

Philosophy 132  
Philosophy of Mind  
Handout 23  
Wednesday December 5 2007

1. *Why is There a Conceptual Problem of Other Minds?*

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?

2. *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 – the method of determining whether the sentence is true or false. 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?

### 3. *The Problem of Solipsism*

If, in identifying the things to which states of consciousness are to be ascribed, private experiences are to be all one has to go on, then, just for the very same reason as that for which there is, from one's own point of view, no question of telling that a private experience is one's own, there is also no question of telling that a private experience is another's. All private experiences, all states of consciousness, will be mine, i.e. no one's. To put it briefly. One can ascribe states of consciousness to oneself only if one can ascribe them to others. One can ascribe them to others only if one can identify other subjects of experience. And one cannot identify others if one can identify them *only* as subjects of experience, possessors of states of consciousness. (*Individuals*, 100.)

A problem distinctive of the problem of other minds and not of shapes is a question how one both accommodates the distinctive access each has to his or her own mind *and* admits that they can see their own subjectivity as being one among many on a common world. The denial of the claim that we can understand other points of view on the world is typically identified with solipsism.

Why does the solipsist have a problem conceiving of others' pains as subjective and not just pieces of behaviour in the material world?

### 4. *The Elusive Self*

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception... If any one upon serious and unprejudic'd reflection, thinks he has a different notion of *himself*, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu'd, which he calls *himself*, tho' I am certain there is no such principle in me. (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.6 §3, p.165 in new Oxford edition.)

Hume leads a tradition of denying the Cartesian thought that we have an inner awareness or perception of our selves as a simple entity. But why suppose that the self is so hard to track down?

#### 5. *The Special Status of the First Person*

- (1) John is wearing red
- (2) I am wearing red
- (3) I am standing up

You may judge that (1) is true and be mistaken because you have *mis*-identified who is wearing red. Although you don't know that John is wearing red you still know that someone is wearing red.

You can make the same kind of mistake in relation to (2): looking in the mirror you may misidentify who it is that is wearing the red piece of clothing, and mistake that person for yourself.

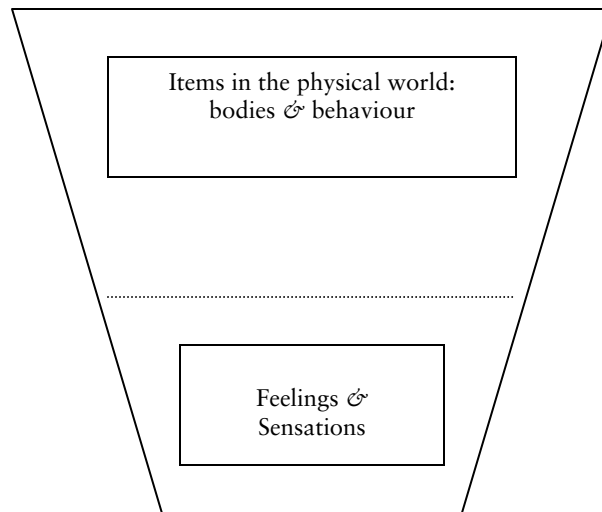
But you *can't* be mistaken in this way in case (3), if you make the judgement in the normal way that we do, on the basis of proprioception or kinaesthesia (awareness of limb position and movement): that is, although you can be mistaken whether you are standing up, you can't be mistaken that it is you who is standing up and yet still know in that way that *someone* is standing up. Such first person judgements are *immune to error through misidentification*.

You can also make judgements about yourself even when you have no information at all about what is going on: G.E.M. Anscombe suggests a case of being trapped in a sensory deprivation tank with amnesia. You could still think to yourself, 'How did I end up in this position?' and in this case you would be thinking about *you*.

Some philosophers have thought that if your use of the first-person pronoun in these kind of judgements was to be explained by having a special awareness of yourself, then that would have to be a very peculiar kind of awareness of just one thing. They have suggested that you are not aware of yourself as an entity at all.

#### 6. *Solipsism (Again)*

Suppose, as Hume suggests, that you encounter your own mental states but not as aspects or modes of an individual, and you are aware of elements of the physical world including the bodies and behaviour of others. We might represent this diagrammatically as follows:



If this is how you encounter the world, then how are you to conceive of your feelings or sensations being the same kinds of thing as are associated with the behaviour of yourself and other people. What one describes as *one's own* feelings and sensations seem simply to be the feelings and sensations there are. One's body has behaviour which is common with the behaviour of others. It is correlated with feelings and sensations, but the behaviour of others is not.

This picture of the world seems clearly wrong, my pains are just among the many pains in the world. But how do I conceive of my pains as merely *mine*?

For Molyneux's problem we might conceive of how sight and touch reveal the same objects and the same properties through thinking of the senses as showing the same spatial world. Is there anything which could play the parallel role in the case of subjects of sensation and feeling?

Strawson's suggestion is that we must conceive of ourselves as being spatially located entities, and hence as using the framework of space and time to think of our sensations as just some among many.

### 7. *Scepticism Again*

Strawson and Malcolm reject Mill's way of thinking of the problem. But how can addressing the conceptual problem really answer the sceptical challenge? It seems as if we cannot rule out as definitely false ROBOTS without appealing to verificationism.

Perhaps Strawson's suggestion is really that the way in which we know is mischaracterized by Mill. Once we think of the notion of person as a primitive category, something which has both mental and physical characteristics, then that will alter the way in which we conceive of coming to know about mental states. How could this be?

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