

# Radical Pluralism

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Ok we're going to start the sermon with a thought experiment. I want everybody here and everybody at home to close your eyes, and I want you to imagine that you are a piece of software.

Ohhkay, yeah, no, stop, stop, you're doing it wrong.

Sorry, but you are — the reason I know you're doing it wrong is that there's no right way to do it. I mean, what do you even imagine...

If I imagine I'm a piece of software; let's say I imagine I'm Microsoft Word, which must be one of the easier examples to imagine. In the first place, where am I? Am I on a screen somewhere? what about all the other screens that I'm also on? If the screen's showing something else at the moment, do I still exist — am I on the hard drive? And what am I anyway, am I the code that makes up the program, or the things that code produces when it runs — the menus and the toolbars and the dialog boxes? Or is none of that the real software; is the software the bunch of electrons that are moving around on silicon chips on your machine and on Microsoft's machines? It's hard to imagine those electrons know anything about fonts or word counts or anything.

For those here who might not know me, I spent a long time in the software industry and I'm now a student in Science and Technology Studies, or STS, looking at how software practitioners enact personal values in their work. A lot of times people think of software as a tool; you tell it what to do and it does it, or at least it should. But what's interesting to me is that if you look closer, it's a lot more complicated than that.

Ok, we're going to try again now, because I know you can do this: Close your eyes really tight and this time I want you to imagine what it is like to be a bat.

Ok that was *a little* better, I guess. A lot of you at least got an image of a bat. Some of you were thinking about the feel of bat fur, some of you were thinking about the sensation of flying, some of you were thinking about how bats *smell* which is weird but valid for this purpose. But even if you imagine all of that — that's not what it's like to be a bat. Thomas Nagel, the philosopher who wrote the piece, [What Is It Like To Be a Bat?](#) says "In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat." And there we come up short, if only because, as Nagel also says, "Bat sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine."

Our experience sure looks like it depends on our embodiment — different bodies, different experiences. Really different bodies, really different experiences; Nagel doesn't even get into what it might like to be, for example, an octopus with nine brains, one in each arm and one in the middle. Where would I even begin to try to conceive of what that kind of being is experiencing, or how it's experiencing it? But in life, most of us are not often called on to bridge gulfs of difference that are quite that great.

Ok, last one, and this one is super easy. Close your eyes one more time and imagine that you are a human being.

Geez, maybe— maybe you're just not very good at this. (I'm not here to make friends.) It's true; y'all don't know how to imagine a human being.

And neither do I. A lot of you just thought, I don't have to imagine anything; I'll just think the thoughts I'm thinking, feel the feelings I'm feeling, and bam, human being. But of course that's not a whole human being: Being human isn't just what happens in your mind for a few seconds while you're conscious on a Sunday in 2024. (You are conscious, right? A couple people still haven't opened their eyes. I'm a little worried.)

But that's not a whole human being. How about the experience of all your trillions of microscopic cells, each of which does stuff on its own and forms a community with those around it? How about all the previous moments of human life and the ones to come? Were you thinking of those? Could you even if you tried? Are those part of "a human being?" How about your ligaments, how about the fascia that connect and support your muscles and organs? Not one of you people thought about your fascia.

It's an anti-fascist crowd, I guess.

That's right, it's a dad joke on Mother's Day. Deal with it!

So, what do we do with all this? ALL these different types of beings, and I don't know how to be any of them, even the one that I supposedly am.

Well — in Unitarianism we have this principle, the 7th principle, which says we respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. And in a way, that makes things WAY worse!

Each of us on our own are so many things at once that we can't even comprehend it all, and on top of that we're connected to so many others, and you're telling me that includes not just humans but other biological and even mechanical beings, and each of THEM are so many things at once that, yeah, just, no.

But the fact that we can't simply imagine what it's like to be a human being (or any other being) relates to what Wendy Rose says in her poem about "temporary tourism of the soul." Now, I read that poem a few minutes ago in the only voice I really have, but I'll say retrospectively that that voice of mine is unqualified to speak that poem on a couple

of different levels. "[For the White Poets Who Would Be Indian](#)" is an important challenge to the colonial and appropriative impulses of people like me who are interested in expanding our own experience and who know that others on the web of existence have experiences we ourselves haven't accessed. Rose is telling me, not so fast. You don't get to say you know me just from imagining me. You don't get to borrow the holiness that has touched me for your own personal purposes without doing the work of being me.

And like Rose says, sharing a mother is not enough. (Happy Mother's Day, by the way.) We all share having been mothered. That doesn't guarantee that we honour that commonality. In the Christian tale of the Prodigal son, the good son and the prodigal son share the same parentage, but that's not enough to make them both virtuous.

A few years ago, an Irish blogger named Maria Farrell wrote a piece called [The Prodigal Techbro](#). It's about the steady trickle of guys (they're all guys) who leave top jobs at Big Tech firms and confess in public the terrible things those firms do to vulnerable people in society. Farrell notices that these people get immediately celebrated for taking a stand against tech harms, without the crucial step that the actual Prodigal Son experiences, the step of hitting rock bottom, repenting and swallowing his pride to come home. Which would be one thing if there weren't a lot of tech people who are working to highlight and counter these harms who never took cushy jobs in Silicon Valley and never got celebrated. The field of software, where I work and study, is a site of a lot of borrowed glory, in which (very much like what Rose says about poetry) a few people capitalize on value that's contributed by others (your social media posts, your product searches) but don't necessarily honour the work that went into that value.

To design and produce software, you have to invoke some idea of the people who will use it. The way to do that with minimum effort and time is to imagine that your users are just like you, or just like you think they should be. It's a huge no-no in pretty much any aspect of human relationship, but it's done all the time in tech design, where the impacts are multiplied infinitely by the infinite scalability of software.

Media scholar Sasha Costanza-Chock has noticed this trend and intervened against it as a key player in the movement of [Design Justice](#). As a nonbinary trans femme, Costanza Chock themselves has an embodied experience very different from a lot of tech designers' expectations. This kind of experience gap produces a lot of products that simply don't have a good idea of their users, even when those users are essentially forced to use their software (like the software that runs in your car and collects data on you without your knowing it, or the app you have to use if you're seeking asylum in the United States). It can wreak a lot of havoc, and it has. Design Justice mandates that the people most affected by design decisions are not just consulted in the design process but where possible lead that process. Nagel says the best way to find out what it's like to be a bat would come from the experiences of bats, if we could only access them. Similarly, Costanza-Chock's motto is "nothing about us without us!"

But really, this is a newfangled incarnation of an old problem. I first came across Wendy Rose's poem in an essay by Donna Haraway, who's one of the biggest names in my current academic field. Haraway echoes the sentiment of the poem by saying "One cannot 'be' either a cell or molecule — or a woman, colonized person, labourer, and so on — if one intends to see and see *from* these positions critically. 'Being' is much more problematic and contingent." And here I agree with Haraway — being... is problematic.

I might think I can answer that "where are you" question much more easily about myself than about Microsoft Word. I'm standing here at a podium, ain't I? But, kind of like with Word, there are representations of me in all of your minds, my image is on the Web for anybody to see, memories of me are with people in far parts of the world. I might not think of those things as the "real" me, but the only way anyone else ever interacts with me is through my representations in their mind, and if I get really precise about it the only way I ever interact with *myself* is through my own representations of me. So I don't even know if I'm much more locatable than a piece of software.

Being is problematic, in part, because being is always multiple. In other words, I am plural. And so are you. Which is kind of convenient for pluralism month.

It's also a *relief*, because that means there's no one singular me that I have to defend, or mourn, or assert. Which makes me a little more free to relate to others who are also plural — we have that in common, after all.

Nagel says it's impossible for a human to imagine the bare subjective experience that presumably exists in the middle of all the bodily and behavioural facts there are about a particular bat, but he also mentions that this shouldn't surprise us because we can't do this with other PEOPLE either. And here I'm going to do him one better and say we can't even do this with ourselves.

Nagel says even if you're a materialist and don't believe in any kind of separate vitalist spirit or soul, you can't understand how conscious experience arises from physical processes of the kind that we can observe in one another. But of course, if you only ever saw running software, you might never be able to understand that it arises from code, let alone electrons on silicon chips.

A few years ago Damien Patrick Williams, who's an STS scholar at Virginia Tech, wrote a piece called [What Is It Like to Be A BOT?](#) in which he talks about the possibilities for subjective experience among digital beings, and similarly to Nagel he concludes that they are fundamentally different from what we can imagine because they are differently embodied. Like Costanza-Chock, Williams connects this difference to differences in how people are treated, and he says: "If we want to live in a world that recognizes and accepts differences in consciousness, then we must start by believing one another about our different lived experience and recognize that we must spend time working to understand these different kinds of minds — especially any minds and lives that have been oppressed, disregarded, and marginalized — because they will have developed knowledge and survival strategies to which we otherwise would not have access."

It becomes easier to spend that time and put in that work when we realize that... We are only temporary tourists, even in our own souls. None of us has the single right viewpoint, the one real position, the unique privileged example to set for anyone else. We are all imperfect bundles of things, bundled imperfectly with other imperfect bundles of things.

So what do I do about meeting all these other beings, all these residents of the Interdependent Web of All Existence, if I'm only ever a temporary tourist? Well, I can decide what kind of tourist I am. I can be the curious and humble and respectful kind, or I can be the kind that compares everything I see to what I know from back home and judges what's better and worse. After all, if I share the fact of my fundamental plurality with every being I encounter — and I do — then there is no "back home" that's fundamentally separate or distinct from any of THEIR homes.

Maybe I can relax about needing other beings to be like me if I admit that I don't even know what I'm like myself. And maybe if I can relax about that I'll find it easier to really get to know them and be knowable myself.

May it be so.