Presentation to Pinner Philosophy Group
19th November 2029
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OTHER MINDS

What is the Problem of Other Minds?

Descartes said '**Cognito ergo sum'.**

He did not say **'Cognito ergo es'.**

When Peter Keeble first asked me to talk on this topic, I wondered what there was to talk about. That other human beings are mostly very like myself is something about which I almost all of the time, was certain. There are exceptions, among them philosophical sceptics, and perhaps those suffering from some abnormal mental condition. I do not, of course, believe that I always or even mostly know about others' inner lives in detail, but I did not doubt that they have an inner life, that they experience the physical world much as I do, rejoice, suffer, have thoughts, beliefs, feelings, emotions, and so on. To quote Shylock in 'The Merchant of Venice' "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

But on further reading I had to ask what, if anything, justified my certainty? I soon found out that Peter had landed me with one of the most difficult problems in philosophy. St Augustine, Descartes, Mill, Hume, Brentano, Wittgenstein, A J Ayer, Dennett, and numerous others have contributed to the field. In the 21st century it remains a topic of considerable interest. The Open University in a third level course 'Problems of Philosophy' devoted units 3 and 4 to 'Other Minds?' with students expected to devote 25 hours to the topic. I regret to inform you that if you read all these philosophers that you will be no closer to a solution because they cannot agree on what underpins this most basic of human beliefs. Their views do, however, intertwine with views revisited, often many centuries later.

I shall consider three aspects of the problem. First I shall look at animal minds, then consider human minds, followed by electronic minds, and finally review whether we

ourselves represent a single mind or if we had different minds at different stages of our life.

The way into the problem is to start with solipsism. Solipsism is sometimes expressed as the view that "I am the only mind which exists," or "My mental states are the only mental states." However, the sole survivor of a nuclear holocaust might truly come to believe in either of these propositions without thereby being a solipsist. Solipsism is therefore more properly regarded as the doctrine that, in principle, "existence" means for me my existence and that of my mental states. Existence is everything that I experience—physical objects, other people, events and processes—anything that would commonly be regarded as a constituent of the space and time in which I coexist with others and is necessarily construed by me as part of the content of my consciousness. For the solipsist, it is not merely the case that he believes that his thoughts, experiences, and emotions are, as a matter of contingent fact, the only thoughts, experiences, and emotions. Rather, the solipsist can attach no meaning to the supposition that there could be thoughts, experiences, and emotions other than his own. In short, the true solipsist understands the word "pain," for example, to mean "my pain." He cannot accordingly conceive how this word is to be applied in any sense other than this exclusively egocentric one. Do we have any solipsists here? Please say so. No, no one believes that other people are figments of their imagination, zombies, or merely faces on a Zoom screen. However it is impossible to prove that solipsism is incorrect, so all other consideration of other minds has to take place in this context. Many philosophers deny solipsism while putting forward proposals that inadvertently slide into solipsism. Bertrand Russell claimed to have met a woman who said to him "I am so pleased to meet a solipsist, there are so few of us around these days".

Let us first consider non-human animal minds. The most famous philosophical study is that of Thomas Nagel (1937 -) 'What is it like to be a bat'. We have discussed this work previously at PPG. In evolution bats and humans diverged 80 million years ago. Our common ancestor was a mammal. Nagel wrote that even though we can try to imagine some of what a bat does (flying, using echolocation, hanging upsides down), trying these is always translating into our sensory and mental framework. We do not have the right kind of brain senses or brain structure to actually inhabit what it is like

for a bat. We might know about echolocation scientifically, but not what it feels like from the bat's point of view.

More interesting than the bat is the octopus. The Australian philosopher Peter Godfrey-Smith (1965 -) explores the mind of the octopus in his book 'The Octopus and the Evolution of Intelligent Life'. Godfrey-Smith argues that octopuses represent an independent evolution of complex intelligence. Humans and octopuses last shared a common ancestor over 600 million years ago. After that our evolutionary paths diverged. Octopuses are incredibly intelligent. They can solve puzzles, open jars, escape enclosures, and show signs of play and curiosity. Their intelligence is distributed differently from humans. Over two thirds of an octopus' neurons are in its arms, not its brain with each arm acting semi-independently, suggesting a decentralised form of intelligence.

So what it like to be an octopus? Do they have a sense of self, do they experience pain or pleasure, what does it mean to have a mind spread over multiple arms? Godfrey-Smith argues against the idea that consciousness is all or nothing. It is likely that consciousness evolved gradually, with different animals possessing different forms or levels of awareness. Octopuses may have a kind of proto-consciousness, not the same as ours, but a meaningful form of experience If you cannot imagine what it is like to be a bat, you have not a hope of knowing what it is like to be an octopus.

Let us now consider human minds. What is it like to be a human? Look at the person sitting next to you. Think what it is like to be them. Now we shall consider the views of eminent philosophers. I have to be select because if I covered every philosopher who has written on other minds, we should be all day. So let us start with what is it like to be Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE).

Aristotle

He did not explicitly formulate a 'problem of other minds' in a way later philosophers do, but his views on the soul, perception, and human nature provide a framework for understanding how he might have approached the issue. In his critical and political works Aristotle presents humans as rational animals and inherently social. Since human beings live in communities and engage in shared rational discourse, it presupposes that others have minds, intentions, and reasoning capacities. Thus the

existence of other minds is taken for granted in social and ethical life, it is not something that he doubts or seeks to prove.

St Augustine

St Augustine (354 – 430) also does not explicitly formulate a 'problem of other minds' the way modern philosophers do, but he does explore ideas closely related to it in several of his works. He emphasises the special nature of self knowledge. We know our own minds more directly and certainly than we know the external world or even other people. He sees the inner life as the primary avenue to truth, famously saying in 'Confessions' "Do not go outside yourself, return into yourself, truth dwells in the inner man". This leads him to the view that we know our own minds through direct introspection, but this raises a contrast we cannot introspect others' minds.

Augustine talks about how we use signs, especially language, to communicate what is in our minds. This is the key to understanding other minds. He argues that while we cannot see directly into another person's soul, we interpret their signs, especially speech to understand what they think or feel. So our knowledge of other minds is indirect and interpretive based on behavioural cues and communication. We infer that others are like us based on what they say and do. Augustine sets the scene for future philosophers use of analogy and inference. Wittgenstein relies heavily on language.

Rene Descartes

Let us consider Descartes (1596 – 1650), the first person in modern philosophy to consider the problem of the mind. If A N Whitehead said that all philosophy is a footnote to Plato, all philosophy of the mind is a footnote to Descartes. I shall consider Descartes in more detail than any other philosopher. In the Second Meditation, Descartes tries to establish absolute certainty in his famous reasoning: Cogito, ergo sum or "I think, therefore I am." These Meditations are conducted from the first person perspective, from Descartes'. However, he expects his reader to meditate along with him to see how his conclusions were reached. This is especially important in the Second Meditation where the intuitively grasped truth of "I exist" occurs. So the discussion here of this truth will take place from the first person or "I" perspective. All sensory beliefs had been found doubtful in the previous meditation, and therefore all such beliefs are now considered false. This includes the belief that I have a body endowed with sense

organs. But does the supposed falsehood of this belief mean that I do not exist? No, for if I convinced myself that my beliefs are false, then surely there must be an "I" that was convinced. Moreover, even if I am being deceived by an evil demon, I must exist in order to be deceived at all. So Descartes writes "I must finally conclude that the proposition, 'I am,' 'I exist,' is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind" This just means that the mere fact that I am thinking, regardless of whether or not what I am thinking is true or false, implies that there must be something engaged in that activity, namely an "I." Hence, "I exist" is an indubitable and, therefore, absolutely certain belief that serves as an axiom from which other, absolutely certain truths can be deduced.

This certainty immediately creates a profound problem. .Descartes has proved that he is a thinking thing but his method gives him no access to other thinking things. Descartes splits the world into two substances:

- Rescoitans (Thinking Substance): the mind, soul, and consciousness. It is non-physical and non extended.
- Resextensa (Extended Substance): the body, matter, the physical world. Ii is non-thinking and extended in space.

Descartes states that you experience your own mind directly through introspection (thinking, feeling, willing). You experience the bodies of other people through your senses but you never directly experience another person's mind. When you see another person, you are only perceiving their body. How do you know their body is connected to a mind just like yours?

Descartes, however, does not believe that we are surrounded by automatons. He offers two key arguments for how we can be justified in inferring (though not proving with absolute certainty).that other human beings possess minds. He argues that no machine could ever be built to imitate convincingly a human for two reasons.

1 The Language Test: A machine could be made to utter words (he uses the example of a parrot), but it could never arrange them in varying ways to sense all that is said in its presence, as even the dullest men can do.

In modern terms this is a precursor to the Turing Test. (In the Turing Test a human interrogator may ask questions with the intent of distinguishing a machine from a human. If after a period of time the human cannot make the distinction, the machine has passed the Turing Test). It is also a precursor to John Searle's Chinese room. Descartes argues that machines can mimic

speech, but they cannot use language with genuine understanding, creativity, and appropriateness in an infinite variety of new contexts. Humans can.

2 The Versatily Test (The General Intelligence Test):A machine might be built to do one thing very well, perhaps even better than a human (eg a clock tells the time) but it would infallibly fail in many others.
In modern terms Descartes is talking about general intelligence. A human mind is a universal instrument that can be applied to all contingencies of life. I am justified in my judgement that they possess minds just as I do.

To summarise Descartes

1. He created the problem by making the Cognito the foundation of all knowledge. Descartes locked each of us within our own consciousness. This created the 'egocentric predicament' and the Problem of Other Minds'.
2. His solution is an inference. Unlike the certainty he has he has of his own mind, his belief in other minds is an inference based on behaviour.
3. The argument from analogy: underlying his tests is a simple argument from analogy. That body looks like my body. It behaves in complex ways, like speaking, just like my body does. My behaviour is caused by my mind. Therefore, its behaviour is probably caused by a mind, too'.
4. The role of God. Ultimately, Descartes' entire system is guaranteed by the goodness of a non-deceiving god. He has a strange propensity to believe other bodies have minds and a good god would not systematically deceive him about this.

John Locke

John Locke (1632 – 1704) claims that the mind begins as a tabula rosa, a blank slate. He argued that all knowledge comes from experience, either sensation (external experience) or reflection (internal experience of our own mental operations). When considering other minds he recognises the epistemic limitation. For him:

1. We perceive only our own ideas, not the external objects or the mental states of others.
2. We infer the existence of external objects as the cause of our sensory ideas.
3. Likewise we infer the existence of other minds as the causes of others' behaviour.

So, according to Locke, our belief in other minds is an analogical inference.

To quote Locke "Since I have a body, and my bodily motions are caused by my thoughts and feelings, when I see another body behaving in similar ways, it is reasonable to infer that it too is animated by a mind."
Locke's view provides a reasonable but indirect justification in other minds through analogy and experience. Critics, however argue that the inference is weak, it is still possible that others are philosophical zombies (beings that act conscious but are not). It does not give certainty, only probability, we cannot truly know other minds exist as we know are our own.

David Hume

David Hume's (1711 – 1776) discussion of other minds—that is, how (or whether) we can know that minds other than our own exist—emerges naturally from his broader sceptical empiricism. Let's unpack it step by step. The problem of other minds asks 'how can I know that other people (or animals) have minds, feelings, and experiences like mine. All I directly perceive are my own sensations—the thoughts, feelings, and impressions within my consciousness. When I see another person behaving a certain way (smiling, crying, etc.), I do not see their mental states; I only see their bodily movements. So, on an empiricist view like Hume's—where all knowledge must come from experience—there is a gap between my direct experience (inner perceptions), and the inferred existence of other conscious beings.

Hume's position can be summarised as that we cannot know other minds exist through reason or demonstration, rather we believe in other minds through habitual inference based on analogy with our own case. This belief is natural and unavoidable, even if not philosophically certain. The belief in other minds, like the belief in the external world, is not rationally grounded, but is a natural part of human psychology.

John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill's (1806 -1873) discussion of other minds appears most clearly in his book *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865). His argument is one of the early *analogical arguments* for other minds in modern philosophy. Mill recognizes a classical philosophical problem. We only have direct access to our own thoughts and sensations. All we perceive of other beings are their bodies and behaviours. So, how can we justify believing that other humans (or animals) have minds like ours, rather than being mere automata? Mill's answer is an argument from analogy: "I conclude that other human beings have feelings like me, because they have bodies like mine and act as I act when I have those feelings."

In other words:

1. I observe that when I am in certain mental states (e.g., pain, joy, hunger), I behave in certain ways (e.g., crying, laughing, eating).
2. I observe others behaving in similar ways under similar circumstances.
3. By analogy, I infer that others have inner experiences like mine that cause their behaviours.

So, my knowledge of other minds is not direct, but inductive and analogical.

Mill concedes that this reasoning is not deductively certain. It is an inductive inference—like our knowledge of unobserved facts in science.
Still, it is strong enough for practical certainty because:

- The correlation between behaviour and inner states is consistent and pervasive.
- The inference works universally for human interaction and understanding.

Thus, Mill treats belief in other minds as an extension of empirical reasoning — grounded in observation, not in intuition or metaphysics.

Mill's view reflects his empiricist and associationist background, inherited from Hume and his father, James Mill. His version of the argument influenced later philosophers, especially in analytic philosophy, as a prototype for what became known as the "argument from analogy" in the philosophy of mind.

Franz Brentano

Let us consider Brentano (1838 – 1917). He believed that our knowledge of other minds is grounded in our own conscious experience, particularly through the concept of intentionality. He argued that mental phenomena are characterized by their intentionality, they are always directed towards something, for example thought is about an object, a desire is for something. This distinguishes mental from physical phenomena and allows us to categorize and understand mental states.

Bretano held that we know our own mental states directly through inner perception, which is immediate and infallible. However knowledge of other minds is indirect. We infer others' mental states, based on their behaviour, expressions and communications. He rejected the idea

that we can perceive others' mental states in the same way we perceive our own. Instead we use analogical reasoning: if I behave this way when I feel pain, then someone else behaving similarly might also be in pain.
Brentano views influenced later philosophers like Edmund Husserl and the phenomenological tradition, which sought to explore consciousness and empathy more deeply.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951)

Wittgenstein viewed the philosophical problems of other minds not as a puzzle to be solved, but as a confusion to be dissolved. He rejected scepticism about others' mental states by emphasizing the role of language, behaviour, and shared forms of life. His approach to other minds evolved significantly between his early and later philosophy. In his early philosophy Tractus Logico-Philosophicus he focused on logical structure and representation. He did not directly address other minds, but implied that mental states were private and logically structured. In Philosophical Investigations he shifted his view radically. He argued that mental states are not hidden inner objects, but are expressed through behaviour and language.

The problem of private language is central to his argument. He states that a language composed of words whose meanings are essentially private sensations that is known only to the speaker, would be impossible. For a word to have meaning, there must be criteria for its correct use that are accessible and checkable by others. If pain referred only to a private, inner feeling, there would be no way to tell if one was using the word consistently, and thus it would have no meaning. This undermines the idea of a completely private, unobservable mental life that we have to infer in others. Instead he argued that our concepts of mental states, like pain, joy, thinking, are tied to public, observable criteria, chiefly behaviour and circumstances. We learn the word pain, not by being shown an inner object, but by learning to use the word in the context of groaning, holding a limb, facial expressions, and certain kinds of situations. Our certainty about other people's minds is not the result of an inference from behaviour to an unobservable inner state, rather, the behaviour is the expression of the mind.

Knowledge of other minds is not based on a philosophical proof, but on our shared form of life- the natural human practices, reactions, and language games in which we participate. When a person cries out "My hand hurts!", we do not infer that they are in pain: we react to it as a genuine expression of pain. Doubt or scepticism about other minds is usually only meaningful

in specific, practical contexts, for example, “Is he faking it?”, not as a general, philosophical attitude.

In essence, Wittgenstein’s project was therapeutic – he sought to show that the problem of other minds arises from a misunderstanding of how our psychological language works and that we see its grounding in public criteria and shared practices, the philosophical puzzle disappears.

Gilbert Ryle (1900 – 1976)

Ryle argues that the problem itself arises from a category mistake, a misunderstanding of what ‘mind’ means. He attacks, in the phrase he coined, the ‘ghost in the machine’ view of Descartes. The idea that the mind is a private inner entity somehow based in the body. According to Ryle, mental concepts like believing, hoping, thinking, feeling, are not hidden inner processes but dispositions to behave in certain ways. To attribute a mind to someone is not to posit an invisible inner world, but to recognize a pattern of intelligent behaviour.

So how do we know others have minds? Ryle says that this is not a matter of inference from behaviour to an inner cause. Instead our understanding of mental states and concepts is public and behaviour anchored. For example to say “she is angry” is not to say “there is an inner angry state that I cannot see” but to describe her behavioural tendencies, her tone, expressions, actions etc. The concept of anger itself is defined by these outward criteria.

Thus the idea that we must infer others’ mental states from their behaviour is mistaken, we understand minds through behaviour directly, not inferential.

Daniel Dennett

Daniel Dennett (1942 – 2024) viewed other minds as knowable through observable behaviour and evolutionary continuity, rejecting mythical or dualistic explanations. . His approach is grounded in naturalism and cognitive science. He argues that we can understand other minds, human and non human, not by introspection or metaphysical speculation, but by examining behaviour, evolutionary history and functional mechanisms. Dennett proposes that we interpret others by adopting the intentional stance, treating them as rational agents with beliefs and desires. This is a predictive strategy, not a metaphysical claim. If it helps to explain and anticipate behaviour, it is useful and justified. To study consciousness scientifically, Dennett suggests we treat subjective reports as data, without assuming they are accurate reflections of

inner states. This enables us to study minds objectively, even when we cannot directly access them.

Dennett emphasises that human minds are not radically different from animal minds. In his book 'Kinds of Minds' he explores how mental capacities evolve gradually from simple organisms to complex ones like humans. He is sceptical of philosophical approaches that treat that treat consciousness or other minds as ineffable mysteries. Dennett insists that such views often lead to contradictions or dead ends. In a review of Peter Godfrey-Smith's book he praises the explanation of octopus intelligence as a window into alien cognition. He sees such studies as vital for understanding the diversity and depth of consciousness in nature.

Dennett's framework helps to demystify the mind. By focusing on observable behaviour, evolutionary logic and cognitive modelling, he offers a way to study minds, including non human ones without resorting to metaphysical speculation. His work bridges philosophy, biology, and AI.

G E Moore

G E Moore (1873 – 1958) wrote 'All mental entities have the characteristic that they can be directly known, in this sense, by a single mind, is I think, certainly plausible for the following reason. It is certainly a remarkable difference between my own mental acts, and those of other people, that mine are the only ones that I ever know directly. I certainly have never been conscious of any one's thoughts or feelings or perceptions in that direct manner in which I am conscious of a colour when I actually see it,; but of my own mental acts, I am very conscious in this direct manner. I am, of course, conscious in a sense of the mental acts of other people; I do know some of them in a very real sense, and I know a great deal about them, but certainly I am never directly conscious of them, I do not know them directly, in a sense that I often know my own. This is, I think, certainly"

A J Ayer

A J Ayer (1910 – 1989) in a section of his book 'The Problem of Knowledge' entitled 'the privacy of experience' wrote 'One of the characteristics which are ascribed to mental objects or events is that they are in some way private. Thus it is commonly held that our thoughts and feelings, our dreams and imaginings, our sensations and memories, are things to which we alone have access. We can communicate them to others, in the sense that we are able to convey

information about them, but we cannot transfer them to others. It is true that one does quite frequently speak of different persons sharing the same thoughts or feelings, but it would be generally held is what is meant by this is that these thoughts or feelings are similar, or proceed from similar causes, not that they are literally the same.'

Andy Clark

Andy Clark (1957 -) is a professor of cognitive philosophy at Sussex University. He published his book 'The Experience Machine- How our brains predict and shape reality' in 2023. Earlier this year he was awarded the inaugural Dennett prize. Clark argues that the brain is fundamentally a prediction machine, constantly generating expectations about the world and updating them when reality does not match. His work suggests that perception, action, and even attention are guided by this predictive process, reshaping how we understand recognition and experience.

Clark describes the brain as a system that continuously tries to match incoming sensory inputs with top down predictions. Instead of passively receiving information, the brain actively forecasts what it expects to encounter. These predictions are organised in a layered structure, where higher levels generate broad expectations and lower levels refine them. The goal is to minimise the predictive error, the gap between expectation and reality. In his book Clark emphasises that what we perceive is not raw reality but a brain constructed model shaped by predictions. Our senses are constantly corrected by prediction errors, creating a dynamic balance between expectation and input. Attention is just a spotlight on sensory data, it is a mechanism for deciding which predictions matter most. By focusing on certain inputs, the brain helps us to act efficiently in the world, adjusting when predictions fail.

Clark's predictive brain theory reframes cognition as anticipation rather than reaction. It challenges the traditional idea that perception is a passive mirror of reality. Instead portraying it as an active, generative, process. This has profound consequences for philosophy, neuroscience, and even everyday life. Explaining phenomena from optical illusions to why expectations shape experiences. It also explains why individual minds differ, sometime radically, and why you cannot know what it is like to be the person sitting next to you.

Artificial Intelligence

The biggest challenge to thinking on other minds since Descartes comes from AI. It is a central and pressing issue at the intersection of philosophy of the mind, artificial intelligence and ethics. It fundamentally links the ancient philosophical problems of other minds to the modern reality of sophisticated AI. In approaching the problem let us recap how we can know that other entities besides ourselves possess a mind, subjective experiences, and consciousness. The challenge is that we have direct first person access only to our own thoughts and feelings. We can only infer the mental states of others based on their behaviour, and physical analogy (they look and act like us). The traditional answer is that because my body, behaviour, and words correlate with my internal mental states, and another human's body behaviour, and words are similar to mine, it is reasonable to conclude by analogy that they also have a mind. The sceptical response to this is that the analogy is not a logical certainty. It leaves open the possibility that other humans are just philosophical zombies, beings that are functionally and behaviourally indistinguishable from a conscious person but have no inner, subjective experience.

The existence of highly capable AI, especially large language models that can converse and generate creative content, brings the problem of other minds to the forefront. If AI can perfectly mimic human behaviour, emotion, and understanding in conversation, for instance passing a sufficient version of the Turing Test, what grounds have we for denying it a mind, especially if we grant one to other humans based on the same kind of behavioural evidence? A key distinction can be made between strong AI (Pro-Mind) and weak AI (Anti –Mind). With strong AI the hypothesis is that a properly programmed computer is, in fact, a mind - that the computation itself is sufficient for consciousness. With weak AI the hypothesis is that AI can only simulate a mind. While it can produce human like outputs, it lacks true subjective understanding, feeling, or self-awareness.

Ray Kurzwell

Ray Kurzwell (1948 -) is an American computer scientist and futurist. In his recent book 'The Singularity is Nearer', he projects that the time when AI will exceed human capabilities is coming closer. He believes that other minds, whether artificial or biological can be understood and even merged with our own through technological advances. His views on other minds are deeply tied to his broader philosophy of transhumanism and the singularity. He argues that the human brain operates through hierarchical pattern recognition, and that this mechanism can be replicated in machines. He believes that by reverse engineering the brain, we can build

artificial minds that mirror human cognition, making it possible to understand and interact with other minds, human or synthetic, on a deeper level. Kurzweil envisages a future where human minds merge with artificial intelligence via brain – computer interfaces and cloud based consciousness. This merger would allow individuals to access and share thought, memories, and experiences across minds, effectively dissolving the boundaries between separate consciousnesses.

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19 November 2025