

The problem of other minds¹

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'. We can each apprehend our sensations and emotions in a way that is 'felt'. We can know what we want or believe through introspection. But our knowledge of other people's minds is very different, it seems. We cannot experience other people's mental states. It seems that all we have to go on is other people's behaviour, what is expressed through their bodies.

While this is a general philosophical puzzle, it raises a special challenge for substance dualism, which holds that minds are distinct substances from bodies - they are not bodies, they are not parts of bodies, and because they are substances, they are not properties of bodies either. Cartesian dualism - the form of substance dualism defended by Descartes - also claims that minds do not depend on bodies in order to exist, i.e. minds can exist separated from any body. People who believe that the mind is the soul, and the soul can continue to exist without a body after death, are usually substance dualists. But if minds and bodies are entirely independent, then how can I infer from seeing a body that there is a mind 'attached'? The two things exist independently of one another. So other 'people' - other bodies - could all be machines, programmed to behave as they do, but with no minds. How can I know otherwise?

THE ARGUMENT FROM ANALOGY

The argument from analogy claims that we can use the behaviour of other people to infer that they have minds too.

- P1. I have a mind.
- P2. I know from experience that my mental states cause my behaviour.
- P3. Other people have bodies similar to mine and behave similarly to me in similar situations.
- C1. Therefore, by analogy, their behaviour has the same type of cause as my behaviour, namely mental states.
- C2. Therefore, other people have minds.

The argument is perhaps the 'common-sense' 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 generalise from one case, because it could be a special case. Perhaps I am the only person to have

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 199-205

a mind. And we can't get around this by first checking that other people have minds to show that I am not a special case!

However, instead of talking about the causal relation in the single case of my behaviour and my mind, we can formulate the argument to cite many instances of behaviour which we know to have a mental cause.

- P1. This behaviour has a mental cause.
- P2. That behaviour has a mental cause.
- P3. That third behaviour has a mental cause.
- P4. Etc.
- C1. Therefore, many behaviours have a mental cause (I know this from my own experience).
- P5. Other people exhibit the same types of behaviour as cited above.
- C2. Therefore, those behaviours also have mental causes.
- C3. Therefore, other people have minds.

However, this faces two objections. First, although many behaviours of which I have experience have mental causes, not all of them do. Sometimes I do something without being aware of a mental cause. So while (C1) is correct, it isn't strong enough to support the claim that the behaviour of other people also has mental causes - perhaps, like some of my own behaviour, it does not. Second, the argument relies on the contentious claim that similar effects (behaviour) have similar causes (mental states). But sometimes similar effects can have different causes. Perhaps those instances of other people's behaviour that are similar to my behaviour have different (non-mental) causes.

THE EXISTENCE OF OTHER MINDS IS THE BEST HYPOTHESIS

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. This argument doesn't appeal to the first-personal experience of having a mind nor does it draw an analogy between my behaviour and that of other people. Instead, the question is entirely third-personal. Why do human beings behave as they do? What hypothesis best explains people's behaviour in general? The claim is that the best explanation is that people have minds, and that their mental states cause them to behave as they do. And if people in general have minds, then obviously people other than me have minds.

Why think that the best hypothesis for explaining human behaviour is that people have minds that cause their behaviour? In particular, why think that it is a better hypothesis than the claim that people are machines without minds?

One way philosophers have developed the argument is to analyse mental states as the 'inner' states of an organism that respond to the environment and cause behaviour - this is what mental states are. 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; and so on. The theory that there are such 'inner' states that cause behaviour is then said to be the best explanation of behaviour. (A substance dualist can then argue that these 'inner'

states are states of a distinct mental substance, rather than, say, states of the brain.)

This line of argument faces three challenges. First, it depends on this theory being the right account of what mental states are.

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. But substance dualism has difficulties in explaining mental causation (see the handout 'Substance dualism: can mind and body interact?'). However, the dualist can respond that to solve the problem of other minds, we only need the claim that behaviour is caused by mental states, not an explanation of how.

Third, we can object that the belief that people have minds is not a hypothesis, nor do we infer, on the basis of evidence, that they have minds. Consider: have you ever seriously wondered whether people have minds and then used their behaviour as evidence that they do? This whole way of understanding the way we think about minds is mistaken.

AVRAMIDES ON DESCARTES' SOLUTION

The problem of other minds seems particularly challenging to substance dualism, because it claims that mind and body are completely separate things. So a human body, it seems, really could be just a machine, programmed to behave in certain ways but with no thought or consciousness, because these properties belong to something entirely different to a body. So what did Descartes say about how we know that other people have minds? Many philosophers have thought that he offers a version of the argument from analogy, but in *Other Minds*, Anita Avramides argues that this is a misinterpretation.

At the end of *Meditation II*, Descartes says 'if I look out of a window and see men crossing the square... I say that I see the men themselves... Yet do I see more than hats and coats which could conceal robots? I judge that they are men'. This can sound like he is entertaining the idea that what we 'see' when looking at other people could either be men, i.e. with minds, or machines, i.e. without minds. But we infer - 'judge' - that they are men.

But, argues Avramides, there are two objections to understanding Descartes in this way. First, the argument from analogy uses two separate observations and two separate judgments, viz. that others behave as I do, and so (by analogy) others must have a mind as I do. By contrast, Descartes suggests there is just one judgment in observing another mind.

Second, the context for this passage in Descartes is the relation between perception and judgment. Using an example of wax that undergoes changes when heated, Descartes has argued that our sense experience doesn't give us knowledge of what physical objects are. The sensory qualities of the wax change, but we judge that the wax remains the same thing. It is our judgment, not our perception, that gives us knowledge that the wax exists. Although we say we 'see' the wax (through vision), in fact we judge (through understanding) that it is present from

what we see. Similarly, we ordinarily say that we see men, but we really see hats and coats, and from this, judge that what we see are men. Descartes does not say we see the body of a man and then judge that this body has a mind. And unlike the argument from analogy, he does not proceed from his own case - that he has a mind is not a premise in his argument. He is simply not discussing the problem of other minds.

In fact, Descartes never discusses the problem of other minds as such. However, we can find his solution to the problem by looking at what he says about people and animals. Descartes believes that, unlike people, animals are machines, without minds. All bodies, insofar as they are bodies alone, are machines. Their functions and their behaviour can be seen to follow from the arrangement of their parts. This can seem to raise the problem of other minds in a very acute form: How do we know that other people aren't simply like other animals, without minds?

Descartes' answer is that there are two differences between animals (without minds) and people (with minds). First, people use language, while animals don't use language. It is inconceivable for a machine to answer questions meaningfully, Descartes claims, so our use of language shows that we have a mind while they do not. Second, people are capable of highly adaptable behaviour, and while some animals can show adaptable behaviour in some situations, they lack of adaptability in others. If they had genuine intelligence (mind), there would be no such asymmetry.

So, a person is both mind and body, united. What distinguishes a person is language and adaptable behaviour. When we encounter others, we observe not just their hats and coats, but their use of language and adaptable behaviour. On this basis, we judge that this other is a real man (i.e. with a mind), not a machine.