

The problem of other minds

THE PROBLEM

The problem of other minds is the question of how we can know that there are minds other than our own. We each experience our own minds *directly*, from 'within'. I can apprehend my sensations and emotions in a way that is 'felt'. I can know what I want or believe through introspection. But my knowledge of other people's minds, if I have any such knowledge, is very different. I can neither have any phenomenological experience of other people's mental states; nor can I know them through introspection. At first sight, at least, all we have to go on is other people's *behaviour*, what is expressed through their bodies.

This is a problem for any philosophical theory of the mind, but is sometimes said to raise a particular challenge for substance dualism. If minds and bodies are entirely independent, then how can I infer from seeing a body that there is a mind 'attached'? Other 'people' – other bodies – could all be machines, programmed to behave as they do, but with no minds.

RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM

There are different answers that philosophers have developed in response to the problem of other minds. We will consider three, and see that the third also forms a response to solipsism.

The argument from analogy

The argument from analogy runs like this: other people are made of the same stuff as me and behave very much as I do in similar circumstances; I have a mind; by analogy, it's logical to think they do as well. It is perhaps the 'commonsense' position on how to solve the problem of other minds. But we can object to its use of induction. The conclusion that other people have minds is based on a single case – mine. This is like saying 'that dog has three legs; therefore, all dogs have three legs'. You can't generalize from one case, because it could be a special case. Perhaps I am the only person to have a mind (solipsism).

A J Ayer reformulated the argument to avoid induction from one case by moving from a single correlation between 'behaviour' and (a single) 'mind' to correlating many behaviours of mine with many mental states of mine. This behaviour is correlated with this mental state; that behaviour with that mental state; and so on. Furthermore, mental states are causes of behaviour – to establish this, we only need our own case. But having established the cause, we may legitimately infer that the behaviour of others is caused by mental states.

But the argument relies on the view that like effects (behaviour) have like causes (mental states), a claim which has been generally rejected. Even if my behaviour is caused by my mental states, that doesn't mean that the behaviour of other people could not be caused by something entirely different (say, brain states without mental states).

Inference to the best explanation

Rather than inferring from one's own case to other minds, we may employ a standard form of theoretical scientific reasoning, inference to the best explanation. What hypothesis best explains other people's behaviour? The hypothesis that other people have minds, and that their mental states cause them to behave as they do.

Why believe this? In particular, think that it is a better hypothesis than the claim that (other) people are machines without minds? One way philosophers have developed the argument is to *define* mental states as the inner states of an organism that respond to the environment and cause behaviour (functionalism). The theory that there are such 'inner' states that cause behaviour is then said to be the best explanation of behaviour. Pain makes you respond quickly to prevent further damage; desire makes you pursue something you need; belief gives you information you need in order to pursue desires.

This line of argument faces three challenges. First, it depends on functionalism being the right account of what mental states are. But philosophers have argued that functionalism is neither the right account of thought nor of consciousness. Second, if we understand the mind in terms of its causal relations to behaviour, then we need to solve the problem of how the mind can cause physical events. Third, we can object that the belief that other people have minds is not a *hypothesis*, nor do we *infer*, on the basis of *evidence*, that they have minds. This argument is developed next.

Our experience presupposes other minds: on ascribing mental states

A third solution is to reject the idea that we need to *infer*, in any way, that other people have minds. We can develop this claim in two ways.

First, Wittgenstein argued that we react to people as minded, just as we react to them as alive, and this reaction is deeper, more fundamental than any beliefs about them. Our 'belief' that other people have minds, then, is not the product of any process of thought (including inference); it is part of human nature, which guides how we think. He also argued that we can have direct awareness of other people's mental states, most particularly, emotions. We can literally *see* anger *in* their facial expression, for example. Again, this is not a process of inference; the 'interpretation' is part of our perception of human faces itself. We experience the mind directly in bodily expressions. This particular response is not easily available to substance dualism, which holds that there is always a logical gap between anything bodily and a mental state.

A different approach argues that to have a mind oneself presupposes interaction with other minds. Descartes assumes that we can ascribe mental states to ourselves. But what does this ability require? We can argue that, for instance, a child cannot learn that it is angry without also learning what it means to say, of someone else, that they are angry. The ability to ascribe mental states to oneself is learned, and is interdependent with the ability to ascribe mental states to other people. To learn the meaning of 'anger' is to learn its correct application to both oneself and others, simultaneously. In general, a sense of self (of oneself as a self) develops as part of the same process as the sense of others as selves. If there can be no knowledge of oneself as a mind without presupposing that there are other minds, the problem does not arise. We discuss this further in the next section.

SOLIPSISM

Descartes argues that he knows 'I think' before he knows anything else. He later remarks that he knows, too, *what* he thinks when he thinks it, e.g. he can identify a sensation of cold without mistake. In thinking about and identifying my experiences, I unite them under concepts. If nothing but me and my thoughts exist, then I need to be able to do all this, in language, without depending on anything else. Descartes' knowledge argument supposes that we can make sense of the idea of our minds existing on their own, independently of anything outside. The idea that only my mind exists is solipsism.

The arguments from analogy and inference to the best explanation assumed that there were other people, or other people's bodies, and we needed to explain their behaviour. Solipsism would reply that there are no other bodies, only my experiences of other bodies. So those answers to the problem of other minds leave solipsism untouched. But the third response, the argument from ascribing mental states, provides an answer, as it entails that it is impossible to give an account of the mind, even one's own mind, starting just from one's own case. Solipsism supposes that my thoughts exist independently of anything else. But I could not have these thoughts without other minds existing. The argument goes like this:

From Descartes' starting point emerges a picture of concepts and language that John Locke explicitly endorsed: 'Words in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them'. (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III.ii.2) What I mean by 'red', for instance, is not, directly, the colour of the tomato, but the *sensation* I have of the colour of the tomato, or remember or imagine having. How does 'red' get its meaning? It's as though I associate the word with the sensation, saying the word 'red' in my head, while keeping the sensation of red in mind as I do so. It is like pointing to a colour chart, but where the chart and the pointing are mental, not physical.

Your sensations, of course, are yours alone; they cannot be experienced by anyone else. This means that what you mean by words is given by something that no one else has access to. Your language is a 'private' language, meaning it is logically impossible for anyone else to get at what you mean by words. Locke accepts this: for communication to occur, we must each mean similar sensations by the same words. Your 'red' must be similar to my 'red'.

The private language argument

Wittgenstein argued that if this understanding of language were right, then solipsism would be *inescapable*. If all words get their meaning by referring to my experience, then what I mean by 'experience' means 'my experience'. We have said that it is logically impossible that anyone else could have my experiences. But that means that it makes *no sense* to think of other people having experience – because 'experience' refers to my experience alone. But if no one else has experience, then solipsism is true.

Wittgenstein famously argued that a 'private' language of the kind described above is logically impossible. (*Philosophical Investigations*, §§257ff.) The words we use to talk about our experiences cannot get their meanings by each of us, individually and privately, referring to a sensation we associate with the word.

First, if it were true, we could not understand each other. Locke says that the sensations to which we privately refer would have to be similar. But this comparison is impossible;

in fact, it makes no sense. If meanings are given by private sensations, there is no meaning to the phrase 'my sensations are similar to yours'. I cannot meaningfully refer to your sensations or compare them with mine.

Second, words would not have meaning at all. How do I associate a word to a sensation? We suggested it was like mentally pointing at a mental sample. Wittgenstein argues this is not enough. Meanings are stable, and words can be used correctly or incorrectly. If 'red' means the sensation that comes to mind when I think of the word 'red', how can I check if the *right* sensation has come to mind?

For instance, can I tell if it is the same sensation that occurred when I first labelled the sensation 'red'? I try to recall that sensation – but of course, this is just to think *again* of what I mean by 'red'. I'm not comparing *two* things at all, so I can't check one against the other. Putting the point another way: what is it to remember *correctly* the sensation I originally associated with the word 'red'? It is to remember the same sensation. What do I mean by 'the same sensation'? Well, the sensation of red. But this is a vicious circle. We were trying to fix the meaning of the word 'red' by appealing to a sensation. But now we have to appeal to the meaning of red to identify the correct sensation!

Why does this matter? Because there is no gap between what *seems* right (I think it is the same sensation) and what *is* right (it being the same sensation). This means I can't use the word 'wrongly' – 'red' is whatever occurs to me at the time I'm thinking. But words can be used wrongly, i.e. with the wrong meaning. So this cannot be how words get their meaning.

Wittgenstein concludes that we cannot fix the meaning of words by appealing to private sensations. Instead, we have to use something *public*, available to other people. For example, we might fix the meanings of colour words by using a colour chart. This defeats solipsism, since, as we saw, that presupposes that the meanings of words can be fixed by reference to my experiences alone. If this is logically impossible, solipsism literally makes no sense.