

What is the other minds problem? What is the argument from analogy and does it solve the problem?

The notion that one never has the same evidences for the existence of other minds as one has for the existence of one's own mind was one of Descartes' fundamental principles which has constrained philosophers, unable to break free of the idea, up until the last half a century. The problem of other minds is generated as a result of philosophers assuming as their initial premise that the individual has privileged access to, or direct acquaintance with, his or her own mental states but not the mental states of others. The problem surfaces when one is asked to demonstrate how we *know* that other minds exist, which is a fact we presuppose in our everyday life.

There are three ways in which we acquire knowledge, a) immediate awareness, b) perception and c) inference from either a) or b). The sceptic would argue that we cannot convincingly argue from which mode of knowledge our supposed intelligence of other minds is derived. From the starting point that mental states are private mode a) is wiped out as it makes it impossible to have immediate awareness of the mental states of another person. 'I can only have perceptual knowledge, b), of the mental states of 'another if I already know of a general correlation between mental and physical states; thus if 'I have knowledge of the mental states of others it must ultimately be based upon inference from 'observable' physical states. Such an inference must be either deductive or inductive. The ever present possibility of pretence however means that this inference cannot be deductive – but neither can it be inductive as an inference based upon only one case (my own) cannot be a reasonable inference (this will however later be disputed). It thus seems that the observed physical states of others fails to provide me with knowledge of their mental states. This conclusion demolishes arguments to claim the existence of other minds from both perception, b), and inference, c). The final conclusion then is that I cannot have knowledge of the mental states of any other human being besides myself.

The 'argument by analogy is basically an attempt to prove the existence of other minds by claiming that an inductive argument can be used for establishing the existence of states of mind other than my own. It is argued by philosophers like Russell and Mill that from one case, namely my own, I can establish a correlation between the existence of a mental state and the occurrence of a certain kind of behaviour; thus allowing me to have perceptual knowledge. I notice that whenever I feel happy (mental state) I cry (behaviour) so I generalise this correlation to the case of other people. Whenever I see other people crying, I infer inductively, by analogy with my own case, that they too must feel sad. There is an amended version of the argument by analogy which argues that in the case of other minds all we require are probability arguments, like the doctor who discovers a particular set of symptoms in a patient and concludes that the patient *probably* has mumps. This argument thus avoids the criticisms which could result from the idea of needing definite proof

There are many criticisms of both the argument by analogy and its amended version which suggests that they do not solve the problem of other minds. The first major objection is the generalisation objection. The generalisation objection basically argues that it is a very weak inductive argument to argue from one case, i.e. my own, to prove every other case, i.e. that others around me have minds similar to my own. The doctor's diagnosis, unlike our inference concerning other minds is not based on a single case and it could be said that it is because the doctor's diagnosis is not based on a single case that makes it permissible to talk of probabilities.

The second major objection is the unconfirmability of induction argument. This argument basically questions the validity of arguments from induction and argues that they can only be used if the possibility of confirming them exists e.g. if I say from past experience 'the sun will rise tomorrow' I can prove that induction to be

right or wrong based on how the world turns out to be. The induction concerning other's mental states can never be validated as minds are meant to 'be public' so the induction cannot be sound. The doctor can only make his or her conclusion based on probability because in the past he/she has been able to verify if he was right or wrong in his judgement. This verification and validation is not possible when discussing other's private minds.

A third major criticism of the argument by analogy comes from Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's criticism also, however, acts as a criticism of both the sceptics who question whether it is possible to have knowledge of other minds and Descartes' original conclusion that the **existence of one's own mind is more** certain than the existence of other minds. Thus if Wittgenstein is successful he will not only prove that the argument from analogy does not solve the problem of other minds but he will also give a solution to the problem itself.

The problem of other minds is presented as being whether what I say about myself when I apply words to describe my own mental states – can be extended to other people. According to this way of looking at things it might be the case that there are not any other minds or even, if we take Descartes' doubt seriously, even an independently existing world. It might be the case that all that exists is myself and my mental states – the position of solipsism.

Wittgenstein claims that in presupposing that I can apply words to my mental states I know from my own case what I mean when I say I am sad or in pain, the sceptic is assuming the possibility of a private language i.e. I can speak a language that only I understand because the words of this language refer to the logically private states of my mind. (Logical privacy is supposed to be a kind of privacy which in principle cannot be violated.) Wittgenstein denies the possibility of a private language. He argues that language is necessarily public in nature. It would not be possible, that is, to engage in the kind of linguistic activity we do engage in were it not for the existence of common meanings and the application of rules. If it can be shown that this is a logical precondition for having a language, then it can be argued that the sceptic, in asking the sceptical question, would be partaking in a public activity, namely language.

In order to justify his position the sceptic must say how it is possible to learn to use words to describe my own mental states. The sceptic would argue that the mental state is named by an inner act of ostensive definition (To define a word ostensively is to do it by pointing e.g. if someone asks what 'chair' means an ostensive definition would be given by pointing at a chair and saying 'That's a chair'). My ostensive definition of a sensation say 'pain' takes place in a logically private world by my concentrating on my private mental state, pain, and saying 'that's what I will mean in the future when I use the word pain to describe, to myself how I am feeling.' A consequence of this theory is that no one else can ever find out what I mean by 'pain' as what 'pain' means depends upon what kind of state I name. In this way the sceptic would claim that I invent my own logically private language, a language that other people in principle cannot understand.

Wittgenstein's criticism of the possibility of a private language takes two main forms. Firstly, he attacks the idea of private ostensive definition and, secondly, he argues the need for a background of rule governing communication and public 'criteria' for the use of psychological concepts.

Wittgenstein says that ostensive definitions presupposes what he calls 'stage setting', that is, a public world of communicators and a public language. Words have a variety of uses: to give orders, to ask questions; to implore etc. Wittgenstein says that to take a word out of its behavioural and linguistic context and ask for its meaning is as misguided as taking a cog out of a machine and asking what it is. Place the cog in the machine and its function is apparent just as replacing a word in

the living human context makes its use evident. Another example of the insufficiency of the ostensive definition is shown in how we teach people the meaning of words such as 'large.'. It might be thought that all we need to do is point at something 'large' and say 'that's large' but this could mean anything. 'large' or calling that type of object 'large' or saying this type of object is made of 'large' and so on. In practice someone might ask 'do you mean the size?' but this already assumes that the person has the concept of size.

Wittgenstein says that the only way the private ostensive definition can be justified is to claim that it is fixed by some mysterious occult act of the mind. Wittgenstein, however, believes that ultimately there need be no mystery about how the name or meaning of any ostensive definition is determined. He says that it emerges from essentially social activities e.g. we know what large means by comparing large things with small things, by people pointing out things which are large and by comparing two things and deciding which is largest and so on. The point is that none of these activities and strategies are available to the solitary private self.

Wittgenstein says that naming is not possible unless in a public language where there are criteria for being right or wrong as naming presupposes the possibility of naming correctly or incorrectly. The idea of the private ostensive definition is that one can name a mental state *, 's' and then when the person has * again he or she can remember that they are feeling 's'. Wittgenstein criticises this idea by saying that if one does not remember correctly what 's' stands for then 's' could be used wrongly but the person cannot distinguish between genuinely correct remembering and only seeming to remember. The reason for this confusion is that for the notion of a correct memory to get started we must be able to distinguish between a genuine memory and a merely putative one. However, this means appealing to something independent and this is just what the private language user cannot do. It is no use trying to check one's memory as this, says Wittgenstein, would be like buying several copies of the same newspaper to check whether a story was true. Wittgenstein concludes that a symbol for which an incorrect or correct use cannot be determined cannot be a word; thus making the notion of a logically private language term look absurd.

If Wittgenstein is right the result is that the argument from analogy cannot even get started and someone like Descartes cannot start from within the closed private circle of his own consciousness and question whether there is an independently existing public world. For such sceptical question to be formulated the existence of a public world within which a common language is possible is presupposed.

Wittgenstein rounds off his argument by setting out a public 'criteria' for the use of psychological language. He says that psychological concepts cannot be learnt only from one's own case. It is necessary that the learner be acquainted with third person criteria for their use. If everybody only felt pain and never showed it then 'pain' could have no use in our public language. It is precisely because we may be sometimes right and sometimes wrong in our ascriptions of pain to others that the word may have a use. Behavioural criteria provide the conditions for the use of mental state terms. A person's use of terms about his or her mental state has to fit in correctly with his or her behaviour otherwise we will be entitled to judge that he or she has not understood the meanings of the terms in question. Wittgenstein does, however, deny emphatically that he is a behaviourist in disguise as he does not believe that mental concepts are reducible to talk about behaviour; rather the behaviour serves as a criterion against which the use of a mental state word can be judged and checked.

Katy Roberts