



## What is it Really Like to be a Human? A Holistic-Subjective Response

Siamak Abdollahi<sup>1</sup> Mansour Nasiri<sup>2</sup>

1. Research Fellow at the Department of Philosophy, University of Religions and Denominations, Qom, Iran. (**Corresponding author**) [abdollahi@ut.ac.ir](mailto:abdollahi@ut.ac.ir)

2. Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Theology, Farabi Campus, *University of Tehran*, Qom, Iran. [nasirimansour@ut.ac.ir](mailto:nasirimansour@ut.ac.ir)

### Abstract

What does it *really* mean to be human? In this context, “real” refers to the most precise comprehension of human experience from a subjective and phenomenological perspective. When exploring human nature in the realm of philosophy of mind, we confront not only the mind-body problem (a fundamental challenge in substance dualism) and the hard problem of consciousness (a hurdle for eliminativism) but also the explanatory gaps that stem from an objective and partitive interpretation of human nature. What if we were to shift this perspective to one that is the aspective-holistic and subjective viewpoint? The principal aim of this paper is to argue that subjectivism requires a holistic perspective to effectively confront eliminativism. The authors propose a shift in perspective, labeling it “Subjective Holism,” which is not a definitive solution to the issues at hand; rather, it serves as a framework for understanding human nature. This approach aligns with our intuition—considering oneself subjectively as a whole—and possesses enhanced explanatory power by treating humans as integrated complex systems. It clarifies how mental and physical states emerge as properties within this system. Through a holistic-subjective approach, the query about human nature evolves into: How do I, as a unified whole with various aspects, possess qualia such as insideness and uniqueness, which are exclusive to the subject’s conscious experiences? As a human being, I exist as a complex system (whole) with *real* conscious experience as my high-level and emergent property.

Original Research



### Keywords

problem of human nature, hard problem of consciousness, mind-body problem, conscious experience, complex system, emergence, downward causation.

Received: 2025/03/05; Received in revised form: 2025/06/03; Accepted: 2025/07/10; Published Online: 2025/09/17

□ Abdollahi S&. Nasiri, N. (2025). What is it Really Like to be a Human? A Holistic-Subjective Response. *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research*, 27(3), 91-114. <https://doi.org/10.22091/jptr.2025.11433.3144>

□ Copyright © The Author

## Introduction

What does it *really* mean to be human? This question is similar to the one posed by Nagel (Nagel, 19474) when he asked, “What is it like to be a bat?” However, we approach it from a different angle: *the concept of reality*. “Real” refers to what is closest to the subject and what a human phenomenologically experiences, or in other words, subjective conscious experience. We have borrowed the term “real” to exemplify specific characteristics of human experiences and nature from Nagel’s statement: “Consciousness is what makes the mind-body problem *really* intractable” (Nagel, 1974, p. 435)

Today, although not often, Nagel’s “Bat” is generally used to attack physicalism.<sup>1</sup> He argued that because we are not bats, we cannot have the same subjective experiences as bats and therefore cannot understand what it’s like to be one. If we were to replace humans with bats, could we understand the nature of being human? This is known as the problem of human nature. We aim to discuss this issue with a holistic and subjective approach in the philosophy of mind to uncover the reality of human nature.

We will be exploring the mind-body problem and the hard problem of consciousness to understand the explanatory gaps in the problem of human nature. Understanding human nature requires addressing the mind-body problem and the hard problem of consciousness. We suggest a concept called subjective holism, which is based on eliminating the shortcomings of competing theories.<sup>2</sup> Before we delve into subjective holism, let’s discuss the relationship between human nature and the mind-body problem and the hard problem of consciousness.

In a (substance) dualistic or eliminativist view of human nature,<sup>3</sup> that is, a partitive account of human nature, it is important to address the

---

1. In his last article, Robert Van Gulick proposes an unconventional interpretation of Nagel’s “Bat” by proposing a kind of non-reductive physicalism (Van Gulick, 2024)

2. This will be discussed in detail later in the article, and why our theory does not have them.

3. The authors have only mentioned substance dualism and eliminativism, omitting other relevant theories such as property dualism, epiphenomenalism, reductionist physicalism, and non-reductionist physicalism for the following reasons: 1) These two positions represent the extremes within the philosophy of mind, with various theories positioned in between. 2) If we accept the authors’ premise that the two significant issues in the philosophy of mind are consciousness and the mind-body problem, then the most substantial critique of eliminativism pertains to consciousness, while substance dualism faces classical challenges primarily related to the mind-body problem. Thus, addressing additional forms of dualism and physicalism warrants a separate article. For the reasons stated above, the authors can justify their focus on these two theories—dualism and eliminativism—while not delving into others.

connection between our mental and physical states. This involves delving into the mind-body problem and the hard problem of consciousness, which aim to explain how subjective experiences emerge from non-subjective physical states:

1. Substance dualism introduces the classic mind-body problem by accounting for human beings as two distinct parts and struggles to explain the relation between non-physical mental conscious states and the physical body.
2. Eliminativism dismisses mental states and fails to bridge the connection gap between our subjective conscious experience and physical state.<sup>1</sup>

The significance of the hard problem of consciousness lies in its connection to the previous problem. Emphasizing consciousness in the mind-body problem, Nagel highlights the subjective nature of experience (Nagel, 1974, p. 435). If the hard problem of consciousness is closely linked to the mind-body problem, and the mind-body problem is crucial for understanding human nature, then the hard problem of consciousness is also essential for human nature arising from objectivism and the third-person perspective. Considering the hard problem of consciousness, as Chalmers suggests, entails understanding “what it is to be a conscious subject” (Chalmers, 2013, p. 4).<sup>2</sup>

Effectively addressing these issues requires moving beyond objectivism and partial accounts of the subject. Instead, we should embrace perspectives that challenge these views. Subjectivism opposes objectivism, while holism, or an aspective approach to human nature, contradicts the partial account. Therefore, to gain a deep understanding of human nature, we should opt for a holistic and subjectivist approach.

Some philosophers have utilized subjectivism and the first-person perspective (*FPP*) to tackle the problem of consciousness. For example, Dan Zahavi is a leading figure in this field (Zahavi, 2006; Miguens & Preyer, 2012; Ganeri, 2012). On the other hand, some have viewed holism as a solution to the mind-body problem (Murphy, 2009, pp. 4 & 11; 2006, pp. 10 & 73).

The primary objective of this paper is to contend that subjectivism

---

1. For more reading about eliminativism or illusoism, see: (Abdollahi & Nasiri, 2023).

2. This perspective implies that consciousness is closely associated with the problem of human nature and the mind-body problem. C. Koch also supports this idea, believing that visual consciousness is a tipping point in the mind-body problem (Crick & Koch, 1992, pp. 158-160).

necessitates a holistic perspective to effectively challenge eliminativism and other reductionist frameworks. Acknowledging the significance of these requirements drives us to formulate subjective holism. Can we integrate both approaches to tackle the issues?

### **Research Question**

The primary question of this essay is: What can we learn about human nature's qualia when we add holism to subjectivism? Can this combination help solve problems like the hard problem of consciousness and the mind-body problem? To achieve this, we need to answer the following questions:

Research Question 1 (main question): What is subjective holism exactly?

Research Question 2: What are its bases?

Research Question 3: What solutions does subjective holism offer to problems in the philosophy of mind, such as the problem of human nature, the hard problem of consciousness, and the mind-body problem?

Research Question 4: What are the advantages and disadvantages of subjective holism?

The authors will address these questions in this essay. First of all, let's discuss the bases of subjective holism.

### **Bases of Subjective Holism**

This section addresses Research Question 2, anchored in the theoretical framework of subjective holism. Subjective holism is predicated upon four principles: subjectivism, holism, methodological naturalism, and non-eliminativism. A thorough examination of these concepts is crucial for developing a nuanced understanding of the complexities associated with human nature.

#### **Holism: in search of a Real Human Being.**

This section provides a list of various sources that have contributed to the concept of holism, including Aristotle's formal cause (Aristotle, 2014), Nancey Murphy's works such as (Murphy, 2006), the Quine-Duhem thesis

(Quine, 1952; Duhem, 1954), Durkheim's functionalism (Zahle, 2016; Britannica Editors, 2010), Gestalt theory (Britannica Editors, 2022), holistic nursing in medicine (Britannica Editors, 2010).

Holism is defined as follows:

1. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Freeman, 2005, p. 154; Ralston, 2011) due to properties that cannot be seen and explained by the parts (irreducibility of the whole)<sup>1</sup> and ontological distinction and the effects of the whole (from and on the parts) (Healey, 2008).
2. The necessity of the whole is rational (and not scientific-observational) and derived from its role and explanatory power.
3. The aspective account of a being (holistic perspective to a human being) is in contrast with the partitive-objective account of that.

To illustrate holism, let's consider the flight of an airplane.<sup>2</sup> The concept of "flight" refers to the entire airplane, not its individual parts. An airplane requires all the necessary parts, such as wings, wheels, tail, and engine, to fly. None of these parts can fly independently. The action of "flight" is a high-level and emergent property of the airplane as a whole, which emerges when all necessary parts are integrated into a specialized structure, forming a complete system that can fly.

## 1 Human Beings as Complex Systems

What makes certain systems complex? Because they exhibit characteristics that cannot be explained solely through bottom-up causality. Human beings, as complex systems, demonstrate two types of complexity: 1) ontological complexity, which concerns the internal structure of human beings, such as the function of their organs and the relationships between neurons in the nervous system, and 2) epistemological complexity, which involves explaining the emergence of properties like being alive and conscious. This paper focuses on epistemological complexity, as it is central to understanding human reality and its explanatory frameworks (Abdollahi & Nasiri, 2024, p. 5).

- 
1. "The meaning or function of the total system is irreducible to the meaning or function of one or more of the system's constituent elements" (Ralston, 2011, p. 1).
  2. Murphy (2006, p. 77) employed the analogy of an airplane's flight to elucidate the concept of downward causation, exemplifying how the integrated functioning of the whole system can exert influence on its constituent parts.

## 2 Downward Causation: Explaining the Complex Systems

Complex systems, such as human beings, demonstrate both upward and downward causation. In today's world, there is a tendency to approach everything from a scientific and technological perspective, which represents upward causation. However, upward causation alone cannot fully explain a property of the whole that is not present in the individual parts, such as the flight of an airplane. Therefore, when dealing with complex systems, it is essential to consider downward causation, which recognizes the influence of higher levels of a system over lower levels.

Downward causation is a type of causation that views the whole as more significant than its parts and proposes that higher levels of complex systems can affect actions at the lower levels of an organism (Flack, 2017). If we consider a human being as a complex system, consequently the question, "What is it like to be human?" should utilize downward causation to explain certain high-level properties.

## 3 Emergence

The most essential feature of an airplane is its ability to fly. This property, associated with emergence, is not attributed to any specific part of the airplane but to the airplane as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Emergent properties are features of a system as a whole and cannot be reduced to lower levels (O'Connor, 2021), but they refer to the higher levels of a whole. O'Connor discusses three types of emergent properties related to consciousness: conscious awareness and its unity, the qualitative and intentional nature of mental states, and conscious will and agency (O'Connor, 2021). High-level emergent properties cannot be explained objectively and require subjectivism and holism to address.

## 4 High-Level Emergent Properties

High-level emergent properties are attributes that arise when observing a system as a whole, such as flight in an airplane, which is a high-level property, compared to low-level properties like wheel rotation or fuel delivery. In considering human beings, subjective conscious experience could be seen as a high-level emergent property.

The complexity of human consciousness presents challenges for traditional scientific methods, especially regarding the "hard problem of

---

1. Similarly, emergent properties apply to societal structures, which emerge from social institutions as a whole, rather than from their individual components.

consciousness” (Abdollahi & Nasiri, 2024; Chalmers, 1995) (Abdollahi & Nasiri, 2024). To understand these higher-level properties, a holistic viewpoint and the concept of downward causation are necessary, as emergent properties result from interactions among parts and cannot be attributed to any single part.

When grappling with the hard problem of consciousness, such as enjoying chocolate ice cream, the question, “Who is conscious of eating the ice cream?” can be answered with, “I am eating it,” where the “I” represents both the subject and the whole. The next section will delve into the subjective aspect in greater detail.

### **Subjectivism: Seeking Real Conscious Experience**

While I am eating chocolate ice cream, its coldness, sweetness, and joy have two aspects: the subjective aspect, which is the individual’s conscious experience, and the objective aspect, including observable factors such as brain activity. Subjectivism in understanding human nature is closely tied to subjective experience and arises from the conflict between holistic and objective-partitive viewpoints.

Emphasizing the importance of considering subjective experience in understanding a being, meanwhile, Nagel and Chalmers discuss the concept of “what it is like.” They emphasize the “subjective character of experience” (Nagel, 1974, pp. 436-437 & 442-449) and “what it is to be a conscious subject” (Chalmers, 2013, p. 4). Also, Chalmers in “Panpsychism and Panprotopsyism: (2013) talks about “phenomenal consciousness/properties,” *phenomenal character* (Shoemaker, 1996, p. x), and “what-it-is-like properties” (Chalmers, 2018, p. 6; 1995, p. 201) .

In the same direction, Zahavi points to “What is it like sense” (Zahavi, 2007), and Searle emphasizes that ontological subjectivity is the primary qualia of consciousness. According to him, conscious states exist in a first-person mode because “each of my conscious states exists only as the state it is because it is experienced by me, the subject” (Searle, 1999, pp. 42 & 73).

Subjectivism involves the first-person perspective, internal experience (insideness), and uniqueness, whereas scientific objectivity relies on a third-person perspective, external observation (outsideness), and shared commonalities.

#### **1 First-person perspective: What Makes My Experiences Real.**

The first-person perspective (*FPP*) captures the essence of subjective



experiences, deepening our understanding of human nature and providing a clearer explanation of real experiences. It links conscious experiences closely to subjective experience or what-it-is-like conscious experience. These subjective concepts demonstrate that conscious experiences of the individual, such as eating a chocolate ice cream, possess qualia that cannot be explained by a third-person perspective, making them real experiences explainable by *FPP*.

The *FPP* is based on the distinctions between ontological subjectivity and ontological objectivity, according to Schraube (Schraube, 2014, p. 734). It asserts that all human experiences are ontologically subjective, as they exist only within the mind of the experiencing subject. Thus, they require an *FPP* (I-perspective) for a proper understanding. For instance, the sensation of pain only exists because an individual experiences it. Without that individual, there would be no pain. This contrasts with the objective existence of things like the animal nervous system, this laptop, or that tree, which do not require the experience of an “I” (Schraube, 2014, p. 734). According to this perspective, conscious experience ontologically requires an “I” and epistemologically requires an *FPP* for explanation.

## **2 Insideness as a Quality of Human Experience**

The second aspect of subjectivism, following *FPP*, is insideness. Thomas Nagel explains “insideness” as the personal experience of tasting chocolate, which is kept within one's mind and remains invisible to others. (Nagel, 1987, p. 29) Additionally, Hume argues that when considering oneself, awareness is limited to particular perceptions such as “heat or cold, love or hatred, pain or pleasure,” and nothing else (Hume, 2007, p. 165). Insideness can be explored through introspection and intentionality. Insideness can be traced in introspection and intentionality. Introspection is a subjective process, and intentionality is a key inner sensation. For instance, when eating ice cream, there are two separate inner senses: 1) being aware of the sensations of the ice cream from a subjective standpoint, and 2) being aware of oneself as the experiencer of these sensations. Insideness pertains to our introspective understanding of our mental states, conscious experiences, or our inner-sense model of self-knowledge.

## **3 Uniqueness as a Quality of Being a Human.**

The distinctive subjective features of conscious experiences, encompassing subjectivity, first-person perspective, and insideness, play a



significant role in shaping the uniqueness of human experiences. Merleau-Ponty underscored this distinctiveness, emphasizing that full participation in an individual's experiences by others is unattainable:

If the subject's only experience is the one I obtain by coinciding with it ... then my Cogito is, in principle, unique – no one else could “participate” in it. (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 391)

I have a unique and subjective accessibility to certain experiences, making them exclusive to me. When I engage with objects such as listening to Taylor Swift's “Bad Blood,” smelling a narcissus flower, tasting a Pizza Margherita, or touching my little girl's face, my conscious experience of these interactions is unique to me. The uniqueness of my conscious experience, my access to that experience (Merleau-Ponty's Cogito), and the unity between myself and my conscious experiences all define and set me apart as a unique and real human being.

### **Summary of Part II-2 Subjectivism**

1. When discussing human nature, it's important to consider things from a subjective first-person perspective.
2. The first-person perspective provides the most accurate explanation of conscious experience, bringing the explanation as close to the subject as possible to make it real.
3. “Real” in this context refers to the experience being phenomenological, which is what-it-is-like subjective conscious experience.
4. Conscious experience encompasses insideness and uniqueness.
5. Taking a subjective approach to understanding human nature requires acknowledging first-person perspective, insideness, and the uniqueness of conscious experiences.

### **Methodological Naturalism and the Dynamic of Subjective Holism**

Methodological naturalism, as the third basis of subjective holism, is a strategy for scientific investigation that provides a minimal interpretation of naturalism (unlike ontological naturalism) and does not reject any method or data as long as they do not conflict with basic facts (Halvorson, 2016, pp. 136, 142 & 147). These basic facts include the atomic theory of matter and the evolutionary theory of biology (Searle, 2007, p. 4). It allows for potential future changes in our

understanding of various fields (such as biology, physics, psychology, society, and ethics) and permits being dynamic rather than static and dogmatic about human nature.

### **Non-eliminativism**

Part four pertains to non-eliminativism. Eliminativism, conversely, presents a radical perspective of naturalism (ontological naturalism) rooted in physical closure, and it disregards all non-physical properties such as mental states (Kim, 1993, p. 280). Non-eliminativism, on the other hand, does not refute these non-physical properties. It forms the basis that emerges from all three previous foundations.

#### **1 Relation Between Holism and Non-Eliminativism**

Holism is an aspective account of understanding human nature that involves downward causation (rather than upward causation) and opposes a partitive account. With downward causation, each part/aspect is influenced by and derives its role from the whole, rather than the other way around. Consequently, every mental state, such as the conscious experience of eating chocolate ice cream, is shaped by downward causation, which is enforced by the whole. Thus, mental states are regarded as integral aspects of the whole rather than being dismissed as epiphenomenal or reducible to physical processes.

#### **2 Relation Between Subjectivism and Non-Eliminativism**

While the third-person perspective and objectivism tend to eliminate non-physical properties, subjectivism and the first-person perspective embrace subjective and intentional properties, such as conscious experiences, that cannot be adequately explained from a third-person viewpoint.

#### **3 Relation Between Methodological Naturalism and Non-Eliminativism**

Naturalism can be classified into two types: ontological and methodological. Ontological naturalism adopts an eliminative approach, whereas methodological naturalism does not. Methodological naturalism asserts that the methods and data used for acquiring knowledge must align with basic facts, such as the atomic theory of matter and the evolutionary theory of biology, without requiring the

elimination of non-physical properties.

### Subjective Holism

Having established the fundamentals, we now turn to the concept of subjective holism and address Research Question No. 1: *What is Subjective Holism?* Subjective holism integrates four key principles: 1) holism, which is related to downward causation and the emergence of high-level properties; 2) subjectivism, involving a first-person perspective and the unique, internal nature of conscious experiences; and 3) methodological naturalism, which ensures that data derived from the combination of holism and subjectivism aligns with the atomic theory of matter and evolutionary theory of biology. Thus, 4) subjective holism rejects an eliminative approach to understanding human nature, embracing non-eliminativism."

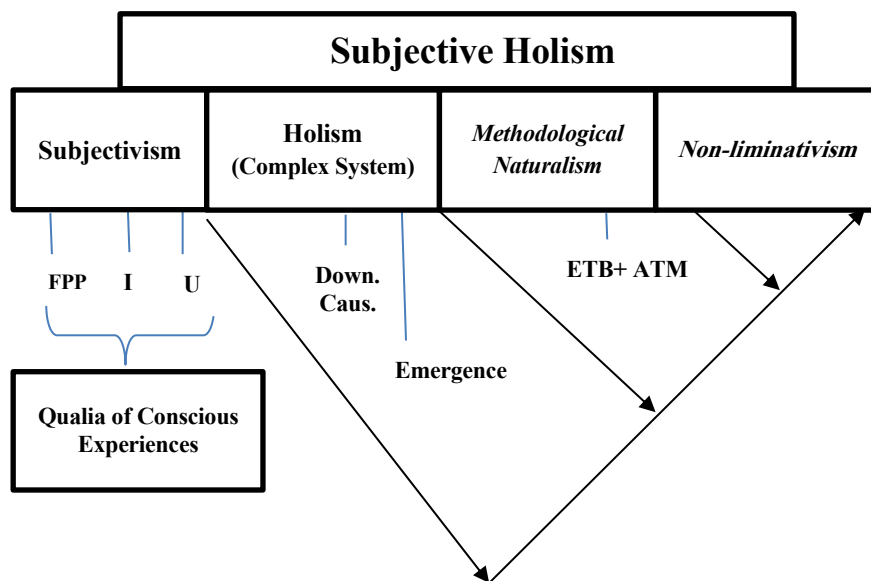


Figure 1: Bases of Subjective Holism

Subjective holism explains mental states through downward causation, viewing them as first-person experiences that emerge from the whole. Regarding the problem of human nature, subjective holism suggests

that, as real human beings, we must understand ourselves subjectively as a whole—a complex system in which conscious experience is a high-level emergent property.

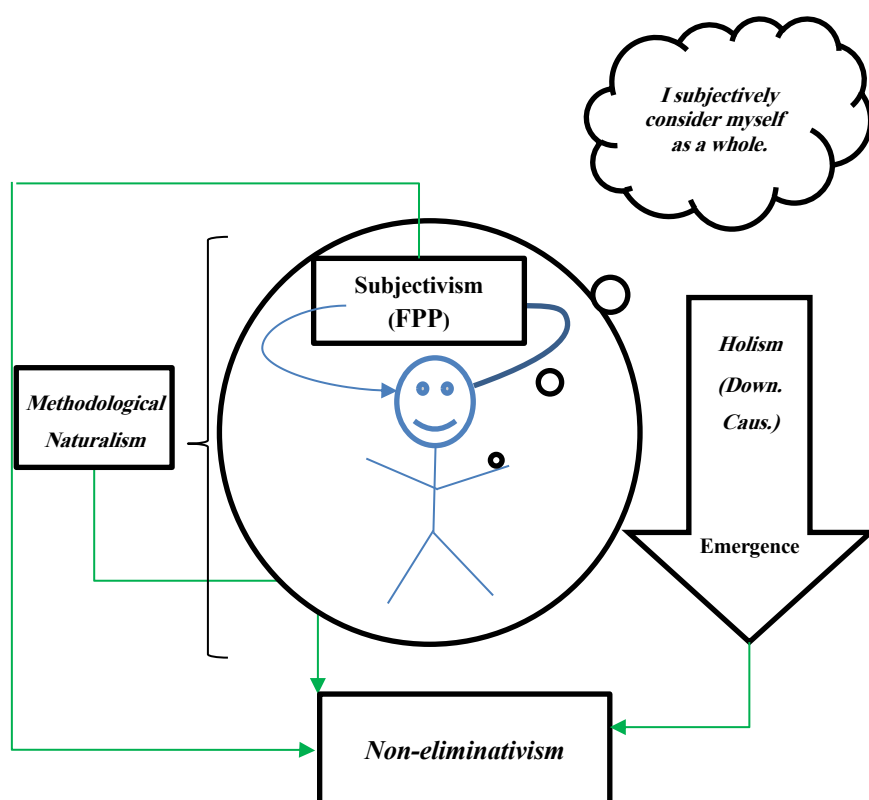


Figure 2: Subjective Holism

Before delving into the results, it is essential to provide a concise explanation of the correlation between holism and subjectivism in the issue of human nature. Holism is intrinsically tied to a non-objective and subjective approach. An objective scientific viewpoint tends to be partial, not only failing to independently consider the whole but also being hindered by complexities such as the hard problem of consciousness. Subjectivism holds significance for two primary reasons in comprehending human nature. Firstly, subjectivism is vital because the conscious experiences of humans are intimately linked to the first-person perspective (*FPP*). Secondly, the subjective view must be

holistic, as a partial perspective leads to objectivism (mainly substance dualism and eliminativism).

From the authors' perspective, subjectivism and holism are interdependent concepts rather than separate viewpoints. When I reflect on my own experience, I consider my entire self from a subjective standpoint. For instance, when I savor the joy of chocolate ice cream, my experience is inherently subjective, yet the self that engages in this experience acknowledges its own totality. Thus, in this interpretation, the subjective viewpoint and holism effectively converge.<sup>1</sup>

## Results

In this section, we will delve into research question 3, which focuses on how subjective holism addresses issues in the philosophy of mind, such as the problem of human nature, the hard problem of consciousness, and the mind-body problem. We will also assess the pros and cons of subjective holism. By effectively integrating those bases, we can capitalize on the advantages of each while minimizing their shortcomings. This synthetic approach offers enhanced explanatory power and aligns well with our intuitions.

Before delving into these results, it is important to highlight two key points:

1. *Subjective holism is not a definitive solution to the issues at hand*; rather, it serves as a framework for understanding human nature. In contrast to the objective-partial perspective that has contributed to issues like the problem of consciousness and the mind-body dilemma, subjective holism proposes a contrastive approach—the subjective-holistic perspective—that makes the hard problem of consciousness seem irrelevant. Thus, instead of solving this issue, subjective holism effectively prevents its emergence. In this view, consciousness is not a problem; it is a complex property of human beings that science will eventually clarify, much like biology is progressively explaining life.

2. As a result, subjective holism does not claim to resolve all the challenges in the philosophy of mind or other broader issues in philosophy. Instead, in its current form, it modestly addresses only the specific problems mentioned, within the outlined conditions.

---

1. A thorough investigation into the mechanisms of subjectivist holism will be presented in the *results* section, particularly in relation to the issues previously discussed. Furthermore, the distinction of subjective holism will be elaborated upon in *Part V*, with a focused analysis in subsections V-I and V-II.

### **Subjective Holism and the Mind-Body Problem**

In the context of subjective holism, the mind-body problem is redefined as the question of how the whole, which is the subject of conscious experiences (the “I”), generates two different kinds of properties, with neither having priority over the other. Priority is solely attributed to the whole. This perspective utilizes the latest scientific discoveries (methodological naturalism) to address the mind-body problem without adopting a non-eliminativist stance.

However, even within this framework, the relation between mental and physical properties is also called into question. When viewed through a partitive account of human nature, the mind-body problem emerges. In contrast, an aspective/holistic approach reframes the inquiry as: How does a human, as a unified whole, possess two distinct types of properties (mental and physical)? Within an aspective perspective and the concept of downward causation, these properties are understood as emergent properties of the whole. Considering subjectivism, the question arises: Is consciousness an emergent property of human beings?

Let’s consider the concept of emergence. When we examine how certain properties manifest in complex systems such as airplanes, animals, and ships, it becomes apparent that these properties are emergent in nature. For instance, flight is an emergent property of an airplane, just as liveliness is a property of animals, and movement on the water is an emergent property of ships.

When we apply this line of thinking to human beings, it becomes crucial to recognize the interconnectedness of their mental and physical aspects. The holistic perspective offers a framework for understanding the emergence of phenomena in various complex systems. From this view, mental states are considered emergent properties of humans, but it is equally important to delve into the scientific mechanisms behind these emergent properties.

### **Subjective Holism and the Hard Problem of Consciousness**

The hard problem of consciousness revolves around the complex task of comprehending how unconscious matter can give rise to conscious experiences. This issue involves conflicting perspectives, such as eliminativist physicalism (concerning the problem of subjective qualia of consciousness) and substance dualism (regarding the relationship between the unconscious physical substance and our conscious mental

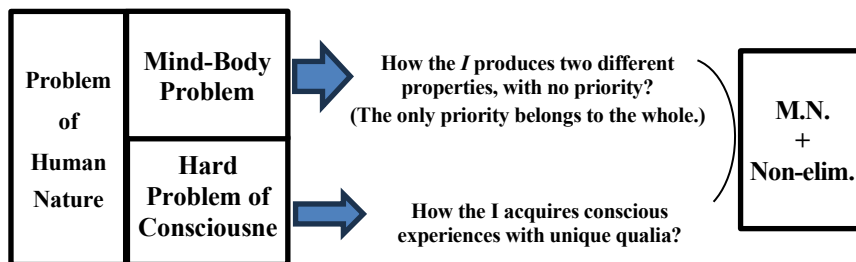
substance) (Abdollahi & Nasiri, 2024). Afterward, the hard problem of consciousness is concerned with subjective consciousness.

The theory of subjective holism views subjective consciousness as a high-level emergent property of a complex system, requiring a holistic and subjective approach for its understanding. From a holistic standpoint, consciousness is described as an emergent property of the complex system with downward and first-person causation of the whole. On the other hand, from a subjective viewpoint, conscious experiences are inherently subjective (ontological subjectivity) and distinct from objective qualities (ontological objectivity). The connection between holism and subjectivism lies in the first-person causation of the whole, termed subjective causation, which is considered the primary causation in the hard problem of consciousness (Abdollahi & Nasiri, 2024)

### Subjective Holism and the Problem of Human Nature

The primary focus of this research is to explore the qualia of human nature and the true essence of being human by integrating subjectivism with holism. The concept of subjective holism underscores three key points:

1. The “I” represents the subject of conscious experiences and should be perceived as a unified whole with distinct aspects, rather than individual parts.
2. The problem of human nature is divided into two questions: the mind-body problem and the hard problem of consciousness. These represent explanatory gaps in our understanding of human nature:



**Figure 3 Subjective Holism on The Problem of Human Nature**

3. This perspective delves into the complexity of human nature, emphasizing that the “I” encompasses various aspects and qualia. To



truly comprehend the human experience, one must consider oneself as the subject of conscious experiences or as a unified whole with different aspects, addressing the explanatory gaps in human nature (mind-body problem + hard problem of consciousness). This approach suggests that purely objective approaches are insufficient, and a comprehensive solution entails a combination of subjectivism, holism, methodological naturalism, and non-eliminativism.

The authors suggest a shift in perspective regarding the concept of human subjective experience. They propose reframing the question “What is it like to be human?” as “What is it like to be me, with my unique and non-objective experiences?” They reconsider Aristotle’s definition of man as a rational animal and explore whether consciousness (conscious experience) can be viewed as our high-level emergent property. This perspective is closely linked to investigating how human consciousness functions and when it arises. They propose the following:

1. Conscious experience, as a high-level emergent property, encompasses our cognitive ability to learn through trial and error, shaped by the theory of evolution (Beer, 1995) and the repetition of favorable outcomes.
2. At its core, consciousness involves intentionality, which means that in a conscious state, one is aware of experiencing something and recognizes himself as the experiencer. In this sense, the whole self consciously experiences itself.

Therefore, the authors conclude that human reality is its conscious experience as a high-level emergent property.

### **Advantages vs. Disadvantages of Subjective Holism**

According to the framework of subjective holism, this theory presents both advantages and disadvantages. Its benefits include its alignment with our intuition and its enhanced explanatory power. On the other hand, its drawbacks encompass solipsism and a deficiency of intersubjectivity.

### **Harmony with Intuitions**

It is essential to acknowledge intuition in this context because it is a

reflection of conscious experiences. When indulging in chocolate ice cream and experiencing coldness, sweetness, and joy, my intuition enables me to consciously embrace these feelings. Regarding the alignment of subjective holism with intuition, let us examine these questions and their corresponding answers at this intuitive moment:

No.	Question	Intuitional Response	Harmony
1	Who consumes this chocolate ice cream?	I do.	√ This is consistent because I, as a whole, am the one consuming it.
2	Who senses the coldness, sweetness, and joy of chocolate ice cream?	I do.	√ This is consistent because I subjectively and consciously experience it.
3	Is our gut feeling conflicting with the atomic theory of matter and the evolutionary theory of biology?	No, even my gut feeling about eating chocolate ice cream can be better explained by the atomic theory of matter and the evolutionary theory of biology.	√ This is consistent with my subjective and conscious experience.
4	Does my gut feeling negate mental states such as self and mind?	No, my gut feeling does not negate these mental states.	√ This is consistent with my subjective and conscious experience.

**Table: How My Intuition Aligns with Subjective Holism**

The table indicates that not only are all aspects of subjective holism in line with my intuitive understanding of conscious experiences, but also,

in certain instances, subjective holism provides a more effective explanation.

## -2 Enhanced Explanatory Power

The primary challenges to subjective holism are eliminativism and dualism. Eliminativism doesn't effectively account for the phenomenon of subjective consciousness, whereas dualism grapples with the connection between material and immaterial substance. Subjective holism surmounts these obstacles and doesn't confront the same explanatory deficiencies.

The comprehensive nature of subjective holism serves to effectively address the gaps in our comprehension of human nature, specifically concerning the mind-body problem and the hard problem of consciousness.

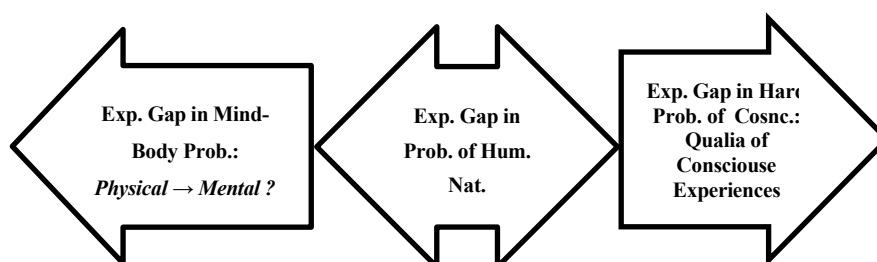


Figure 4: Explanatory Gaps

Foundational principles of subjective holism offer an intuitive framework, treating humans as integrated entities and elucidating how mental and physical states emerge as properties within a complex system. Furthermore, its subjective and phenomenological approach prioritizes the experiential aspect of consciousness, emphasizing the unique first-person perspective. By employing methodological naturalism, subjective holism leverages scientific insights to advance our understanding of these issues. Furthermore, non-eliminativism, akin to Dennett's notion of the center of narrative gravity, retains non-physical constructs like the self, which hold narrative and explicatory significance in addressing conceptual gaps (Dennett, 1992). Thus, non-eliminativism upholds non-physical concepts, such as the self, thereby bridging explanatory gaps and facilitating the resolution of the problem of human nature.

## Solipsism

In the film *Being John Malkovich*, a character yearns to inhabit Malkovich's viewpoint and perceive the world through his eyes, thereby underscoring the inherent impossibility of truly understanding the consciousness of another being. The intrinsic limitation found in subjective theories, such as subjective holism, lies in the absence of intersubjectivity. This intrinsic limitation prompts the scrutiny of how one can comprehend the emotions of another individual, given their status as distinct entities. This quandary finds reflection in the well-known query: "How can I apprehend what it's like to be a bat when I do not possess the perspective of a bat?"

Subjective qualia postulate that each person's encounters are bespoke and beyond the reach of others. Consequently, grasping the intentions or sentiments of another becomes a formidable task, fostering the concept of solipsism, wherein the genuine comprehension of another's experiences appears unattainable. This notion resonates with Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the unique nature of individual experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 391).

Nevertheless, contemporary philosophy has transcended solipsism and skepticism. Philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Austin, and Searle have elucidated the flaws of skepticism, which frequently arises from the misapplication of language (Searle, 2007, p. 27). Moreover, we have acquired definitive, universal knowledge pertaining to the external world, impervious to individual perceptions and biases (Searle, 2007, p. 27).

Searle advances the proposition that we have entered an era of post-skepticism, wherein scientific advancements and objective knowledge concerning the external world have notably diminished the philosophical import of skepticism. We are now capable of grounding our philosophical tenets on fundamental certainties, such as the atomic theory of matter and the theory of evolution. This sentiment aligns with Merleau-Ponty's assertion that a multiplicity of consciousnesses is plausible based on our unambiguous consciousness of ourselves (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 391). Therefore, "we can now start philosophy on the assumption of the basic facts" (Searle, 2007, pp. 26-29).

Furthermore, science has facilitated the transmission of skepticism through the construct of empathy. Empathy enables individuals to comprehend and relate to the lived experiences of others (Zahavi, 2007, p. 73), as evidenced by the activation of the prefrontal cortex in the brain (Light et al., 2009, p. 1210) during the experience of empathetic pain. Certain segments of our brain become active when empathizing with another

individual's distress, akin to our own experience of pain (Holden, 2004).<sup>1</sup> This signifies that when person A experiences pain, person B also undergoes a comparable conscious state, albeit to a lesser degree. This phenomenon illustrates the concept of inter-intentionality, allowing for conscious participation in another's experiences but with reduced intensity.

When exposed to horror films such as *Saw*, an individual can share in the pain felt by the characters. Similarly, in a dentist's office, a mother can empathize with the pain experienced by her child. This shared experience, *empathy*, enables individuals to genuinely sense the emotions of another being.

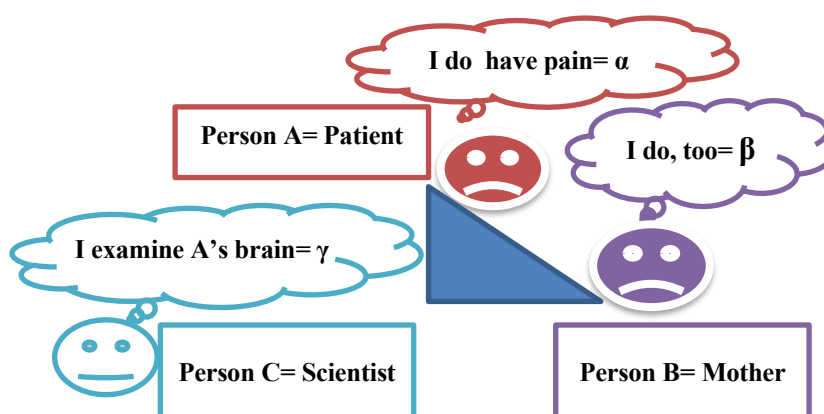


Figure 5: Dentist's Office

In amalgamating Merleau-Ponty's inter-consciousness, Searle's basic facts, and the potential of empathy, we can surmount solipsism and obtain deeper insight into the conscious experiences of others.

## Conclusion

Subjective holism specifically engages with the challenges pertinent to the discourse of this article, particularly focusing on the complexities surrounding human nature. It is essential to note that this theoretical approach does not purport to offer definitive solutions to these

1. In exploring the neural underpinnings of empathy, one can reference the contributions of Lamm, Batson, and Decety (2007) as well as Zaki and Ochsner (2012). These studies provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between neural mechanisms and empathetic processes.

challenges. Instead, it posits that in order to navigate phenomena such as the hard problem of consciousness, one must consider the totality of humans from a subjective standpoint. Adopting this perspective introduces a duality of benefits and drawbacks.

The aforementioned strengths and weaknesses have been articulated in “Part V - Advantages and Disadvantages...,” wherein we aimed to equip readers with a comprehensive understanding of subjective holism and its implications. The authors contend that this section serves as a foundational exploration of the topic, establishing a basis for further inquiry and analysis. In the second section, “II-Basis...,” we have explored the foundational elements of subjective holism, emphasizing its dual principles of holism and subjectivism. Additionally, we introduce a dynamic (methodological naturalism) and non-eliminative approach by incorporating two supplementary foundational bases, thereby enriching the theoretical framework. Furthermore, in “Part IV-Results,” we have presented the outcomes derived from applying subjective holism to the problems discussed in this article. This section elucidates the unique contributions of this theoretical approach in comparison to alternative theories.

The explanation of subjective conscious experiences, as a key to understanding human nature, requires a holistic and subjective approach:

1. Conscious experiences are understood holistically as emergent properties of a complex system, involving downward and first-person causation of the whole.
2. The integration of holism with subjectivism relies on first-person causation for the whole, which is considered the primary causation in understanding human nature.
3. From a subjective perspective, the qualities of conscious experience, such as insideness and uniqueness, possess an ontological subjectivity distinct from ontological objectivity.

In conclusion, the concept of subjective holism provides a framework for addressing gaps in our understanding of human nature, particularly the mind-body problem and the hard problem of consciousness. It posits that an individual is a complex system with conscious experiences as high-level emergent properties, defining their *real* nature.

#### ▣ **Conflict of Interests**

- ▣ The authors declare no competing interests.

## References

- Abdollahi, S., & Nasiri, M. (2024). Subjective holism and the hard problem of consciousness. *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research*. <https://doi.org/10.22091/jptr.2024.10773.3062>.
- Andrews, K., & Monsó, S. (2021). Animal cognition. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/cognition-animal/>>..
- Aristotle. (2014). *Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy: Aristotle: Nicomachean ethics* (Vol. 2). (R. Crisp, Ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Armstrong, D. (1984). Consciousness & causality. In D. Armstrong, & N. Malcolm, *Consciousness & causality*. Basil Blackwell.
- Beer, C. (1995). Trial and error in the evolution of cognition. *Behavioral Processes*, 35(1-3), 215-224. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0376-6357\(95\)00059-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0376-6357(95)00059-3).
- Britannica Editors. (2010, August 4). *Holism*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/holism>.
- Britannica Editors. (2022, Dec. 2). *Gestalt psychology*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/science/Gestalt-psychology>.
- Campbell, D. (1974). Downward causation in hierarchically organised biological systems. In F. Ayala, & T. Dobzhansky, *Studies in the philosophy of biology: Reduction and related problems* (pp. 179–186). Basingst.
- Chalmers, D. (1995). Facing up to the problem of consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2(3), 200-219.
- Chalmers, D. (2013). Panpsychism and panprotopsyism. *Amherst Lecture in Philosophy* 8, (pp. 1-35). Retrieved from <https://www.amherstlecture.org/chalmers2013/>
- Chalmers, D. (2018). The meta-problem of consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 25(9-10), 6-61.
- Crick, F., & Koch, C. (1992). The problem of consciousness. *Scientific American*, 267(3), 152-60. Retrieved from <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-problem-of-consciousness/>
- Dennett, D. (1992). The self as a center of narrative gravity. In F. Kessel, P. Cole, & D. Johnson, *Self and consciousness*. Erlbaum.
- Duhem, P. M. (1954). *The aim and structure of physical theory*. . Princeton University Press.



- Dunn, J. (1998). *The theology of the Apostle Paul*. Eerdmans.
- First, Second and Third Person Explained*. (2022). Merriam Webster. Retrieved from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/point-of-view-first-second-third-person-difference#:~:text=character%20and%20reader,-Third%20Person%20Point%20of%20View,he%2C%20she%2C%20or%20they>.
- Flack, J. (2017). Coarse-graining as a downward causation mechanism. *Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society A: Mathematical Physical and Engineering Sciences*, 375(2109).
- Freeman, J. (2005). Towards a definition of holism. *British Journal of General Practice*, 55(511), 154–155.
- Ganeri, J. (2012). *The self*. Oxford University Press.
- Halvorson, H. (2016). Why methodological naturalism? In K. Clark, *The Blackwell companion to naturalism* (pp. 136–149). John Wiley & Sons.
- Healey, R. (2008, Dec Wed 10). Holism and nonseparability in physics (substantive revision). In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/physics-holism/>>
- Holden, C. (2004, Feb 19). *I feel your pain, really*. doi:10.1126/article.34745
- Holism. (n.d.). *Dictionary.com*. Retrieved from: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/holism#:~:text=Definition%20of%20holism&text=Philosophy,mere%20sum%20of%20their%20parts>.
- Hume, D. (2007). *A treatise of human nature*. (D. Norton, & M. Norton, Eds.). Oxford University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1984). *Logische untersuchungen II*. Martinus Nijhoff.
- Kim, J. (1993). *Supervenience and mind: Selected philosophical essays*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lamm, C., Batson, C., & Decety, J. (2007). The neural substrate of human empathy: Effects of perspective-taking on the neural representations of others' emotions. *Cerebral Cortex*, 17(9), 2106–2113.
- Levine, J. (1983). Materialism and qualia: The explanatory gap. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 64(1), 354–36.
- Light, S., Coan, J., Zahn-Waxle, C., Frye, C., Goldsmith, H., & Davidson, R. (2009). Empathy is associated with dynamic change in prefrontal brain electrical activity during positive emotion in children. *Child Development*, 80(4), 1210–1231. <https://doi.org/10.1111%2Fj.1467-8624.2009.01326.x>.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012). *Phenomenology of perception*. (D. Landes, Trans.). Routledge.
- Miguens, S., & Preyer, G. (2012). *Consciousness and subjectivity*. Transactions Books.
- Murphy, N. (2006). *Bodies and souls, or spirited bodies?* Cambridge University Press.
- Murphy, N. (2009). Introduction and overview. In N. Murphy, G. Ellis, & T. O'Connor, *Downward causation and the neurobiology of free will*. Springer.

- Nagel, T. (1974). What is it like to be a bat? *The Philosophical Review*, 83(4), 435–450. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183914>.
- Nagel, T. (1987). *What does it all mean?* Oxford University Press.
- O'Connor, T. (2021, Winter). Emergent Properties In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/properties-emergent/>
- Piñeros, G., Juan, S., & Tenenbaum, S. (2023, Spring). Action. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved from: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/action/#pagetopright>.
- Popper, K., & Eccles. (1977). *The self and its brain*. Springer.
- Quine, W. (1951). Two dogmas of empiricism. *Philosophical Review*, 60(1), 20–43.
- Ralston, S. (2011, August 15). Holism. *Encyclopedia of political thought*. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1910274>.
- Schraube, E. (2014). First-person perspective. In T. Teo, *Encyclopedia of critical psychology* (pp. 733-736). Springer.
- Searle, J. (1999). *Mind, language and society*. Basic Books.
- Searle, J. (2007). *Freedom and neurobiology*. Columbia University Press.
- Shapin, S. (2012). The sciences of subjectivity . *Social Studies of Science*, 42(2), 170–184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312711435375>
- Shoemaker, S. (1996). *The first-person perspective; and other essays*. Cambridge University Press.
- Smuts, J. (1926). *Holism and evolution*. New York: Macmillan.
- Van Gulick, R. (2024). Consciousness, subjective facts and physicalism – 50 years since Nagel’s bat. *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research*, 26(1), 5-20. <https://doi.org/10.22091/jptr.2024.10424.3021>.
- Zahavi, D. (2006). *Subjectivity and selfhood: Investigating the first-person perspective*. The MIT Press, A Bradford Book.
- Zahavi, D. (2007). Subjectivity and the first-person perspective. *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 45 (S1), 66-84.
- Zahle, J. (2016, Mar 21). *Methodological holism in the social sciences*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved from: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/holism-social/>
- Zaki, J., & Ochsner, K. (2012). The neuroscience of empathy: Progress and pitfalls. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 7(5), 503-511.