

Unsurprising Uniqueness of Me

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In this paper, I argue that I am very special. Indeed, I am so special that it is impossible for everything except myself to be me. The argument for this, however, goes on to show that we all are that special in a certain way, and there is nothing exciting about it. I start by discussing and mostly agreeing with Thomas Nagel's (1974) basic idea in "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" that we have an inexplicably subjective feeling of being aware of ourselves. But I point out that Nagel's choice of bats to illustrate the mystery of that feeling is not impressive enough. I then present my own subjective feeling of being myself as a better example. Based on this, I argue that such a subjective feeling can be felt only by its original feeler, a creature who can correctly use the indexical 'I'. An implication of the argument I present is that it is acceptable for physicalism to not be able to explain our subjective feelings, as nothing about them is surprising enough to merit an explanation. Considering and replying to several objections, I arrive at that indeed no theory, let alone the physicalist ones, needs (or is truly able) to explain the subjective feeling of self-awareness.

Without a doubt, we feel that we are aware of at least a couple of things during our waking life. Also, we often feel that we do things by our own conscious decisions. Sometimes we even feel that we genuinely exist as if nothing is a dreamy lie. These feelings are subjective, and they do not require us to think about them to understand them. We just immediately feel what we feel without needing to refer to the objective features of the context. It is not always important whether these feelings match reality, but it seems worthwhile to explain how we can feel them. That is because we might want everything to be explicable at least in principle. Moreover, we might want everything to be explicable in terms of physical sciences and their "objective" theories. If, however, there is nothing objective in these subjective feelings, we should accept that our aspiration of explaining everything might never succeed.

Likely motivated in a similar sort of way, Nagel argues that the subjective feelings of awareness cannot be explained by the objective depictions of science because their intrinsic subjectivity makes them irreducible to the objective physical facts. As an instance of the kind of feeling he refers to, Nagel discusses the feeling of being a bat for a bat. The idea is that if bats have some sort of unique experience including some sort of awareness about themselves, then it should be true that there is a subjective but quite real feeling of being a bat. Nagel then claims that even if we figure out all possible physical facts about bats, it still seems impossible to have the feeling they have for themselves, namely that of being a bat. Here, one might doubt if bats can feel that they are

aware in the sense that we do. Moreover, it is not entirely clear why we should assume that bats are any good at having subjective feelings. Likewise, it does not seem clear why we need to talk about bats at all when we have a more straightforward example: my subjective feelings. In other words, it makes much more sense to talk about my unshareable awareness to illustrate the same point. Since no one except myself will feel quite like the way I feel about my awareness, and the subjective particularities of my way of feeling don't seem to be explicable physically, Nagel's point stands: not everything can be explained by physical means.

Now, I agree with Nagel that the subjective feeling of awareness is inexplicable. But I do not think that this is because of its subjectivity. Rather, I think the feeling of self-awareness is tied to the ability to be self-reflexive, which makes the feeling trivially unique to the feeler. For brevity, call a self-reflexive creature who can have the feeling of self-awareness the 'original feeler'. We can expect that the original feeler is a competent user of an indexical such as 'I'. Namely, the original feeler can refer to itself. It is in this sense that an original feeler has to be self-reflexive. Self-reflexive creatures can strangely infer that they are identical to nothing but themselves. Being self-reflexive, creatures somehow gain epistemic access to the fact that they are, in a sense, unique. To be clear, in this sense, almost everything is unique because almost everything is only identical to itself. However, original feelers are unique also in the sense that they are justified to talk about their uniqueness. In what follows, I argue that this self-reflexive "justified talk" is also unique for every original feeler but trivially so.

If Nagel is right, then original feelers are the only creatures that have epistemic access to their subjective feelings. This also means that they are justified to use the indexical 'I' whenever they feel like it. The case of original feelers is analogous to that of a time-traveler who can say 'now' to any time he wants. To be more explicit, 'now' is an indexical that creatures use to express the moment they experience, and if these creatures could move through time, they would be justified to use the indexical 'now' for any specific time they want. So, following the analogy, it seems plausible to say that the original feelers have the grounds to use the indexical 'I' quite liberally. But the indexical 'I' differs from 'now' for at least one reason: the indexical 'I' cannot be shared unlike the indexical 'now'. That is, more than one creature can refer to the same thing by saying 'now'. To illustrate this point, you can experiment trying to say "now" with someone else at the same time. The indexical 'I', on the other hand, cannot be used by two different creatures to refer to the same thing. We have already established that everything is unique in the sense that they are only identical to themselves, so it should suffice to say that if a creature talks about itself, then its talk is about nothing but itself. More specifically, when a creature refers to itself, what it says is disparate from anything else other creatures have to say about themselves. As every "self" is unique, everything the indexical 'I' refers

to is disparate when it is used by different original feelers. Then it is indeed the case that original feelers have the justified and unique feeling of self-awareness. However, as you see, there is no mystery here. All in all, the subjective feeling of self-awareness turns out to be based on a simple logical principle of identity.

There seem to be two natural implications of the conclusion I have arrived at. The relatively less significant is that it is necessary that the “self” is inexplicably unique. Since this is the case, it would not be fair to expect from a theory to provide full-fledged explanation of the self. An attempt to explain it would be hardly different than an attempt to explain why $(P \wedge \neg P)$ is logically contradictory. Self-awareness relates to the ability to use the indexical ‘I’ (or being self-reflexive in another way), and this ability depends on the principle of identity. Then explaining the self is not much different than explaining why we deeply hold some logical principles. This also shows that the discussion about the self is on a more fundamental level than all the discussions about the feasibility of physicalism, or any other theory aiming to expound the mental.

The more significant implication of the conclusion is that it shows how we are so trivially unique. The way original feelers have to express themselves is so incredibly unique to themselves that if they had not felt what they feel about their awareness, it would be impossible for them to be themselves. It is no surprise that original feelers are justified, as we see above, in referring to themselves because it is logically impossible for them to refer to anything else by using the indexical ‘I’. Furthermore, it follows that it is logically necessary that original feelers feel what they feel about themselves. In other words, original feelers could not feel what they do not feel because they would not be themselves to feel what they do not feel in that case! Similarly, no one can talk about what it is like to be, say, me as that would require someone to have my “self”, which would – unsurprisingly – no longer be my “self”! By all means, this implication could be easily generalized to say that all original feelers are as unique as me in that sense.

Despite all this, one might still find it unconvincing to say that this conclusion does not harm physicalism at all. After all, a simple thought experiment might show that even if we change all my physical properties, my “self” perfectly persists and the feeling of it possibly keeps its form. This seems to mean that I am something above the physical realm, which is too spooky for empirical sciences to understand. Yet, I do not think that this is different from pointing out the fact that the laws of logic are not physical. We could change everything about the physics of the universe, possibly the multiverse, or even all existence without seeing any difference in our logical principles. But it is not obvious why we should go on to say that physicalists need to reject the laws of logic. Over and above, such a resistance would be self-refuting because it could not explain the laws of logic it uses. Then it is better to say that uniqueness of the self is merely an inexplicable but unsurprising fact that we must intuitively accept.

As a penultimate inquiry, we could ask whether it is ever possible for an original feeler to change itself. We have already discussed that physical characteristics are not about the self. But what about changing merely “parts” of the self? If changing them is possible, then it might also be possible to feel like I am someone else, perhaps even like an uninteresting bat. I do not think that this is logically possible because of a simple Parmenidian reason. Supposing that we can change something that directly or indirectly changes what makes us us mean that we can partly or wholly abandon our prior self to move into a newer self. However, we cannot be something we can abandon and we are not something we will be. Both seem to require an understanding of the self above the self, which leads to an obscure conception of a double-self, or perhaps a series of higher-order selves. Regardless, what should move into what if we were to claim that the object of change was already our “self”?

Concluding this paper, we can be proud of ourselves that we are unique. Concurring with Nagel, I have argued that our subjective feeling of self-awareness makes us unique. But I have then contended that this feeling is not unique because of its subjectivity but its dependence on self-reflexivity. I have introduced what I understand from the concept of self-reflexivity with original feelers or self-reflexive creatures that can refer to themselves by talking about what they feel subjectively. I have maintained that original feelers are justified to talk about whatever they feel because they use the indexical ‘I’ correctly. However, I have then argued that original feelers use the indexical ‘I’ correctly because they could not have used it otherwise. Namely, use of ‘I’ always refers back to its original feeler, and it is simply impossible for an original feeler to not be itself to refer to something else by using the indexical ‘I’. So, every one of original feelers are uniquely self-aware and feel that they are uniquely self-aware because of the unsurprising fact that they had no chance to be something that is not themselves. In sum, the overall conclusion that we could draw from the argument I have offered regarding the larger scale discussions seem to be that no theory, including physicalism, does have the burden of explaining the feeling of self-awareness since it comes from unsurprisingly unique but logically necessary expression of self-reflexivity.

Reference

Nagel, T. (1974). The Philosophical Review. *What is it Like to Be a Bat*, 435-450.