing the counter-argument to Jackson and Nagel, Sarah gives adequate room to explain this point, yet leaves the reader with a clear sense of how this argument still presents dilemma’s to Jackson and Nagel. Overall, the essay is well balanced and incorporates a smooth underlying current along which the reader is drawn into the essay and gains a clear picture of both the objections and final conclusion Sarah makes.

-Tori Couch, Writing Center Consultant