

Introspecting Other Minds

In everyday life we take it for granted that others have minds very much like our own. I know that I have thoughts, bodily sensations, emotions, sensory experiences, and other kinds of mental states, and I know directly what it is like to have them. In addition, I am deeply convinced that other human beings have mental lives that are very much like my own, insofar as they also think and feel. This belief about other minds is a belief that we universally hold. But how do we justify it? This straightforwardly epistemological question is what the *Epistemological Problem of Other Minds* (henceforth EPOM) is concerned with. Locating the justification is challenging for the following reason: if I can inspect my own mental states but never those of others, what, if anything, justifies my belief in the mental states of others? There is an *asymmetry* regarding what is known directly in my own case and what is known indirectly in the case of others. That is, sometimes, at least, I know directly, i.e., not by an additional observation or inference, what I think and feel, but it is impossible for me to have this direct knowledge of others' mental states. The direct knowledge comes from the special, introspective access I have to my own mental states, and only to my own mental states. Given the impossibility of my feeling other people's feelings or my thinking other people's thoughts, how do I *know* that they have them?

EPOM and the asymmetry on which it rests are at the heart of the problem of other minds (Hyslop 1995). According to received philosophical wisdom, it is a conceptual truth that the asymmetry cannot be overcome: the claim is that it is *logically impossible* to introspect someone else's mental state *as* the mental state of someone else. The underlying rationale can be illustrated by the following example. Suppose Fred and Tim are Siamese twins who share a leg. Suppose further that each feels a pain in the leg, the same pain. Fred feels Tim's pain and Tim feels Fred's pain. However, even if Fred has direct knowledge *of* Tim's pain, Fred lacks the direct knowledge *that* Tim is in pain. In other words, it is not sufficient that Fred can

introspect Tim's pain. He further needs to introspect it *as* being felt by Tim. Unless Fred directly knows that what he feels is, indeed, felt by Tim, Fred cannot be said to have direct knowledge of Tim's pain *qua* Tim's pain. This means that Fred's experience would have to carry a 'label' which indicates that it is Tim's. Similarly, it is argued that alleged cases of telepathy would be of no help to EPOM. At best, via telepathy I can have direct knowledge of the inner lives of others, but I still fail to know directly that those others are minded at all. Being telepathically 'hooked up' to someone else's mind is not enough. We need direct knowledge that what we are 'hooked up' to is indeed the inner life of another. This extra bit of information must still be acquired on the basis of observation and inference.

In my paper, I shall argue that the asymmetry to which EPOM is due is not logical but, at most, empirical. That is, it is not contradictory to suppose that we might, in principle, be introspectively aware of someone else's mental states as her mental states. In order to back up this claim, I will refer to the debate on 'inserted thoughts' and 'alien voices' in schizophrenia and other cases of anomalous experiences (Stephens & Graham 2000). Schizophrenic patients sometimes report having experiences in which they are introspectively aware of a certain thought and yet they deny that the thought is theirs. They aver that the thought has been inserted into their mind by someone else. In order to explain such unusual experiences, it has been suggested that we have to distinguish between the *owner* and the *author* of a thought (Campbell 2003). Accordingly, there is no conceptual contradiction in supposing that a subject can own a certain thought without being its author.

In addition, it is important to note that the discussion on 'inserted thoughts' has focused almost exclusively on the *psychopathological* context of schizophrenia. This explains why it is assumed at the outset that such anomalous experiences must be symptoms of severe mental illness and cannot *eo ipso* be veridical. But this assumption is dubious. Phenomena like thought insertion and alien voices also occur in healthy, *prima facie* non-pathological contexts, such as religious and spiritual experiences; such anomalous experiences are not

necessarily pathological (Jackson & Fulford 1997). This opens up space for considering experiences of the following sort as potentially veridical: the subject, *qua* owner, is introspectively aware of someone else's mental state *as* the mental state of someone else. In order to understand the epistemic significance of thought insertion and alien thoughts, it is important not to confine oneself to cases of full-blown psychotic disorder like schizophrenia. I shall highlight the relevance of these points to EPOM.

To sum up, the idea that I would like to present in this paper is that it is at least *conceptually possible* to introspect other minds *qua* other minds. In stark opposition to what has been traditionally agreed upon in the debate on other minds, I shall argue that there is no *a priori* bar to our having direct knowledge of the inner lives of other human beings. From this it follows that we have to revise the most basic assumptions from which EPOM is taken to ultimately derive.

References

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