

The Problem of Other Minds

The difficulty concerning how we can know that other people have minds is called 'the problem of other minds'.

Note that we have privileged access to our thoughts and feelings, and as such our knowledge of our own minds is thought to be secure.

The Argument from Analogy

'I am conscious in myself of a series of facts connected by an uniform sequence, of which the beginning is modifications of my body, the middle is feelings, the end is outward demeanour. In the case of other human beings I have the evidence of my senses for the first and last links of the series, but not for the intermediate link. I find, however, that the sequence between the first and last is as regular and constant in those other cases as it is in mine. In my own case I know that the first link produces the last through the intermediate link, and could not produce it without. Experience, therefore, obliges me to conclude that there must be an intermediate link; which must either be the same in others as in myself, or a different one;... by supposing the link to be of the same nature... I conform to the legitimate rules of experimental enquiry' (Mill [1865], 1979, ch. 12).

The argument from analogy starts from my knowledge of the existence of my own mind. This knowledge— together with knowledge of how I (as a minded being) behave—can enable me to determine the sort of behaviour other beings minded beings would display:

1. 'There are patterns in my behaviour in response to external stimuli which reveal that I am having mental states of a certain sort (e.g., my crying out in response to being burnt by a match indicates I am in pain)'.
 2. 'This same behaviour in response to external stimuli is exhibited by others'.
- C. 'These others experience the same mental states that I do, and so are minded, just like me' (Pritchard, 2006, pp.130-31).

Problems

1. The argument is an inference to a conclusion that can't be checked up (Ryle 1949, p. 15). (This objection does not go very far. Consider the fact that many hypotheses in science can never be directly checked up on.)

2. The form of the argument is problematic. Compare it to the following argument:

1. 'Box A is brown and it contains a book'.
 2. 'Boxes B, C, and D are brown'.
- C. 'Boxes B, C, and D contain a book' (Pritchard, 2006, p.130).

The mere fact that one brown box (A) contains a certain item, does not give us reason to believe that the other brown boxes (B, C, and D) contain the same item. Indeed, it has been argued that the conclusion of the argument is a generalization based on one case only and therefore fatally flawed (see, for e.g., Malcolm, 1962, p.152).

Consider the following: is the fact that *one* chocolate in the box was chocolate-fudge (the one you ate first) a reason to think that any or every other similar chocolates in the box will be chocolate-fudge? Is it a reason to say you *know* they are fudge?

An improved form:

1. 'Lots of brown boxes have been observed over many years and in a wide range of environments and they have all contained books'.
2. 'Boxes B, C, and D are brown'.
- C. 'Boxes B, C, and D contain books' (Pritchard, 2006, p.130).

Perhaps we could revise the argument from analogy for the existence of other minds so that it's more like the argument above. But then we would have to suppose that our own minds are in some way representative of many minds or minds in general. The problem then, though, is how we can do this without assuming that which we are trying to show – that there are other minds like my own.

That said, there are ways the argument could be strengthened:

- Could we look not at a single piece of behaviour but at the full range of behaviour displayed by other beings?
- What about the fact that other humans have nervous systems very much like one's own? Surely this should be taken into account.
- Does mental activity supervene on the brain? If so (or if it is likely that it does), then 'similarity of hardware is an even stronger analogical basis for inferring similarity of mental life in biologically behaviourally similar organisms' (Dretske, 1995, p.638).

Another response:

The argument presupposes that I know what it means to ascribe mental states to myself without necessarily knowing what it means to ascribe them to others. But, as Peter Strawson and others have argued, one cannot know how to ascribe mental states to oneself unless one also knows what it means to ascribe mental states to others.

In his essay 'Persons', Strawson argues that 'one ascribes P-predicates [predicates that describe mental states or states of consciousness] to others on the strength of observation of their behaviour and that the behaviour-criteria one goes on are not just signs of the presence of what is meant by the P-predicate, but are criteria of a logically adequate kind for the ascription of the P-predicate' (1959, p.106).

Non-inferential knowledge of other minds

Some philosophers claim that we have a direct knowledge of other minds, and therefore would reject the claim that knowledge of other minds is known inferentially. Suppose one of us in this room starts crying out in what appears to be agony. Do I really need to make an inference – or need to go through a reasoning process – in order to know that that person is in pain? Can I not just see *directly* that the person is in pain?

McDowell argues that, at times, 'one can literally perceive, in another person's facial expression or his behaviour, that he is in pain, and not just infer that he is in pain from what one perceives' (McDowell, 1978, p. 136).

* We will discuss how this response ties in well with direct realism and how it may be seen to avoid scepticism (it could be said to close the gap between the way the world *seems* to us and the way the world is).

Problems

- A person's thoughts and feelings are hidden from public view. And a lack of obvious bodily behaviour often makes it difficult, if not impossible, for us to directly 'perceive' another's thoughts or feelings. We will consider responses to this problem during the webinar.

- Our knowledge of other minds depends upon our own experience and upon the similarities between ourselves and others. We will consider responses to this objection also.

* Dissatisfaction with the views outlined led philosophers to claim the best explanation for why other humans (and animals) behave as if they were minded is that they **are** minded; they behave as they do because their behaviour is caused by **their** mental states. Like the analogical argument, this suggestion uses induction: inference to the best explanation.

Bibliography

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