

Churchland, Nagel, and Their Severe Critique of Folk Psychology

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RESUMEN

En este artículo intento mostrar que Thomas Nagel y Patricia Churchland, dos filósofos de la mente en apariencia muy distintos, están sin embargo muy próximos en su severa crítica de la psicología popular. Debido a las profundas insuficiencias de la psicología popular, tanto Nagel como Churchland han sugerido importantes revisiones de ella que, sorprendentemente, han llevado a ambos a llamar “revisionistas” a sus respectivas posiciones. Este artículo hace una contribución significativa a las publicaciones sobre filosofía de la mente, puesto que casi todos los filósofos, incluyendo a los propios Churchland y Nagel, entienden que tanto unos como el otro defienden puntos de vista filosóficos diferentes sobre estos asuntos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Thomas Nagel, Churchland, fenomenología objetiva, materialismo eliminativo, psicología popular, aspecto subjetivo de la experiencia.*

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I attempt to show that Thomas Nagel and Patricia Churchland, two seemingly very different philosophers of mind, in fact resemble each other quite closely in their severe critique of folk psychology. Due to folk psychology's deep inadequacies, both Nagel and Churchland have suggested important revisions to it, which, strikingly, have led both of them to call their positions “revisionist”. This paper makes a significant contribution to the philosophy of mind literature, since almost all philosophers, including the Churchlands and Nagel themselves, understand the Churchlands and Nagel to espouse completely different philosophical views on these matters.

KEYWORDS: *Thomas Nagel, Churchland, Objective Phenomenology, Eliminative Materialism, Folk Psychology, Subjective Aspect of Experience.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Nagel is considered one of the leading figures on the pessimist side of the debate over the prospects for giving an objective account of consciousness, whereas Patricia Churchland is known as one of

the most radical optimists about that same issue.¹ In this article, I argue that these two philosophers, who are frequently cited as belonging to opposite sides of the debate, are theoretically highly similar.² By “highly similar”, I mean that both of them have a strong hunch that an objective account of consciousness can be given. These two positions, although defined with different words, have been developed from surprisingly similar motivations and a shared attitude. The motivation for Nagel is to revise our inadequate folk psychological framework so as to increase its capacity to accommodate the phenomenal character of consciousness.³

Nagel’s arguments are often cited as rejecting the possibility of a naturalistic/objective account of consciousness [Bergström (2009), p. 76; Flanagan (1985), p. 373; Ratcliffe (2002), p. 353; Stoljar (2016), sec. 16]. Sometimes, he is accused of being mysterian or romantic [Dennett (1991), pp. 71, 273, 372], and he has been equated with Chalmers, Jackson, Levine, Searle and McGinn [Block (2007), p. 483; P. S. Churchland (2007), p. 186]. Some people note in passing that Nagel is not so pessimistic about the problem of consciousness, and/or that he is not directly opposed to physicalism [N. Block & Stalnaker (1999), p. 1; Jackson (1982), pp. 131–132, n. 10; McGinn (1989), p. 354; Stubenberg (1998), p. 41], or at least was not so before 1974 [Dennett (1991), p. 425].

There are a few writers who have made some related but somehow different remarks [Matthews (2009); Stubenberg (1998)]. Stubenberg makes no attempt to liken Nagel with Churchland, but he argues powerfully that Nagel’s objective phenomenology project clears a path for future physicalism. Matthews argues that Churchland’s critique of Nagel is gravely erroneous. His line of reasoning centers on the fact that Nagel expressly accepts physicalism. Only two works have a section exclusively focused on the connection between Nagel’s physicalism and his objective phenomenology [Stubenberg (1998); Thomas (2009)]. Although Stubenberg argues that the objective phenomenology project serves to clear the path for future physicalism [p. 42], Thomas argues that Nagel’s non-physicalism is compatible with his objectivism [p. 38]. Neither of these accounts, however, adequately addresses the relationship between physicalism, objectivity, and the massive deficiencies of folk psychology, as Nagel construes them.

In this paper, I first try to offer a coherent and intelligible account of how Nagel, on the one hand, and the Churchlands (primarily Patricia, but also Paul), on the other, understand physicalism, folk psychology and revisionism (section II). Second, I present textual evidence to support my interpretation of their views (sections III, IV and V); and third, I ar-

gue that their views, so interpreted, have something philosophically relevant in common (section VI). I take the last point to be my most important contribution here, since the Churchlands and Nagel regard themselves as espousing completely different philosophical views on these matters.

Let me now clarify how the paper is organized, what its main contribution is, how this will be argued for, what the reader will find in each section, and how it contributes to the overall argument.

With few references, section II mechanically and briefly characterizes the three fundamental terms used by Nagel and Churchland: “physicalism”, “folk psychology”, and “revisionism”. Then section III shows how Nagel redefines physicalism by giving an objective account of the subjective. The hypothesis that phenomenal states have an objective nature is a more fundamental idea than the hypothesis that the nature of experience can be captured in a physical description. On the one hand, the subjective–objective relationship replaces the mental–physical dichotomy. On the other, the notion of objectivity is notably revised and becomes graded. When Nagel speaks of the move from a subjective to an objective characterization, he says: “Objectivity [is a] direction in which the understanding can travel” [Nagel (1974), p. 443]. When I use the term “objectivity” without qualification, I have in mind such gradable objectivity.

In section IV, I try to convince the reader that the Churchlands’ alleged eliminativism is, in fact, not a demand to eradicate folk psychology, but rather a methodological approach, to the effect that we should revise our system of categorization regarding cognition as the relevant sciences advance. In this section, I limit myself to providing textual evidence of passages where the Churchlands dub their view as either “eliminative” or “revisionary” materialism. However, in sections V and VI I try to explain what they mean by this, and whether the revision of folk psychology they envision has anything to do with Nagel’s revision, which is based on offering an objective understanding of phenomenal consciousness [see Atkins (2013); cf. Lee (n.d.)].

Section V focuses on Nagel’s expansionary revisionism and his project of objective phenomenology. Since he was persuaded of physicalism’s truth in 1965 but his intuitive resistance remained, his solution was to revise our conceptual framework. Hence, the objective phenomenology project and expansionary revisions. Nagel’s project lays a conceptual foundation for an objective account of experience’s subjective aspect.

In section VI, I try to rebut two objections. The first of these questions whether the revision of folk psychology envisioned by the Church-

lands is relevant to Nagel's revision. The second concerns the notion of objectivity, which is key to my main point. Only in this section will the reader have a chance to see clearly the philosophically relevant features that their views have in common. The final section is a summary of the paper.

II. NAGEL'S AND THE CHURCHLANDS' VIEWS, IN A SHORT BUT COHERENT FORM

Before adducing much textual evidence to support my points, I shall initially offer a coherent and intelligible account of how Nagel, on the one hand, and the Churchlands, on the other, understand physicalism, folk psychology and revisionism.

Nagel's physicalism. In 1965, Nagel accepted the truth of physicalism in a non-committal and weak sense and did not later substantially change his overall stance toward the objectification of mind, although he occasionally changed his mind about what to call his view. Yet he also occasionally states that physicalism is something we cannot understand. There is no significant inconsistency here, for he accepts that “[s]trangely enough, we may have evidence for the truth of something we cannot really understand” [Nagel (1974), pp. 447–448]. I do not deny that Nagel himself in subsequent years never called himself a physicalist. He once named his approach a “dual-aspect theory” [Nagel (1986), p. 30]. Later (2002), he called his position a form of monism, acknowledging the non-contingent psychophysical identity between mind and brain. In *Mind and Cosmos* [(2012), p. 5], Nagel asserts that some kind of neutral monism is the best-supported answer to the mind–body problem among the traditional alternatives.

Churchland's physicalism. Patricia Churchland uses the term “physicalism” in an unsophisticated way, to refer to theories that claim that the mind is the brain. To understand the mind, we must study the brain. This view prohibits spooky stuff, such as ectoplasm or paranormal avenues to knowledge.

Nagel's folk psychology. According to Nagel, as a naïve understanding of psychological processes, folk psychology is not capable of accounting for the relation between mind and body. Folk conceptions of consciousness, memory, self and personhood have been challenged by neurobiological findings, such as the split-brain and other abnormal psychological and neurological syndromes.

Churchland's folk psychology. Churchland is highly critical of both the integrity of the principles and the propriety of the entities used in the folk psychological framework.⁴ The chief target is propositional attitudes. She believes that the integrity of the framework is greatly threatened by advances in the brain and behavioral sciences. It is unlikely that this framework will preserve its integrity. Its principles will fray, and its posits will gradually be sidelined.

Nagel, revisionism. Nagel offers “expansionary revisions” of our conception of mind. By this, he means a conception that will permit subjectivity to have an objective physical character in itself. Such an expansion does not strike him as out of the question, because it does not involve any contradiction with the essential nature of subjective experience. Nagel even once said that our standard model of mind might be eliminated in the future as neurology advances [Nagel (1970), p. 399].

Churchland, revisionism. Churchland's methodology takes a co-evolutionary approach to studying the mind. She strives for a rich interanimation between top-down and bottom-up approaches by which a fruitful co-evolution of theories, models, and methods might become possible, wherein each informs, corrects, and inspires the other. She talks about “revisionary” and “unificatory” materialism. “Revisionism” here simply means that if someone can improve her predictions by upgrading her folk psychology in line with scientific results, then she should do just that [Mölder & Churchland (2015), p. 179].

III. THE PROBLEM OF PHYSICALISM: GIVING AN OBJECTIVE ACCOUNT OF THE SUBJECTIVE

Nagel is a defender of objectivism [Nagel (1974), p. 449, (1986), p. 5, (2013)]. Furthermore, he explicitly acknowledges the truth of physicalism (1965). Before discussing the relationship between his physicalism and his project of objective phenomenology, we should have a closer look at his conception of physicalism.

I am not sure that Nagel has any exact and enduring definition of physicalism in mind, so ultimately it is not clear whether Nagel is a physicalist. Nonetheless, Nagel's earliest definition of physicalism is “the thesis that a person, with all his psychological attributes, is nothing over and above his body, with all its physical attribute” [(1965), p. 339]. He was “inclined to believe that some weak physicalist theory of the third type is true, and that any plausible physicalism will include some state and event

identities, both particular and general” [p. 340]. The first type is identity theory, and the fourth is something even weaker than token physicalism. His acknowledgment of the truth of physicalism was abductive in nature. He had some reasons to believe that some sort of physicalism should be true, although he gives no argument for this. Nagel adopts an ontologically less committal notion of physicalism. In fact, his goal is not to defend or refute physicalism, but just to defeat the then-widespread arguments for the conclusion that physicalism must be false.

My attitude toward it is precisely the reverse of my attitude toward physicalism, which *repels* me although *I am persuaded of its truth*. The two are of course related, since what bothers me about physicalism is the thought that I cannot be a mere physical object, cannot in fact be anything *in* the world at all, and that my sensations and so forth cannot be simply the attributes of some substance [Nagel (1965), p. 356, all but the last italics are mine].

Interestingly, from this passage, we can see that Nagel was a physicalist as early as 1965; he was persuaded of its truth. Some philosophers, such as Tim Crane, for example, have explicitly stated that Nagel believed physicalism to be true [Crane (2007), p. 23; see also Stubenberg (1998)]. Furthermore, Crane adds that the crucial point for Nagel is that we cannot fully understand physicalism. However, Crane’s interpretation of Nagel is problematic here, because Nagel does not say that we can never understand physicalism. He does not claim that a physicalist account of consciousness cannot be given; only that nobody has yet given a plausible account. More importantly, it is not clear what that account might be.

The physicalism for which Nagel expressed sympathy in 1965 implies that there are no irreducibly non-physical properties. He subsequently moved toward the view that, even if mental events are physical events, this is not all they are. Rather they have essentially subjective properties that are not physical. This view is known as a “dual-aspect” theory. Ultimately, Nagel has been drawn to the view that the truth lies in a form of monism that we cannot at present formulate, and according to which the mental and physical aspects of these events or states are necessarily linked as the manifestation of a single reality seen from both the inside and the outside. However, this might not be physicalism proper. Overall, we might say, Nagel is agnostic on whether physicalism is in fact true. Moreover, he thinks that we do not yet have an understanding of consciousness that would allow us to see how physicalism even *could* be true. Nagel thinks that what is needed is some way of characterizing consciousness in objective terms.

It is reasonable to think that Nagel changed his mind, not concerning the metaphysics of mind, but rather regarding the definition of physicalism. In 1965, intermediate views between physicalism and non-physicalism were not very popular. By the turn of the second millennium, however, it was not unusual for philosophers of mind to adopt non-traditional alternatives concerning the mind–body problem. Dual-aspect theory and neutral monism have become two of these alternatives. Whether a given view is a form of neutral monism, as opposed to a form of physicalism, may depend on how much you think physicalism asks of us.

Nagel says that, assuming the available mentalistic conception of human beings, it appears impossible for the noncontingent identity of mind and brain to be true. The reasonable move is thus to revise and expand our available set of mentalistic ideas: “This does seem to call for some revision in our way of conceiving of mind, or matter, or both. The difficulty is to do this without denying what is in front of your nose” [(1998), p. 343]. Some people will be shocked to hear that, in fact, Nagel once even said that our standard model of mind might be eliminated in the future as neurology proceeds [(1970), p. 399].

In his atypical stance toward physicalism, the classical distinction between physical and mental becomes obsolete. The subjective–objective relationship replaces the mental–physical dichotomy. Yet, the notion of objectivity is importantly revised and becomes graded: “The development goes in stages, each of which gives a more objective picture than the one before” [(1980), p. 79]. If we could see that the question of physicalism is the problem of objectivity in disguise, then we would accept that the problem of physicalism is not ontological in nature, but rather methodological. This is so because “objectivity is a method of understanding” [(1980), p. 77]. The categories of subjectivity and objectivity have replaced the categories of mind and body. Nagel’s strategy is to transcend rather than reconcile the duality between mental and physical categories. Thus, the time-honoured opposition between physicalism and non-physicalism would become a false dilemma, a dilemma that withers away.

There is a fundamental commonality between how Nagel and Churchland construe the preconditions for developing an objective account of experience. There are two major reasons why these similarities are striking. The first is that these philosophers perceive themselves as opposites. The second is that other philosophers assume that this supposed opposition between Churchland and Nagel does in fact exist. Both Paul and Patricia Churchland have severely criticized Thomas Nagel over the last three decades [P. M. Churchland & Churchland (1998), pp. 65–

66; P. S. Churchland (1996), p. 402, (2007), p. 186]. The Churchlands have accused Nagel of being a true pessimist about the possibility of giving a scientific, objective account of consciousness. According to Patricia Churchland [(1996), p. 402], Jackson, McGinn, Fodor, Searle, Kripke, and Chalmers, after and following Nagel, have all defended quite similar views about the possibility of giving a scientific account of experience. She has occasionally noted some significant differences among these philosophers, but they share the same pessimistic orientation [(2007), p. 186].

IV. CHURCHLAND, THE THIRD-PERSON VIEWPOINT, AND ELIMINATIVISM

For the last half-century, the Churchlands have defended the idea that consciousness in all its aspects either is or will become amenable to scientific explanation [P. M. Churchland (1979); P. S. Churchland (1983)]. Because they advocate this idea, it should be clear that they assume the existence of consciousness [cf. Klar (2020)]. Philosophers often consider the Churchlands to be eliminativists about consciousness in particular, or the folk conception of mind in general [Allen-Hermanson (2015); Crane (1998); Lycan (2005); Northoff (2004); Poslajko (2020); Steinert & Lipski (2018)]. Many philosophers think that as thoroughgoing naturalists *and* physicalists, the Churchlands should be understood as denying the existence of experience altogether.

The category of consciousness is not to be eliminated and replaced by novel concepts that come out of nowhere. Rather our present conception of consciousness will be transmuted and naturalized to fit within a neurobiologically harmonious framework [P. S. Churchland (1983); P. S. Churchland & Churchland (1996)]. The sciences in question are not the currently available sciences. Rather, they are the sciences of the future. This future science is occasionally called future cognitive neuroscience: “What is envisaged instead is a rich interanimation between the two, which can be expected to provoke a fruitful co-evolution of theories, models, and methods, where each informs, corrects, and inspires the other” [P. S. Churchland (1986a), p. 3].

During this long co-evolution, there would be much revision in the concepts, tools, and principles of philosophy of mind and the relevant sciences. The Churchlands give their approach at least three different names: (i) eliminative materialism (in 1981), (ii) revisionary materialism (in 1986), and (iii) revisionary *or* eliminative materialism (in 1998):

What seems exciting and promising is that the results from this research on split-brain patients, the results from social psychology, and the philosophical theory underwriting revisionary materialism ... are converging.⁵ [P. S. Churchland (1986a), p. 192]

Lastly, Paul Churchland once spoke of revisionary *or* eliminative materialism: “For reasons outlined in many places, including chapter 1 of NCP, I am strongly inclined toward a revisionary or eliminative materialism concerning the mind” [(1998), p. 287]. What makes the Churchlands’ position eliminativist is their acknowledgement of the possibility of nontrivial revision or even wholesale denial: “The possibility of nontrivial revision and even replacement of existing high level descriptions by ‘neurobiologically harmonious’ high level categories is the crux of what makes eliminative materialism *eliminative*” [P. S. Churchland (1994), p. 26]. Strikingly, Patricia Churchland also once said: “Or, as we have preferred but decided not to say ‘what makes revisionary materialism *revisionary*’” [(1994), p. 39, n7].

The Churchlands say that during the co-evolutionary process, both the lower and higher-level theories modify each other by the force of new data, emerging insights, and novel concepts. This constant reconfiguration is open-ended. These revisions might be minor, moderate, large or radical. Herein, the categories and theories that are anticipated to be subject to significant revision are the categories of so-called folk psychology, as well as some contemporary categories of psychological science, such as memory, attention and reasoning. I have tried to show that the Churchlands’ approach to this debate can be named “revisionary materialism”, as they have preferred to call it. Elimination is just an empirical prediction, or a broad hunch, of a very substantial or even radical level of revision. The more we learn from brain and behavioral sciences, the more modifications we will need to make to the old mental categories that we currently use, both in daily life and in psychological science. How much revision folk psychology as a theory (and its posits) will undergo is an empirical question: “We thought that ‘revisionary materialism’ was actually closer to what we wanted to convey, inasmuch as we take it to be an empirical question how much revision a theory and its concepts will undergo ...” [P. S. Churchland (1986b), p. 247].

What was closer to their intended message was the term “revisionary materialism”, even if they did not initially choose this label. Revisionary materialism, here, would not imply that some core part of folk

psychology will or must be preserved [cf. Bickle (1992)]. It only emphasizes the empirical character of the revision needed. The degree of modification cannot be known in advance.

Given their first-hand history of the name “eliminative materialism”, I think, many interpretations of the Churchlands’ approach turn out to be deeply mistaken. Eliminativism is just a moderate methodological idea, not a radical ontological thesis. But the much more intriguing point is that Thomas Nagel himself defended a very similar position, and even used the same name for his approach, i.e., “revisionism”. I shall now proceed to scrutinize his proposal.

Nagel asserts: “The mind-body problem exists because we naturally want to include the mental life of conscious organisms in a comprehensive scientific understanding of the world” [(1993), p. 1]. He [(1986), p. 5] “offers a defense and also a critique of objectivity”. His critique of objectivism is limited to certain ambitious claims of natural scientists, who venture far beyond the scientific spirit, and make bold assertions bolstered by a metaphysical worldview [Nagel (2012), Chapter 1]. For Nagel, the core problem is how to give an increasingly objective account of the subjective. To achieve that, Nagel believes, we should develop a better foundation to make the truth of materialism intelligible, and also to capture the subjective aspects of experience [(1974), p. 449, see also (1998), p. 352].

Nagel claims that we currently lack the conceptual resources to understand the truth of physicalism. It probably will turn out that the mind is the brain. During future philosophical and scientific developments, our current conceptions of “physical” and “mental” will be revised. Thus, at the core of the problem of consciousness lies the objectivity problem. However, during this conceptual progression, our conceptions of the physical and the mental will be significantly modified. The resulting view might not be physicalism proper, whatever that may be. Such a result may be why Nagel never dubbed his position “physicalism” after the 1970s. In the end, Nagel is drawn to what he terms a “hybrid” approach.

For Nagel, if something is physical, “it has to be objective” [Nagel (1974), p. 449, n15; for more on this issue, see also his (1979), p. 202]. That is, if we are to explain the mental in physical terms, we have to characterize it as something objective. Nagel anticipates that in the future, once the relationship between the mental and the physical is fully understood, “the fundamental terms” of the theory that explains that relation will not fall squarely within our current categories of physical and mental. That is, for Nagel, the physical account of the mental will remain improbable without giving “more thought” to the general problem of the

subjective and the objective [(1974), p. 450]. In fact, Nagel, in one of his less known works, states that the problem of physicalism is just a substitute for the question of objectivity [Nagel (1979), p. 202; for a parallel claim, see Stoljar (2016)].

What makes the problem of consciousness intractable, then, is not that there is a mystery about how the physical gives rise to the mental. Rather it is our lack of a suitable notion of objectivity. Our current notion of objectivity is confined to pure physical objectivity. This pushes the phenomenal aspect of experience aside to the purely subjective side of the debate. The phenomenological aspect of experience should be made amenable to objective exploration. Nagel proposes to do this through his objective phenomenology project [Nagel (1974), pp. 448–449, see also n14]. This is indeed the case:

Apart from its own interest, a phenomenology that is in this sense objective may permit questions about the physical basis of experience to assume a more intelligible form. Aspects of subjective experience that admitted this kind of objective description might be better candidates for objective explanations of a more familiar sort [Nagel (1974), pp. 449–450].

In the future, it will be possible to develop an objective phenomenological vocabulary to answer the question “What is it like to be a bat for a bat?” [see Atkins (2013)]. Nagel does not deny the possibility of giving an objective account of consciousness. On the contrary, he strives for it.

V. NAGEL’S PROPOSAL OF EXPANSIONARY REVISIONISM

As I have shown, because an objective characterization of consciousness is unlikely to be given *within* the present conception of mind, Nagel proposes an objective phenomenology project. Yet he finds physicalism repellent [(1965), p. 355]. He has an intuitive resistance to physicalism, but also knows that his intuition is anchored in the standard conception of mind, and that this conception can and should be upgraded. In fact, this is the core of his argument for the need for objective phenomenology.

Nagel’s proposal of objective phenomenology reflects his desire to make important revisions to both the mental and the physical categories. Because these revisions are primarily about folk psychological categories, I will first briefly discuss the latter. Folk psychology is a mentalist ex-

planatory framework which human beings have used throughout millennia for understanding, predicting, and manipulating other people's behaviors and mental states. The core of folk psychology consists of propositional attitudes such as believing, aiming, hoping and desiring; that is, belief–desire psychology.

Viewing the issue from an opposing angle might help. Those philosophers who argue that we cannot give a full scientific account of consciousness typically assume some aspects of our present conception of it: non-spatial, accessible to introspection, incorrigible to the owner of the experience, unitary, and intimately connected to language [P. S. Churchland (1983), p. 80]. From this, it follows that the debate over consciousness is actually related to our convictions about our mentalistic framework. If folk psychology is fundamentally mistaken, then those convictions are at stake. Fodor expresses this in a striking manner. He says that if our belief–desire explanations are not literally true, then practically everything he knows about anything is erroneous [(1990), p. 156]. Nagel argues that if the then-widespread ideas denying the possibility of giving a scientific account of consciousness are correct, then the basic assumption that “we are selves” is wrong, and he does not want to accept this conclusion: “We are thus freed to investigate the possibility, and to seek the kind of understanding of psychological states which will enable us to formulate specific physicalistic theories as neurology progresses” [Nagel (1965), p. 355].

Even before the Churchlands, Nagel emphasized the enormous trouble that folk psychology would face in the long term. He argued that brain and psychological sciences have increasingly demonstrated that folk psychology is critically inadequate [(1970), (1971)]. He saw that our standard conception of mind is not harmonious with developing neurobiology. Two types of scientific studies struck him especially: the split-brain studies and abnormal psychological cases. The former is the very same type of study that directed Patricia Churchland toward neurophilosophy at the earliest stage of her career [Mölder & Churchland (2015); Vasiliev (2015)]. In the seventies and eighties, both Churchland and Nagel greatly appreciated what split-brain studies could tell us about the mind–body problem [P. S. Churchland (1986a), pp. 174–193; Nagel (1971)].

Clearly, Nagel calls for revision, as do the Churchlands. By expanding and revising our mentalistic concepts, we will achieve a scientifically harmonious notion of mind and consciousness. In doing so, it will become possible to give an objective characterization of mind. Consciousness thus becomes amenable to scientific exploration. This is actually the core of Nagel's objective phenomenology proposal [(1986), Chapter II].

A potential account of conscious experience is explained in terms of objective, scientific characterization. The intractable problem becomes tractable; it becomes subject to scientific exploration.

At this point, a challenge demands to be addressed. If Nagel is this much in step with the Churchlands, then how should we explain the prevalent reporting of the Churchlands' position as eliminativist? Are these just total misreports about their neurophilosophy? Or, alternatively, should we say that there are two opposite positions under the rubric of "revisionism": expansionism and eliminativism? In this case, it is natural to reply that their anticipated revisions have different targets. When expressed in this way, the apparent problem might seem to disappear. However, this natural reply will not fly, although the reason is elusive. For Churchland [(1986b), pp. 241–242], eliminative materialism just means the revisability of theory at every level: "I argue for physicalism, for inter-theoretic reduction, for naturalizing epistemology, for conceptual-role semantics, and for revisability of theory at every level (eliminative materialism)."

Both Nagel and the Churchlands assert that the degree and direction of future revisions is an empirical issue [P. M. Churchland (1981), p. 78], which cannot be fully anticipated at present. In view of the fact that the degree of revision is an empirical issue, the phrase "revisionary materialism" is closer to their intent. Across-the-board elimination is located at one extreme of this wide spectrum of possibilities.

The point here is that our current categories and assumptions about the nature of mind are not a sound foundation upon which we could build a future cognitive neuroscience or philosophy of consciousness. That is so from the Churchlands' viewpoint. From Nagel's point of view, the insufficiencies of our self-conception hinder the objective characterization of consciousness, which is very desirable and urgently needed, and is possible to achieve through revising our concepts of mind and matter.

Considering all that has been quoted above, it can be said without hesitation that Nagel is a revisionary monist in the context of the mind-body problem. Nagel himself actually says the same, as quoted above in the second section. Here is the sequel of that quotation:

By this [expansionist revision] I mean a conception that will permit subjective points of view to have an objective physical character *in themselves*. The reason such an expansion does not seem to me out of the question is that it doesn't involve a contradiction with the essential nature of subjective experience [(1998), p. 343; compare his (2012), pp. 23–24].

Not an eliminativist but an expansionist, says Nagel. But what does that really mean? Nagel accepts the existence of subjectivity. But what kind of subjectivity is he talking about? This is the subjectivity that is right in front of our noses, he says. It is directly related to the first-person viewpoint and represents the felt character of experience. The relevant experiences are *our* experiences and are articulated in belief–desire language and represented by the concepts of sensations and emotions. There is a disanalogy between familiar scientific reductions and any potential psychophysical identification, which concerns the language of our self-conception. In Armstrong's theory, the identity between gene and DNA, says Nagel, cannot be a model for the relationship between mind and body. Then he goes on to say:

Our dealings with and declarations to one another require a *specialized* vocabulary, and although it serves us moderately well in *ordinary* life, its *narrowness* and *inadequacy* as a psychological theory become evident when we attempt to apply it in the formulation of general descriptions of human behavior or in the explanation of abnormal mental conditions [Nagel (1970), p. 399; for exactly the same reasons, see P. S. Churchland (1986a), p. 223].

From this, it follows that our mentalist picture is insufficient for a general account of human behavior and cognition, even though it is enough for daily transactions. However, we should desire a sufficient account. Then the mentalist picture should be improved via unending revisions as follows:

The crude and incomplete causal theory embodied in commonsense psychology should *not* be expected to *survive* the next hundred years of central nervous system studies *intact*. It would be surprising if concepts like belief and desire found *correspondents* in a neurophysiological theory, considering how limited their explanatory and predictive power is, even for gross behavior. [(1970), p. 399, my italics]

This passage is explicitly a powerful critique of folk psychology, focusing on its concepts of belief and desire. It emphasizes the explanatory limitations and the predictive weaknesses of folk psychology, regarding even gross behavior. It says that a future brain science would not match our current self-conception.

Old psychological concepts will not work in the future. They will become archaic. In a future theory of cognition, we will need novel terms, a new objective phenomenological vocabulary. Thus, if Church-

land is an eliminativist, then so is Nagel. Conversely, if Nagel is revisionary, then so is Churchland. Their motivations and aims are sufficiently shared.

VI. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

Concerning the relevance of Nagel's revision of folk psychology to the Churchlands', it would be helpful to remember that phenomenal consciousness has traditionally been regarded as qualitative, intrinsic, private, ineffable and unitary. The third-person perspective has no access to it at all. The essential avenue into phenomenal consciousness is first-person, introspective access.

Nagel challenges most features of this standard conception. In "Armstrong on the Mind" (1970), he unequivocally claims that our standard notion of cognition will not survive developments in the brain sciences. Earlier than almost all philosophers of mind, in "Brain Bisection and the Unity of Consciousness" (1971), he foresees the philosophical implications of split-brain studies for the structure of experience and the unity of consciousness, and their potential threat to our concepts of the self, personal identity and personhood. He accepts that the unity of consciousness is mistaken, or at least overstated. In his famous bat article (1974), Nagel rejects the idea that qualia are private. In "Subjective and Objective" (1979), he replaces the problem of the mind and the body with the question of the subjective and the objective. In *The View From Nowhere* (1986), he tries to develop a speculative project of making consciousness amenable to scientific investigation. In "Conceiving the Impossible and the Mind-Body Problem" (1998), he entertains the idea that we will have third-person-perspective access to consciousness's inner processes. As we saw in one of the quotes above [from Nagel (1998)], he sees nothing in the idea that the essence of experience prevents it from being physical. There he rejects the ability of imaginative exercises, irresponsible thought experiments and modal talk to prove that physicalism must be false. In "The Psychophysical Nexus" [Nagel (2002)], he explores the non-contingent psychophysical identity between mind and brain.

Nagel's ideas are not in tension with each other concerning the possibility of giving an objective account of subjective experience. Yet it might be fair to say that, during his terminological wandering in his theory of experience, he became less and less willing to associate himself with even a weak sort of physicalism, or with the proposal that consciousness

can be given an objective physical characterization. Fair enough. However, he has not retreated from his speculative proposal that subjectivity can be accounted for in objective terms. He merely deleted the word “physical” in the sentence above. Instead of talking about an objective *physical* account of the phenomenal, he starts to use the phrase “objective account of the phenomenal.” Concerning his latest vocabulary, Nagel has transcended the dichotomy between the mental and the physical.

The skeptical reader might ask whether or not this is also consistent with the Churchlands’ views. It is reasonable to say that there is no incompatibility between the Churchlands’ view and Nagel’s. Although the Churchlands define themselves as physicalists, what they mean by “physicalism” is a worldview that gives primacy to the physical sciences. If the objective methods of science could examine a phenomenon, then it is natural. The labyrinthine complexities of the infinitely many positions within philosophical physicalism should not obscure the real motivation for the physicalist worldview held by naturalist philosophers such as Paul and Patricia Churchland. Because the Churchlands adopt only a simple, austere notion of physicalism, any metaphysical innovation to fix the alleged problems of more committed versions of physicalism is irrelevant to their worldview [P. S. Churchland (2014)].

For this reason, we should not expect any inconsistency between Nagel and the Churchlands concerning the austere notion of physicalism. Nagel’s proposal addresses a non-existent problem from the viewpoint of the Churchlands. There is no incompatibility here. The Churchlands’ plain physicalism has no thick philosophical commitments. Nagel’s speculative proposal is beneficial in that other positions on the mind–body problem thus find easier classification. In addition to his own approach, positions such as dual-aspect theory, Russellian monism and its numerous versions, panpsychism, panprotopsyism, and neutral monism do not fit as comfortably as one would like in the debate between physicalism and anti-physicalism. The divide between subjectivity and objectivity provides a more comfortable home for these positions. Since the defenders of different positions have conflicting views of the phenomenal aspect, many alternative positions to the more traditional views concerning the mind–body problem have emerged. However, what is much more important is that these philosophers have different notions of the mental and the physical.

The second problem I will address is the notion of objectivity, which is a key notion for my main point, but has been insufficiently explained. Again, I should construct a coherent notion of objectivity as

used by Nagel and show that it fits into the Churchlands' overall view of the phenomenal.

Nagel attempts to set the stage for an account of what it would be for the analysis of mind and the subjective aspect of experience to be objective. He aims to construct a suitable notion of objectivity concerning the subjective aspect of consciousness, by exploring our need for and the limits of objectivity [see Nagel (1980), p. 77]. What matters for Nagel is not whether we can actually have a maximally objective account of subjective experience, but rather the goal of objectivity itself, which is intimately connected with his realism. This goal is valuable, and initial indicators suggest that it could be attained [(Ibid., p. 100]. In other words, we do not yet know whether this goal can be achieved in an absolute sense, but we must strive for it, as we do in many areas of life such as mathematics [Ibid. (1986), p. 17]. This is exactly what Quinean naturalists such as the Churchlands would suggest. Mind, or at least some features of it, should be reconceived so that these features may become amenable to objective study [Ibid., p. 5]. Only those philosophers who think that mind, meaning and knowledge might be scientifically explored are true naturalist philosophers. In this sense, I am not saying that Nagel is a full-fledged naturalist, but it is reasonable to think that his approach to the subjective aspect of experience contains the seeds of a moderate naturalism. Less ambitiously put, his view is perfectly compatible with naturalism in its initial state.

For Nagel, what makes the mind-body problem intractable is one particular but important conception of objectivity: the physical conception of objectivity. This notion is incapable of accommodating certain features of subjective experience. Nevertheless, this conception is the one that we use to understand the physical world, and Nagel finds it highly successful in navigating nature [(Ibid., pp. 13–17]. Since there is an intimate connection between reality and objectivity, the vast majority of people assume that physical objectivity is the general and complete form of reality [Ibid., (1980), p. 99]. Conversely, Nagel asserts that we need an expanded notion of objectivity (and the structure of reality) in order to account for subjective experience [Ibid., (1986), pp. 18–19].

An objective concept, in Nagel's terminology, is available from all viewpoints. This provides a universally accessible description of at least some features of an essentially subjective phenomenon. Conversely, subjective concepts are possible only from specific points of view.⁶ Since points of view are restricted to the experiential capacities of organisms, a maximally objective phenomenal concept becomes a concept of the

phenomenal character of experiences that does not require any specific experiential capacities. Being objective implies being publicly observable. The full intersubjective verifiability of something would make it maximally objective: a universally accessible description. That would imply the game of science. If consciousness is intersubjectively observable, then it is open to third-person-perspective access, which means that it is amenable to scientific methods.

As can be seen, Nagel has an intricate notion of objectivity. One can even sense some paradoxical air to his revision of the notion of objectivity. Nonetheless, he urges us to expand the usual conception of objectivity, rather than constructing a new one from scratch. He acknowledges the strong connection between intersubjectivity and objectivity. Atypically, intersubjectivity in this sense does not exclude subjectivity for him. He claims that “our capacity to share in a general way each other’s point of view” is one of the pillars of “the objectivity of the mental concepts” [Nagel (1993), p. 4]. This somewhat obscure and speculative proposal would suggest an expansion of current science. As for objective phenomenology, Nagel does not mean the current physical forms of objectivity, but rather an objectivity that would provide a universally accessible description of at least some features of an essentially subjective phenomenon, without giving up its subjectivity.

Skeptical readers will object that if Nagel dislikes the physical conception of objectivity, then his project could hardly be compatible with the Churchlands’ general approach. The answer to this complaint is easy, given that for Nagel, objectivity is a method of understanding, not an ontological issue. For him, the physical notion of objectivity signifies the currently used and very effective methods used in the physical sciences. However, Nagel judges these methods to be possibly incomplete and insufficient to account for all features of subjectivity. There is no universal and unchanging scientific method, not even in the most abstract sense of this term, unless one conflates it with general ways of reasoning found among our species.

Sciences constantly change, as do their methods. Objectivity as a method of understanding should be expected to keep changing indefinitely. There is a dialectic between the shifting methods and the changing concepts and theories. This is why the history of science is a history of conceptual change and theory replacement. Some features of our consciousness might be waiting for more advanced techniques, more holistic methods, novel concepts, and a very unfamiliar brain and mind theory. In Nagel’s thinking, these would yield progress by successive applications

of novelties to the features of subjectivity. We do not need a completely objective understanding of subjective reality, but we must strive to advance as far as possible.

Concepts have varying degrees of objectivity. Objectivity is a gradable property [see Nagel (1980), pp. 77–78, 89–91]. Nagel needs the concept of consciousness to become more objective [Ibid., p. 91]. A conscious experience might be subjective on an ontological level, but our knowledge of it should be objective. Ontological subjectivity does not exclude epistemological objectivity [see Searle's remarks in Baars (1993), p. 301]. Nagel asserts that “phenomenological concepts seem in fact to secure their objectivity through an internal connection to behavior and circumstances” [Nagel (2012), p. 214].

For Nagel, the mind is “a general feature of the world”, and a “natural objective understanding” of it is needed [Nagel (1986), p. 191]. Conversely, some philosophers of mind take the having of experiences to be inexplicable in objective terms. They claim that explaining subjectivity in objective terms is absurd [P. S. Churchland (2007), p. 186]. Thus, consciousness cannot be scientifically explained. Ironically, without knowing what Nagel did, Churchland attacks him, as well as other philosophers against whom Nagel had already argued.

VII. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have attempted to show that Thomas Nagel and Patricia Churchland, two seemingly divergent philosophers of mind, in fact resemble each other quite closely in relation to the problem of the possibility of giving an objective, scientific characterization of conscious experience. Their most conspicuous common ground is their severe critique of folk psychology. Because of the deep inadequacies of folk psychology, both parties suggest important revisions to it, which, strikingly led both of them to label their positions as “revisionist”. Nagel also terms his revisionism “expansionist”. On the other hand, the Churchlands have always been called “eliminativist”. In the fourth section, I argued that Churchland's eliminativism is nothing but a moderate form of revisionism. Nagel's choice of the term “expansionist revisions” is just another way to discuss his objective phenomenology project, in which he argues for the possibility and the desirability of constructing an objective characterization of consciousness. This cannot be done upon a weak, inadequate and slippery

foundation. Although Nagel's own revisionism is not quintessential, Churchland is not his target. Indeed, they are strange bedfellows.

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NOTES

¹ It is sometimes said that there are significant differences between Patricia and Paul Churchland, so we should not treat them as a unit, saying exactly the same things. Fair enough. However, within the scope of this paper, there is no relevant difference between them. So, I sometimes say “the Churchlands” and sometimes just “Churchland”. Unless stated otherwise, there is no significant difference between these two usages.

² I am highly grateful for all the help and encouragement I received from my colleague Cenk Özdağ to pursue further the unexpected but important similarities between Nagel and Churchland. I would also like to thank Berk Yaylın, Tolgahan Toy and Yavuz Başoğlu for their comments on an earlier draft. Last but not least, I greatly appreciate the two anonymous reviewers' and the editor's judicious evaluations, and their constructive and concrete comments and objections.

³ For a much more comprehensive analysis of Nagel's attitude toward physicalism, and of his objective phenomenology project, see [Tümkaya (2020)].

⁴ For a deeper and more systematic treatment of Churchland-type eliminativism against folk psychology, see [Tümkaya (2019)].

⁵ On the official website of the Nobel Prize, the core finding of split-brain studies is expressed as follows: “When, early in the 1960s, Sperry had the opportunity to study these patients he was able, through brilliantly designed test procedures, to show that each cerebral hemisphere in these patients had its own world of consciousness and was entirely independent of the other with regard to learning and retention. Moreover, each had its own world of perceptual experience, emotions, thoughts and memory completely out of reach of the other cerebral hemisphere” [“The Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine 1981”, 2021]. These findings directly challenge the standard conception of consciousness, which says that consciousness is unified. The principle of the unity of consciousness is acknowledged to account for the unity of agency, personal identity, the existence of the first-person viewpoint, the binding problem, the feeling of the unity of consciousness, self-consciousness, and the unity of vision. The neurobiological challenge to the unity of consciousness suggests that we should revise our folk notion of mind.

⁶ For a more systematic, more comprehensive and deeper account of Nagel's objectivity, or a reconstruction of it, see [Lee, n.d., pp. 2-6].

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