

# Theory of mind: daniel dennett vs. thomas nagel essay sample



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The mind-body problem consists of two very different theories; Dualism and materialism. These are two theories that are on opposite sides of the spectrum and I will compare not only their ideas, but also the ways in which they coincide and oppose each other. From these two theories, I agree with materialism since I believe our consciousness and “ life” consists of nothing more than the physical mind.

Dualism is the assumption that mental phenomena are both non-physical and physical, consisting of a physical body and a non-physical mind. A famous dualist was Thomas Nagel, whom attributed the consciousness of the mind to physical and non-physical properties. Thomas Nagel believed that dualism was the correct theory of life due to the fact that the consciousness of mind is too complex to have arisen through solely physical means. In his publication titled What is it like to be a bat? Nagel builds on his dualistic view of life and emphasizes how any purely physical explanation for the consciousness of mind, if existent, is in the distant intellectual future. Nagel believes that we have absolutely no conception of how a physical explanation for the mind-problem would be, and therefore strengthens his dualistic viewpoint of the mind.

As stated in What is it like to be bat?, however, there are some restrictions as to whether an organism can be considered conscious, as described in the following statement “ 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.” (Nagel 2). Nagel calls this the subjective character of experience and goes on to say that this idea is basically the opposite of the materialistic view since it is not captured by any

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reductive analyses. Nagel affirms that the subjective character exists and uses this as a form of discrediting materialism since the subjective character is not analyzed in the materialistic viewpoint which from Nagel's viewpoint, is a sign of the incompleteness of the theory of materialism. Nagel further illustrates his idea of the subjective character by providing the example of being a bat.

He states that it is impossible to imagine ourselves as a bat since our imagination is limited by our own personal experiences and that the most we could possibly imagine of our lives as bats would be how we can behave as bat or, in other words, how a human would feel as a bat, instead of how a bat feels as a bat. As said in *What is it like to be a bat?* " In the case of experience on the other hand, the connection with a particular point of view seems much closer. It is difficult to understand what could be meant by the objective character of an experience, apart from the particular point of view from which its subject apprehends it." (Nagel 6) This point exemplifies the validity of the subjective character of experience and further evidence of dualism, since there is currently no form in which the specific point of view, a vital part of an organism's subjective character of experience, can be explained through physical means and therefore, with our present intellectual limitations, the only plausible conclusion is to say that the consciousness of an individual is a combination of physical and non-physical identities.

Nagel's views on the theory of mind can be explained as dualistic in nature although he uses exotic arguments to justify his position. As I have stated above, Nagel commonly uses the subjective character of a bat and our <https://assignbuster.com/theory-of-mind-daniel-dennett-vs-thomas-nagel-essay-sample/>

inability to experience this character as a means of further proving that dualism is most possible the correct choice. Nagel also believes that in virtually all subjects of the mind, having an objective view allows you to see the bigger picture and, therefore, have a more precise and accurate understanding of that specific subject. An exception to this rule, however, is experience, since the actual specific point of view and the subjective character of the individual are such a vital part of it. Hence, gaining an ever increasing objective view of experience would actually decrease the accuracy and precision of your understanding since something as important as the feeling of being a human, for example, would be lost. Nagel also brings up another common materialistic argument, which is the fact that the mind is composed of physical processes, but takes it a step further and states that there must be something that it is like for these processes to take place and only this cannot be further simplified or reduced.

According to Nagel, any physical process that affects the mind also has a subjective character of experience and that is what shows the non-physical side of all organisms. Nagel, however, never fully discards the idea that materialism is wrong. Instead, he hypothesizes that although any presently available explanation for materialism is wrong; there is a probability that a correct materialistic theory could be created in the intellectual future. In *What is it like to be a bat?* Nagel writes “ For example, people are now told at an early age that all matter is really energy. But despite the fact that they know what “ is” means, most of them never form a conception of what makes this claim true, because they lack the theoretical background.” (8).

In the quote above, you can deduce Nagel's viewpoint that any scientific explanation, although correct, is commonly only understood for what it states and concludes instead of why it is as stated, similar to how a child knows everything is energy without knowing about sub-atomic particles and their many properties. Nagel's conclusion on the mind-body problem, therefore, is that while there is no definite correct conclusion, due to the current shortcomings in the intellectual field and the fact that a subjective point of view cannot be made objective while maintaining accuracy, dualism seems to be the most plausible conclusion.

On the other hand, Dennett is inclined towards the materialistic view of the mind. Dennett concludes that all organisms including humans can be regarded as intentional systems. These intentional systems, according to Dennett, are entities whose behavior can be predicted if you observe it from an intentional stance. In the intentional stance, you treat the entities you are observing as agents that choose to behave in a certain way through their own means. Dennett also believed, however, that this behavior would be caused by underlying beliefs and desires about their environment and themselves. Dennett also believes that intentional systems exhibit the philosophical property that their beliefs and desires must be about something. An example of this would be wanting a toy because it seems fun. In this example, the toy is the intentional object and you have a desire and belief about it. Therefore, there would be an intentional system occurring just like Dennett hypothesized.

In The Intentional stance Dennett states " It is as if these cells and cell assemblies were tiny, simple-minded agents, specialized servants rationally

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furthering their particular obsessive causes by acting in the ways their perception of circumstances dictated. The world is teeming with such entities, ranging from the molecular to the continental in size and including not only “ natural” objects, such as plants, animals and their parts, but also many human artifacts. Thermostats, for instance, are a familiar example of such simple pseudoagents.” (34) With the above statement it becomes clear that Dennett believed that living things and their components can be observed from the intentional stance because the way in which they behave is produced through systems and processes that seek goals and are driven by information. Later in The intentional stance Dennett further elaborates how a common household item such as a thermostat can be considered an intentional system “ It has a rudimentary goal or desire, which it acts on appropriately whenever it believes that its desire is unfulfilled. Of course you don’t have to describe a thermostat in these terms.

You can describe it in mechanical terms, or even molecular terms. But what is theoretically interesting is that if you want to describe the set of all thermostats you have to rise to this intentional level. What thermostats all have in common is a systemic property that is captured only at a level that invokes belief-talk and desire-talk.” (42) Another point that Dennett sees as an important advantage of the intentional stance is that it is convenient to use when trying to predict the outcome of something. According to Dennett there are also two other methods of predicting the behavior of something. These two other methods are called the physical stance and the design stance. The physical stance is when you use scientific laws to predict the outcome of an action while the design stance is the method in which

assuming is based on the idea that the entity is designed to function in a certain way in a certain situation and it is working properly.

Both of these forms of predicting an outcome are accurate but the design stance is considered more efficient since it saves time and doesn't pay much attention to the actual inner workings of the entity that actually cause it's behavior, instead, it only focuses on the practical applications and mechanisms of the entity. Although Dennett's intentional stance seems like a sound hypothesis, there are some shortcomings to this method such as how it does not provide a clear distinctions between living and non-living entities in which the latter, although the theory might suggest otherwise, are as far as we know, incapable of carrying out any mental processes. It is also not clear on whether this stance is a global theory of all mental states or only specific mental states.

In final analysis, I personally believe that although both theories have some interesting views of the mind and some parts that I do not fully agree with, the most plausible and logical conclusion is the materialism that Dennett sponsors. Although Dennett's ideology isn't clear in how you distinguish living from non-living (such as in the thermostat example) and that it might not apply to every single process of the mind, I believe that it is far more encompassing of all the areas of the mind than Nagel's ideas which I for one think are far too narrow since they focus far too much on the subjective character of experience rather than all of the other equally complex processes of the mind. Dennett's conclusions of the mind also have much more insight as to how we respond to our surroundings and how our mind processes various stimuli and reacts to the aforementioned stimuli.

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As I previously stated, Nagel has a much too narrow focus and doesn't really express an opinion on many other aspects of the mind and of dualism and instead tries to provide proof for dualism that, in my opinion, falls short since it is of too narrow scope and leaves many more aspects of the mind open to question, therefore never actually providing strong enough evidence to justify his viewpoint. I am also inclined to believe Dennett's materialism more than Nagel's dualism since Dennett exemplifies all of his opinions and covers all areas of the mind with his personal opinion and justifications for those opinions.

### Sources

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