

I'd first like to thank Joseph for the provocative and well-developed paper. It is full of fruitful ideas about the state of the debate between first-order and higher-order theorists of consciousness, as well as more general concerns about philosophical method—a perfect paper for a Brains symposium!

I am sympathetic with the idea that theorists in consciousness studies are often talking past each other and using terms in equivocal ways. Further, it's clear that the infamous phrase “what it's like” is among the most slippery—it seems to morph its meaning from one theory to the next. However, I do not subscribe to the main conclusion Joseph draws from these facts. I do not think that they show that the debate between first-order and higher-order theorists is verbal in the relevant sense. My reading will be more “neo-Quinean” than (what I read as) Joseph's “neo-Carnapian” interpretation. The views may circle back towards one another, as Quine's and Carnap's perhaps do. The differences may be a matter of emphasis rather than real substance.

To begin, I want to register a general skepticism about the employment of detailed linguistic analysis to elucidate these sorts of philosophical debates. I know, I know—that's pretty rich coming from an analytic philosopher who's literally argued in just this way! Still, my thinking is that whatever we ultimately decide about the right analysis of language is beholden to more basic views we have about what's true, what's the best theory of the world, what science says, and so on. We are always clever enough to fix the language after the real explanatory shooting ends. If the first-order view is right on the facts, then the linguistic spoils go to the first-order victor. (This is a distant counterfactual, of course!) The point is that a language-first approach won't carry much weight. It's not that there's nothing there, but other considerations are beefier and push analysis around.

Next, a brief aside on “technical terms.” It seems to me that Nagel's “what it's like” phrase is not ordinary, non-technical language. I teach the Bat article to undergrads year after

year and have to explain with care just what Nagel is after. This indicates that the standard for technical language mentioned by Joseph—that there be an explicit acknowledgment of the new technical usage—is too strict. I contend that many examples of technical terms, terms of art, jargon, and so forth, emerge spontaneously from discourse and practice and need no explicit marker. Further, Nagel introduces the phrase in *The Philosophical Review*. It is a technical journal, not a piece of popular press! Simply by introducing it in the venue he does signals its technical nature. What's more, the later uptake and use by the community of philosophers embellishes and alters the meaning. Whatever Nagel may have meant when he introduced “what it's like,” it is a living phrase and its meaning evolves as the community employs it. A gradual process of sophistication and technicalization has occurred, even if, as seems to me unlikely, Nagel was just talkin' the plain, simple, ordinary English of the analytic philosophy professor. I don't think this undermines Joseph's main point, but it may put pressure on the analyses of Stoljar's he uses, if those rely on a strictly non-technical usage.

But for all that, it seems right that first-order and higher-order (not to mention dualists, panpsychists, neutral monists, and the like) use “what it's like” and its cognates in a variety of ways. Isn't that enough to make Joseph's point that they are most charitably interpreted as speaking different languages? I don't think so. Rather, I think there is univocal, though very thin meaning of Nagel's phrase, and this accounts for its wide use in consciousness studies. Nagel begins his paper with the sentence, “Consciousness is what makes the mind-body problem really intractable” (1974, 435). He later famously tells us that, “But fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to *be* that organism—something it is like *for* the organism” (Ibid. 436, emphasis in original!). Much of Joseph's paper is a heroic attempt to find various useful analyses (following Daniel Stoljar) for this “definition”. But my thinking is that the first sentence

gives us all the meaning we need to use the “what it’s like” locution in productive, communicative ways. It points to whatever (seems to) make the mind-body problem really intractable. This is the claim made by Uriah Kriegel in his 2009 and addressed briefly by Joseph. While it’s true that different theorists, including different higher-order theorists, disagree about whether or not there really is something intractable here, they all think there’s at least a *prima facie* problem here. Nagel’s phrase is a rough pointer at that *prima facie* problem. It provides a way to indicate to other researchers that, “hey, I’m talking about the problem under philosophical discussion, even if I later dismiss that problem.” What folk disagree about, among other things, is what the real problem is. But the phrase provides a way of opening the debate. It says far less, at least at the outset, than any of the detailed analyses do. Those are possible ways to cash out the phrase, each contentious and motivated by various theoretical, phenomenological, and philosophical concerns. But the initial, more minimal pointing allows for us to get started with a meaningful debate. And that, to me, suggests that we’re all speaking a common language but disagreeing on how to precisify and extend that language in theory-driven ways.

There is likely a more general moral here, that language is too fluid and flexible to really pin down in precise word- or phrase-level analysis. It may be that the unit of useful analysis is much bigger, more like whole theories or world-views. This is not to say that rough-and-ready analysis can’t be helpful in exposing the commitments (often hidden) of a particular theory, but we shouldn’t be overly tempted to put much weight on such analyses. The boundary between meaning intuition and theoretical belief is fluid and unprincipled, to put things in a Quinean key. And this suggests to me that the issue here is one of competing theories, rather than different languages. The data themselves—linguistic, analytical data included—are likely theory-laden. Each side sees what their theory dictates in developing

Nagel's phrase. Since it is a thin and relatively empty linguistic vessel, theorists can fill it as they see fit. It is all things to all theorists, which explains its popularity in the literature.

And this, in turn, makes more charitable sense of the debate than positing a proliferation of languages. It allows us to retain the contentious spirit of the discussion. We really are disagreeing! Hooray! Further, consider what happens if we accept Joseph's suggestion that all this is a "metalinguistic negotiation" about how to rightly use words (or about what language is best to employ). What will we appeal to in this negotiation? Theorists, in all likelihood, will argue that their language allows for the best explanation of consciousness—you know, of *phenomenal* consciousness, of "what it's like". And the disagreements will all reemerge as before, with the same sound and fury. But from the Quinean point of view, that's unsurprising. We don't get any new purchase by moving to the meta-language. It's all a holistic mess, a sticky web of belief ensnaring word, object, theory, and data, language and meta-language. But that's ok! I can understand from your theoretical perspective how things go, and you can do the same for mine. We may disagree about what's true (or what words mean), but we'll be able to charitably interpret each other. First-order and higher-order theorists have different theories, but they are broadly theorizing in the same language about the same thing. Or so it seems to me.¹

References:

- Nagel, Thomas (1974). What Is it Like to Be a bat? *Philosophical Review*, 83(3), 435–450.
- Kriegel, Uriah (2009). *Subjective Consciousness: A Self-Representational Approach*. Oxford University Press.

¹ Thanks to Uriah Kriegel for discussion of these issues.