

Philosophy 132
Philosophy of Mind
Handout 23
Monday December 3 2007

1. *Subjectivity & Conscious Experience*

Earlier we contrasted two understandings of the subjective/objective contrast:

a.) *Metaphysical*: something is (strongly subjective) if its existence constitutively depends on some mental state or episode (*viz.* pains). On this understanding, we mean by the subjective that which is mental and that which depends constitutively for its existence on the mental; Something is objective if not subjective. But if things can be subjective without being strongly subjective – in some sense dependent on the mental, but not in virtue of there being some particular experience of them – then the objective will be that which is entirely independent of the mental.

b.) *Representational*: something is subjective to the extent that knowledge of it requires that one occupy some specific perspective; it is more objective to the extent that it can be known from more and more perspectives.

Something is fully objective if it can be grasped from any point of view whatsoever, or from no point of view. (Nagel called his book on the subjective and objective, *The View from Nowhere.*)

For Nagel the fundamental problem in understanding the mind as part of objective reality is trying to understand conscious conceived as a point of view on the world. He suggests that how we have knowledge of the consciousness of each other is by understanding *what it is like* to be that way = occupying the same or similar point of view on the world. If you can know something only relative to some specific point of view then it is a subjective phenomenon, and so known from some points of view and not others.

2. *Subjectivity as a Subject's Point of View*

Malcolm's objection to Mill is that the problem of other minds posed as Mill does presupposes that we have an understanding of our own minds and feelings and just face a problem about our knowledge of others' minds. But Malcolm suggests that if we don't know whether others have minds, then we are not in a position to know of our own mental states.

This is often called the *conceptual* problem of other minds.

The interesting problem of other minds is not the epistemological problem, how can I know that other people are not zombies. It is the conceptual problem, how can I *understand* the attributions of mental states to others. And this in turn is really the problem, how I can conceive of my own mind as merely one of many examples of mental phenomena contained in the world. (Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, pp.19-20.)

Why do Malcolm and Nagel think that there is a problem here?

If one has to imagine someone else's pain on the model of one's own, this is none too easy a thing to do: for I have to imagine pain which I *do not feel* on the model of the pain which I *do feel*. That is, what I have to do is not simply to make a transition in imagination from one place of pain to another. As, from pain in the hand to pain in the arm. For I am not to imagine that I feel pain in some region of his body. (Which would not be possible.) *Philosophical Investigations* Pt I, sec. 302.

Here there is a problem about our understanding of our own mental states (but what is it?) and hidden behind it a problem about how we are to conceive of the mental states of others.

As Saul Kripke asks, 'Why is the case any different from inferring features of the duck I do observe to features of a duck I don't observe?'

That is, why shouldn't we suppose that this is simply an example of the problem of induction?

Two Elements in Response:

- A) Problem of Diverse Routes to knowledge – that one knows in one’s own case in a different way from how one knows for others;
- B) Peculiar Status of Subjectivity – how does one know that one is just one mind among potentially many in the world?

3. *Verificationism & Empiricism*

The dictionaries do not give two sets of meanings for every expression which describes a state of consciousness: a first-person meaning and a second-and-third person meaning. But to the philosopher this thought has given trouble. How could the sense be the same when the method of verification was so different in the two cases – or, rather, when there *was* a method of verification in the one case (the case of others) and not, properly speaking, in the other case (the case of oneself)? (*Individuals*, pp.99-100.)

Verificationism is the doctrine that the meaning of a sentence is given by its method of verification. If two sentences are verified in different ways, then that implies that they have different meanings. *BUT* there are truth-value links between first-person ascriptions and third-person ascriptions. If ‘I am in pain’ is true as said by John, then ‘John is in pain’ is true as said by an observer.

Concept empiricism:

The application of our concepts is to be explained by their connection to our sense experience. Hume is often taken to be such a concept empiricist, given his characterization of the connection between ideas and impressions (the copy principle).

The worry for the concept empiricist is then that experience of one’s own mental states (through introspection or just feeling them) is different from one’s experience of others’ mental states, through their behaviour. So how can we conceive of applying the same concept in both cases?

This is parallel to a worry in relation to perception of spatial properties, Molyneux’s Problem introduced by Locke in the *Essay*:

Suppose a man born blind, and now adult, and taught by his touch to distinguish between a cube and a sphere of the same metal, and nighly of the same bigness, so as to tell, when he felt one and the other, which is the cube, which the sphere. Suppose then the cube and sphere placed on a table, and the blind man to be made to see; *quaere*, Whether by his sight, before he touched them, he could now distinguish and tell which is the globe, and which the cube (*Essay*, II, ix, 8)

That is, in relation to our employment of concepts or recognitional capacities for shapes, do we employ the very same capacities now in respect of vision and now in respect of touch? What is it about our experience which would reveal that the very same world and the very same features are now presented through vision and through such a totally different way in touch?

The question is at its most acute if one endorses concept empiricism and supposes that the resources to answer the question arise solely from sense experience. But the question may persist in the rejection of that doctrine: the demand is to explain how our concepts latch on to the world. The question presupposes that the answer requires us to look at one’s further psychological capacities (what other concepts or abilities one has) and not just to a relation between concept and world (which feature of the world is the use of the concept correlated with).

In the case of other minds, Strawson requires that we explain the correctness of what later is called by Evans, ‘the Generality Constraint’:

Any thought which we can interpret as having the content *that a is F* involves the exercise of an ability – knowledge of what it is for something to be *F* – which can be exercised in indefinitely many distinct thoughts, and would be exercised in, for instance, the thought that *b is F*. Similarly for the thought that *a is G*. (Evans, *Varieties of Reference*, p.103.)

In the shape example, philosophers are inclined to claim that it is our understanding of the idea that there is a common spatial world shared between vision and touch which explains why the same concept should be employed in relation to vision and touch. Typically arguments for this, though, are controversial in relation to empirical results in the psychology of vision and touch.

What would the parallel of this be for the case of other minds?

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