

# Wondering

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In the story *Kio & Gus* (Lipman, 1982), Kio and Gus introduce themselves in their characteristic ways right at the beginning of the novel: Kio demonstrates the more matter-of-fact, down to earth, approach to things, while Gus straight away draws us into her private world inviting us to wonder what it is like to be a bat, Leviathan the whale, Kio's grandfather, or to wonder whether anyone has ever wondered and what it would be like to understand everything. Gus is the more inquiring, of the two friends, whereas Kio seems to take things for granted as they are. The theme of wonderment is also emphasised in the title of the accompanying Manual, 'Wondering at the world,' so it is worth exploring and responding to Gus' challenge: 'Have you ever wondered what it is like to be a bat?' Just what is involved in such an activity?

Thomas Nagel (1979) examines this question raising several factors mitigating against our understanding of other creatures. His analysis, which is featured in this paper, makes wondering seem all the more remarkable as it represents an attempt on our part at explaining what may well be incomprehensible in terms of the familiar and understood though entirely different (p 166). Take, for example, the question 'Have you ever wondered what it's like to be a rock?' It asks us to put ourselves in the place of something we regard as insentient and to try and empathise with it as though it were a self-conscious sentient creature; and to, in a sense, become the rock, experiencing what it would experience if it were sentient. The question asks us to project our consciousness into it, a supposedly non-conscious, insentient object and adopt, so as to appreciate, its point of view. Attempts at wondering what it's like to be another thing, say X, would seem to assume self-conscious awareness or experience on the part of

X because we are attempting to go some part of the way towards adopting X's point of view about the world and its place in it or experience of it. Thus we are assuming that there is something intelligible and comprehensible that it is like to be an X.

Nagel takes up this problem of conscious experience and to what extent, if any, one can understand or appreciate this of another organism. His starting point is that whatever the form of conscious experience, 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 (p166). In wondering what it is like to be that organism we are trying to, in some way, appreciate something of the conscious experience the organism enjoys. Since this experience is the experience of the organism itself and not that of some other organism, it is subjective and essentially connected with the subject's point of view. In wondering then, we are trying to tap into the subjective character of its experience. But how and to what extent, if any, is this possible for us who are not the organism in question?

Consider Gus' strategy and the likelihood of success this offers in settling our wonderment. In wondering what it is like to be Roger the cat, Gus rolls over on the floor and makes believe she's sharpening her (imaginary) claws on the rug. "Mrrrowr," she growls, "I'm Roger." Gus uses the well tried enactive techniques used by all actors to stimulate her imagination. But, as Nagel points out (p169), since it is our own imagination that provides the basic material for our imagination, its range is limited. This presents an obstacle to our imagining what it's like to be anything else. And these problems are brought out more vividly in considering the particular case of imagining what it's like to be a bat. This is so because we are more willing to believe that mammals have conscious experience than we are to believe this of lower order creatures (insects, slugs, lichen, bacteria); yet bats, though mammals, have a range of activity and sensory experience markedly different, even alien, to our own. Bat sonar, for instance, though a form of sensory perception is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess: there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine. This appears to create insurmountable difficulty for the notion of what it can be like to be a bat. It is not clear just what would be accomplished by hanging upside down from one's toes in the attic, attaching webbing to one's arms, making believe to fly around at dusk catching insects in one's mouth and imagining that

one is perceiving the world by a system of reflected high frequency signals, etc., as Gus might do. Insofar as this aids the imagination in telling us anything at all about bats, it tells us only what it would be like for us to behave as a bat behaves. But this is no great help: we want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Yet, as Nagel points out (p169), if I try to imagine this, the resources of my mind are inadequate to the task. I cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions and modifications. To the extent that Gus could look and behave like a bat, a cat, a firefly; or Kio, a fish, without changing their fundamental human structure, their experiences would not be like the experiences of those creatures.

One might dress up in a bear skin or gorilla suit and look convincing because one's size is not an immediate giveaway. One might even get away with pretending to be a bear or gorilla because one's humanity is initially masked, concealed, at least for a while, though anyone familiar with bears or gorillas would notice the giveaway leg and arm lengths and possibly gait and carriage unless one was also an accomplished contortionist. But in the case of a bat, cat, or fly, size is an insurmountable obstacle. Thus the important feature of pretence (Austin, 1961) - concealment (of one's humanity, in this case) - cannot be achieved: no matter how much Gus mrrrows, arches, stretches and claws, her contemporary behaviour cannot mislead as to the contemporary fact that she is, nevertheless, human.



Christine Keiltyka, Senior, "Untitled," Drypoint Print

Also, Nagel adds, it is doubtful what meaning, if any, can be attached to the supposition that one should possess the internal neurophysiological constitution of a bat, or any other creature. Even if one could, by gradual degrees, be transformed into a bat, cat, fly, etc., nothing in one's present constitution would enable one to imagine what the experience of such a future stage of oneself so metamorphosed would be like.

I would agree with Nagel that if extrapolation from our own case is involved in the idea of what it is like to be a bat, the extrapolation must be incompletable. The best evidence would come from the experience of a bat, if only we knew what that was like. Nagel suggests that we cannot have more than a schematic conception of what it is like. We are limited to ascribing only general types of experience on the basis of a creature's structure and behaviour. For instance, tiger enclosures in some zoos are faced with monochromatic glass so that we experience what it is like to have monochromatic vision as, it is believed, tigers have. But this doesn't tell us what it is like (subjectively) for a tiger. This is not simply a problem confined to exotic cases: the subjective experience of a person blind from birth is not accessible to me either. I know what it is like for me to be in pain and this gives me some idea of what it is like for you to be in pain, but both of us are willing to admit that the subjective quality of my pain for me is different than your

pain for you. So I am willing to believe that many other creatures feel some version of pain, fear, hunger, etc., and that they have other familiar types of perception too. Also, like Nagel, I would accept, on the evidence of behaviour and structure, that there is a subjective character to the sensory experiences of other creatures which is also beyond my ability to conceive. There may well be facts then, as Nagel suggests (p171), that could not ever be represented or comprehended by human beings because our structure does not permit us to operate with concepts of the requisite type. Whatever the status then, of facts about what it is like for an organism to be a human being, a bat, a cat, an extraterrestrial, etc., they appear to be facts that have a subjective character and embody a particular point of view.

This point of view, though, is not one accessible only to a single individual. Rather it is a type, Nagel suggests (p171). For this reason it is often possible to take up a point of view other than one's own. We often rightly say of another that he is blinded by emotion or passion, that we are better placed to recognise the 'true' nature of the other's experience. So there is a sense in which phenomenological facts are perfectly objective. They are subjective, however, in the sense that even this objective ascription of experience is possible only for someone sufficiently similar to the object of ascription to be able to adopt its point of view - to understand, as Nagel puts it (p172), the ascription in the first person as well as the third. The greater the difference between oneself and the other experienter, the less the success one can expect in this enterprise. The distance between oneself and another experienter can fall anywhere on a continuum so that the understanding of what it is like to be another can be better in some cases than others. Even for other persons, Nagel claims (p172), the understanding of what it is like to be them is only partial, and when one moves to species very different from oneself, a lesser degree of partial understanding may still be available. Here imagination, being flexible, is helpful. For example, blind people are able to detect objects near them by a form of sonar using vocal clicks or taps of a cane. If one knew what this was like one could, perhaps, by extension imagine something of what it might be like to possess the much more refined sonar of a bat. But not what it's like for a bat to possess this. To form even a conception of what it is like to be a bat one must take up the bat's point of view. If one can take it up roughly, or partially, then one's conception will also be rough or partial. And this is possibly what Gus is doing when telling what it is like for a cat to be proud to have a tail.



Elizabeth Wucherer, Senior, "Untitled," Drypoint Print

doubt this concern for others increases her sensitivity to how other people respond to their surroundings, for by 'sensitive' we ascribe a partial conception of what it is like for someone else. To fulfill her wish to make a difference, she comes to realise later, she can write what she knows so that others may know.

Verbal communication of this sort is the way we come to appreciate another's point of view. But with other creatures lack of such communication is an insurmountable barrier to such knowledge about them. Kio starts to recognise this when challenged by Grandpa: "How do you know what a whale might or might not know" on his insistence that the whale couldn't have meant to save his grandfather's life. It puzzles him that Gus can know

In one incident (Ch 4, iii), Gus who has become a firefly, then a bat, does not become the sparrow that knocks itself unconscious on the window. She tells us that although she could become a sparrow, she couldn't become that sparrow as for a while it didn't know what was going on around it, which isn't like her at all. The gap between herself and the sparrow is too great for her imagination to cross maybe because when a creature is concussed it doesn't have a point of view so one can't make any sense out of even a partial conception of what that is like.

But forming a conception of what another's point of view might be is necessary for knowing what that other thinks or knows. Gus seems able to do this more successfully than Kio who is puzzled as to how she seems to know that his grandfather is brooding about whether to go and search for the whale. In Ch 5 Gus talks about her point of view, helping Suki and Kio to extrapolate from their visual perspective to her textural one, confessing that she would like to see the colours everyone talks about and to be in touch with the world the way everyone else is. She immediately realises, however, that she wants everyone to know what she knows, for keeping it all to herself, she decides, is not fair - presumably because we can all learn from each other's point of view, which may help us to be more understanding and tolerant of each other. No

what Grandpa thinks and what Roger has been doing, but the imposition is finally brought home to him when, speaking for Roger and is told by Suki that he loves to go outside, he retorts, "How do you know."

We cannot know what others know other than what they tell us they know. We can sometimes get a partial knowledge from the context or circumstance of their behaviour as Gus explains to Suki and Kio about their reports of Roger's behaviour (Ch 5, i). But to pretend to know is deceptive. However, on the evidence of behaviour and structure plus our schematic understanding of such evidence and our lively imagination, we can make believe we're another creature, behaving after its fashion in an attempt to get a glimpse (partial appreciation) of what it might be like to be that creature. Thus throughout the novel Kio, and Gus more so, make believe to be other creatures in just this way. And the more observant we are of others and their circumstances, the more likely we are to succeed. Gus' particular circumstance forces her to pay closer attention than Kio and hence is more aware of our limited ability to really appreciate or understand what it's like to be a bat, or whatever. Through her we are ourselves invited to pay closer attention and hear, maybe for the first time, the whales' plea on behalf of all creatures who share this earth with us: "Listen please. Please. Please!"

## REFERENCES

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