

An Unhelpful Idiom

by Bill Meacham

A friend of mine used to startle people by asking “So, what’s it like being you?” Best answers:

- “Fun!” (five year-old boy)
- “Better than being you.” (graduate student, now director of corporate strategy at a large enterprise)
- “I don’t know, I have no basis for comparison.” (university professor)

Humorous as these answers may be, only the last one is philosophically accurate. Ever since Nagel’s influential essay “What Is It Like To Be A Bat?” the phrase “what it is like” has been used to refer to the subjective character of being conscious. An influential article on Phenomenology, for instance, contains the phrase “what it is like to have sensations of various kinds.”⁽¹⁾ The famous [Zombie Argument](#) against the reducibility of the mental to the physical asserts “There is nothing it is like to be a zombie.”⁽²⁾ The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy tells us, “An experience or other mental entity is ‘phenomenally conscious’ just in case there is something it is like for one to have it.”⁽³⁾ Other examples abound. But it is a very misleading phrase, because strictly speaking one’s subjectivity is not like anything!

In order for the phrase “what it is like” to make sense, it has to refer to something we can contrast to something else.⁽⁴⁾ We can ask what it is like to swim in Barton Springs and answer by comparing swimming in Barton Springs to swimming in Deep Eddy. But to ask what it is like to be conscious or to have sensations makes no sense, because there is nothing to which we can contrast being conscious or having sensations. Each of us has his or her own experience alone. Nobody else has direct access to it, nor have we direct access to anyone else’s, so we can’t compare them and can’t truly assert similarity or difference. We can compare our present experience to memories of our own past experience or anticipations of our future experience. But our experience is not like anything, in the way, for instance, that the flavor of a tangelo is a bit like that of a tangerine but juicier and a bit like that of a grapefruit but sweeter.

Nagel himself recognized the difficulty. He says “The analogical form of the English expression ‘what it is like’ is misleading. It does not mean ‘what (in our experience) it resembles’, but rather ‘how it is for the subject himself’.”⁽⁵⁾ Nagel’s essay would have been better titled “How It Is To Be A Bat.”

In everyday speech it may be quite OK to use the phrase “what it is like” to refer to our subjectivity, because it is an idiom that we generally understand. But even so, it lacks a certain panache. Bob Dylan did not sing “What is it like? / To be on your own / Like a rolling stone.”

In philosophical speech, however, such idiomatic language is best avoided. It leads to sophomoric conundrums like how I can tell whether my experience of redness is the same as yours. (Answer: I can't, and it doesn't matter.) Let's quit using the expression "what it is like" to speak of subjectivity and speak instead of how it is or how it feels to be conscious. The issue concerns more than just arcane discussions in philosophy of mind. It is a crucial question in the age-old and perennially new question of how we can know ourselves. Wisdom is not served by verbal confusion.

Notes

- (1) Smith, "Phenomenology," section 1.
- (2) Chalmers, "Zombies on the web."
- (3) Lomand, "Consciousness," p. 581.
- (4) Garvey, "Hacker's Challenge," pp. 28-29.
- (5) Nagel, "What Is It Like To Be A Bat?" footnote 6.

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