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PROBLEMS OF OTHER MINDS: SOLUTIONS AND DISSOLUTIONS IN ANALYTIC AND CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

While there is a great diversity of treatments of other minds and inter-subjectivity within both analytic and continental philosophy, this essay aims to specify some of the core structural differences between these treatments. Although there is no canonical account of the problem(s) of other minds that can be baldly stated and that is exhaustive of both traditions, it can be loosely defined in family resemblances terms. It seems to have: 1. an epistemological dimension (How do we know that others exist? Can we justifiably claim to know that they do?); 2. an ontological dimension that incorporates issues to do with personal identity (What is the structure of our world such that inter-subjectivity is possible? What are the fundamental aspects of our relations to others and how do they impact upon/constitute our self-identity?); and 3. it also depends on one's answer to the question what is a mind (How does the mind – or the concept of 'mind' – relate to the brain, the body, and the world?). While these three issues are co-imbricated, I will claim that analytic engagements with the problem of other minds focus on 1, whereas continental philosophers focus far more on 2. In addition, this essay will also point to various other downstream consequences of this, including the preoccupation with embodiment and forms of expressivism that feature heavily in various forms of continental philosophy, and which generally aim to ground our relations with others in a pre-reflective manner of inhabiting the world that is said to be the condition of reflection and knowledge.

1. a) ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY AND THE PROBLEM OF OTHER MINDS

Analytic philosophy's interest in the problem of other minds is typically posed in epistemic terms. The core problem is that we have two competing intuitions about our knowledge of the existence of the other that both have some *prima facie* plausibility: a behaviourist intuition that in our daily life we do in fact know others with reliability (cf. Ryle); and a Cartesian one that insists that there is something about the other (their mental life) that necessarily remains unknowable (Overgaard 250). For most, however, the issue of subjectivity (and hence inter-subjectivity) has been too quickly dispensed with by behaviourism's strict eliminativism about the mental, which resolves the problem of others minds by fiat, and analytic philosophy has since concluded, almost univocally, that the view that the other is simply their behaviour cannot be right. After all, others are often enigmatic and confusing, and the consensus is that Ryle's main insight – that the mental is importantly related to behavioural response or output – can be readily accommodated within contemporary forms of functionalism. If the behaviourist solution is eschewed, however, we seem to be left without the required intellectual resources to adequately confront the sceptical problem regarding how we can know that there really are other minds, and how we are to distinguish creatures with such minds (persons) from Zombies. Without the behaviourist's entailment relation between pain behaviour and pain, it seems that the best we can do is to argue by analogy from our own experiences of the relationship between us having mental states and behaving in certain ways, as was suggested by Mill (p191) and A. J. Ayer (p191-214). Arguments by analogy are, however, at best probabilistic, and probabilistic claims (or generalisations) based on a single experience seem rather irresponsible (Wittgenstein 293). Moreover, they do not capture either the judgments of common-sense/folk psychology on this issue, or our

pre-reflective relationship with others that phenomenology aims to describe and disclose.

Faced with the inductive problem of arguments by analogy (i.e. one case is not sufficient) one can respond in either of two main ways: 1. improve the argument from analogy, and/or supplement it with other inductive arguments; 2. give up the inferential problematic and find another way of showing how belief is justified (Stern 220). Most continental philosophers pursue some version of the second alternative – e.g. some norms are said to be grounded in perception rather than inference, and there is often claimed to be a transcendental conception of normativity, whether it be the structure of our perceptual being-in-the-world, or Apel and Habermas' claim that everyday conversation and argument presupposes certain regulative ideals that we should endeavour to live up to. Analytic attempts to pursue this strategy are much rarer, confined to the post-Wittgensteinian tradition of conceptual and criteria-based solutions to the problem. The claim made by Wittgenstein, Norman Malcolm and Peter Strawson in different ways, is that the required link between the observed behaviour of the other and the attribution of mental states to them is neither an inductive inference, nor a direct entailment (as in behaviourism); rather, the relationship between mental states and behaviour is claimed to be criterial (Hyslop). It remains, however, a comparatively marginal position within analytic philosophy, due to ambiguities surrounding the use and abuse of the idea of criteria and the abiding concern to integrate with the findings of the sciences.

Most contemporary analytic responses to the problem of other minds hence attempt the first option: to reconstrue the argument by analogy and present it in a hybrid form that incorporates inference to the best explanation and hence imbues the argument with a status akin to a scientific theory. As Alec Hyslop suggests, “the

guiding thought is that the mental states of human beings are what cause them to behave as they do. So, the inference to their having minds is one based on that being the best explanation for the way they behave” (Hyslop).

It is also important to recognise that much of the recent literature has centred around debates about ‘folk psychology’. The folk have a faith that other people exist, and, on this view, they also evince an everyday ability to fairly accurately attribute desires, beliefs, and intentionality to other people despite the possibility of them being but cloaks and springs. The task for the analytic philosopher that takes this datum seriously (not all do) becomes one of explaining how this common sense folk psychology about the other might have come about, how it functions, what roles it plays in regard to meaning, reference-fixing, and to answer some more technical questions, such as **to what extent is our mastery of folk psychology a matter of representation-possession, and how special-purpose and/or innate is the mechanism underwriting our folk psychological competence?** Despite the problem of other minds sometimes being considered to be marginal, these debates have significant consequences for two of the dominant positions in philosophy of mind. As Nicholls and Stich suggest, “if functionalists conceive of folk psychology as the body of information that underlies mind-reading, and there is no such body of information, then the functionalist account of the meaning of mental state terms must be mistaken, since there is no folk theory to implicitly define these terms. And if there is no folk theory underlying mind-reading, then it cannot be the case that folk psychology is a radically mistaken theory as the eliminativists insist” (Nicholls & Stich 9).

Two main answers to the questions regarding folk psychology have been proffered in recent times, labelled respectively ‘Theory Theory’ and ‘Simulation

Theory'. To the above questions in bold, TT generally answers (1) 'a lot' and (2) 'not much'ⁱ. ST generally answers (1) 'not much' and (2) 'a lot'ⁱⁱ. Of course, both come in different forms, as well as hybrid ones, but on the standard TT view it is because we have an implicit theory (with rules, etc.) that we are able to identify other minds and predict their behaviour with some competence. TT is hence inferential and quasi-scientific, in that other minds are more like hypothesised entities than immediate givens, and we infer from observed public behaviour to a hidden mental cause. *Prima facie*, however, TT is confronted with an obvious problem if such a mechanism is said to be central to understanding others. Given that children seem to lack a suitably developed *theory* of mind, being without the required inferential abilities (and especially the awareness of others as mental agents with beliefs different from their own), TT seems committed to the view that there is no experience of minded beings, and thus no genuine understanding of self and other, until roughly 4 years of age. One might accept this consequence, defining mental states narrowly such that children don't have them at all and that we are initially essentially an interior and private mind until 'theory theory' kicks in (Gallagher and Zahavi 176). Such a radical shift may, however, be difficult to explain. Alternatively, one might adopt a gradualist thesis that deflects the force of this counter-intuitive result regarding children and 'mindedness', and which attempts to come to terms with findings in developmental psychology and the brain sciences. For example, it might be argued that there is some quasi-understanding of others evinced when the child is able from birth to distinguish humans from non-human and playfully imitate only the former, but maintain that infants lack fully-fledged representational mental states.

For Simulation Theory, on the other hand, we represent the mental activities of others by mentally simulating them, or by simulating similar activities and

processes (for some versions of ST this is said to happen at the subconscious level). The explicit version of ST remains within the argument by analogy paradigm, in that it contends that the processes that our brain uses to guide and understand our own behaviour can also make possible representations of other people. Rather than maintaining that we have some general information (or theory) that makes it possible, we use our own mind (and behavioural processes) as a model of what the other's mind might be like, mainly through imagination according to Alvin Goldman (p161-85). This position denies that mental theorising is at bottom what is going on, and draws attention to the emotional and imaginative aspects of our relations with others. For Goldman, we have a privileged understanding of our own mind through introspection, and using these resources we then attempt to put ourselves in the other's shoes.

As a response to the problem of other minds, however, this seems problematic. To try and consciously put ourselves in the other's shoes presupposes that we already have some understanding that they are in fact others. Likewise, to see the similarity between my pain and the other's pain I have to already understand their gestures as expressive phenomena that are bound up with other minds rather than mere automatons, and it thus begs the question. Another problem is that there seems to be little phenomenological evidence of the indispensability of such introspective and imaginative simulations to our everyday dealings with others. As Wittgenstein is reputed to have said, do we look within ourselves in order to recognise the other's fury?

One solution to this problem is to abandon Goldman's insistence upon the importance of introspection and the imagination, and to maintain that the simulations are subconscious or subpersonal, thus bypassing the phenomenological objection to

ST. It is frequently claimed that recent evidence from neurology and other cognitive sciences supports this view, in particular the fact that mirror neurons ‘fire’ in the same manner when we perform an act as when we witness someone else performing it. While mirror neurons have not been discovered to exist in humans but rather only in monkeys (the relevant test on humans would not get ethics approval), let us grant that coupled with other well-known findings in developmental psychology (e.g. newborn imitation of tongue protuberance, recognition of 6 basic emotions, etc.) they provide some (probabilistic) evidence for the claim that the human brain has systems that may be activated either “endogenously — for example, by the output of one’s own decision-making, emotion-formation, or pain perception systems — or exogenously, directly fed by the sight of other human faces and bodies” (Gordon). At least as ‘implicit ST’ interprets such data, this suggests that one perceives the other and there is then a subconscious activation of mirror neurons that represent/replicate the experience that is being perceived. But why should these sub-personal processes be characterised as simulations, when ‘simulations’ on the usual understanding involves reference to either pretence, with an agent who does the pretending/simulating, or to an instrumental model that we can use to understand some other thing? Neither of these definitions seems to be involved in the use that *implicit ST* makes of the term simulation (Gallagher & Zahavi 179). Without a clear answer to this, it is not clear that these neural resonance processes aren’t better understood as *part of* perception rather than something that comes *after* perception as implicit ST contends. Are there internal replicas or representations of the other involved here, or are they directly part of the perceptual apprehension without intermediary in the manner that philosophers like Merleau-Ponty and Scheler have maintained? The scientific findings have not ruled out either interpretation.

It is clear that for both ST and TT the problem of other minds is not resolved in an epistemic sense. In the latter case, functionalism cannot be known to hold of minds in general unless it holds of other minds, and that cannot be known unless they have been shown to exist (Hyslop). In the former case, there is no independent argument that our simulations are a response to an actual other person. Rather, both views are predominantly concerned with trying to fit in with a different overall view of the mind and brain emerging in the relevant sciences.

1. b) CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Having suggested that epistemology is central to the way that the problem of other minds is traditionally formulated in analytic philosophy and to the background concern to integrate (or cohere) with the knowledge claims from the various brain sciences, we might note that both of these foci are *comparatively* absent from continental reflections upon inter-subjectivity. Instead, philosophers like Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, sought to establish a new outlook on the world and our (social) place within it, precisely through overturning the modern conception of knowledge and the various paradoxes bound up with it, with the problem of other minds being envisaged as an exemplary case. The problem for the above philosophers is the focus on epistemology *and* the particular paradoxical understanding of epistemology that we have inherited, which is roughly the bifurcating one that Foucault in *The Order of Things* describes as the “empirico-transcendental doublet of modern thought” (xiv) and that Merleau-Ponty calls empiricism and intellectualism. The worry seems to be that the modern conception of knowledge might serve to disguise from the fly a way out of the bottle, and, in a

related vein, Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* suggests that epistemic scepticism about the external world or other minds depends upon the mirror of nature conception of the mind, in which the mind is assumed to be ontologically distinct from its environment. And based on the foregoing account of other minds (which resembles the thing-in-itself), it seems fair to suggest that analytic philosophy's epistemic and justificatory focus concedes something to the sceptical problematic. Things are very different in continental philosophy, however, where the task is more to explicate our place in the world and there is an abiding attempt to establish that the other is of a different ontological order to things. This is evinced in the various discussion of intersubjectivity, alterity, the other, being-with (*Mitsein*), etc., that have been central to continental philosophy, occurring in virtually all of the canonical textsⁱⁱⁱ. The important question about the problem of other minds vis-à-vis the 'divide' hence becomes the following: is it an epistemological problem that might be solved (even if only probabilistically), or is it an ontological one that needs to be dissolved and/or shown to be untenable via phenomenological descriptions and transcendental arguments?

An aversion to epistemologically inflected accounts of the existence of the other is manifest internally within continental philosophy. Heidegger criticises Kant for suggesting that it is a scandal that the problem of other minds has not been solved, and he instead insists that that scandal is actually the attempt to solve it (Heidegger, Section 43). Although Sartre praises Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger for installing the other at the heart of consciousness and hence contributing to the overturning of a dualistic worldview, they are also criticised for remaining too epistemological and for labouring under versions of the problem bequeathed to us by Descartes (Sartre 230). Likewise, when Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* critiques Western philosophy's

“imperialism of the same” – that is, its epistemological focus that unerringly aims at reducing the unknown object to the understanding of the knowing subject (for Levinas, a certain ontological picture is also bound up with this) – he is careful to distance himself from contemporaries like Merleau-Ponty whose philosophy of touch remained too epistemological in its relation with the other (Levinas 1990). This gesture in which epistemology becomes a dirty word is a common one in continental reflections on inter-subjectivity, but what might be wrong with this epistemological focus? One problem would be that it functions on the basis of certain philosophical presuppositions, most notably the existence of a knowing subject with privileged epistemic access in relation to their own thoughts/feelings and a more speculative or theoretical relation in the case of other people. The difficult task is then one of explaining how it is that we might have justified knowledge of other minds (and external things more generally). For many continental philosophers this suggests that something has gone wrong and that the premises that lead to such a dilemma – other minds as hypothesised entities – need to be rejected. Ontological re-descriptions are hence given to explain aspects of the phenomena in question – such as desire, shame, etc., which are claimed to presuppose the difference of the other – but which simultaneously avoid the problematic consequences that ensue if we understand that difference as one pertaining to epistemic access between the first and second person perspectives. The uncanny and surprising nature of our relations with others is generally not to be explained by, or understood in terms of, the possibility of misunderstanding and failure in relation to our knowledge of the other (McGinn 50). For Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and the other existential phenomenologists, this level of judgment – of knowing consciousness – is not our fundamental relation to the world, which is, rather, pre-reflective. If it can be shown that the latter precedes and is

the condition of possibility of the former, then reflective and sceptical judgments are undermined. It is for reasons like this that most continental philosophers will not accept the Cartesian premise that we have privileged epistemic access to ourselves, and nor will they accept that accounting for our relationships with others via knowledge (or probability) can be adequate, since our connection with others is firstly (in both a developmental and transcendental sense) non-inferential, grounded in perception, affection, intensity, etc. Moreover, for those continental philosophers indebted to Hegel, self-consciousness (and self-knowledge) are thought to be only possible following an encounter with others. To summarise then, continental philosophers tend to respond in at least one of the two following ways to the problem of other minds: 1. maintain that expression in some cases gives constitutive evidence of mentality (although this need not preclude ambiguity); and 2. argue that we have certain capacities or experiences (thought, shame, meaningful expression, self-consciousness awareness, etc.) for which the existence of others is a necessary condition. We mainly consider the first strategy here, the second is explored in another Compass entry.

As many philosophers have noted, from Strawson to Merleau-Ponty, there is a clear link between the mind/body problem and the problem of other minds. If we consider the mind (or the mental) as transcending the body, or as radically different from the body, then we are immediately in a difficult position in trying to establish that other people do in fact exist. On the other hand, any strategy of dissolving the problem by pointing to a mind-body unity must not deny the perspectival asymmetry between first and second persons, nor the fact that communicative expressivity is a matter of degrees. It seems difficult to dispute, for example, that the facially expressive nature of emotions like anger or any of the other purportedly universal

facial expressions (joy, disgust, surprise, sadness, fear) is more transparent than in the case of a complex state like nostalgia, say, and than is the case with regard to the knowledge that one might have of something specific. In this respect, Overgaard points to an important distinction in expression between “occurrent mental phenomena, which have a beginning and an end (e.g. sensations, perceptions, and emotions) and phenomena that seem to be dispositional in nature”, including beliefs and knowledge (Overgaard 258). Again, if a philosopher can show that this latter relation is not basic then we have the beginnings of an argument for inter-subjective expressionism. Roughly speaking, this is the argumentative strategy that the existential phenomenologists pursue in thematising in great detail the lived body as locus of agency rather than the mind; ‘mind’ does not reduce to body in the manner suggested by some behaviourists, but the body is enlarged and made intelligent, and also claimed to be the condition of reflective thinking.

Such views tend to be accompanied by a denial of the necessity of intermediate entities (e.g. representations, judgments, the Kantian ‘I think’, etc.) in everyday inter-subjectivity. According to one of Merleau-Ponty’s examples, a friend’s consent or refusal of a request for them to move nearer is immediately understood through bodily interaction. Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty goes on to suggest, this does not involve a perception, followed by an interpretation, and then a behavioural response. Rather, “both form a system which varies as a whole. If, for example, realising that I am not going to be obeyed, I vary my gesture, we have here, not two acts of consciousness. What happens is that I see my partner’s unwillingness, and my gesture of impatience emerges from this situation without any intervening thought” (Merleau-Ponty 111). The interpretation is thus built into the perception itself, rather than something secondary that is added to the raw perception of sense-data, in manner

related to some of Heidegger's thematisations of "seeing-as" in *Being and Time*. In the perception of the other, a certain gesture does not make me think of anger, or read anger behind the expression, but that it is anger in-itself (Merleau-Ponty 184).

Likewise, Merleau-Ponty consistently draws attention to the way in which newborn babies are able to imitate the facial expression of others, both in *Phenomenology of Perception* and elsewhere, something that provides the basis for our relations to others thereafter. As Thomas Fuchs notes in regard to the imitative capacities of children, "by the mimetic capacity of their body, they transpose the seen gestures and mimics of others into their own proprioception and movement" (Fuchs 98). On this Merleau-Pontyan inspired view, our body-schema responds immediately to the other's expressions, and elicits a non-inferential process of what might be called 'empathic perception'.

While this kind of turn to the body is typical of phenomenology from the later Husserl on, it does not exhaust continental philosophy *per se*. The notion of the body 'proper' has been contested by many recent theorists (especially post-structuralists), sometimes in the name of the vast differences between bodies that are occluded in the general deployment of the term, as well as because of the claim that the necessary relationship between the body and technology renders problematic some phenomenological accounts of the lived body. Nonetheless, virtually all continental philosophers dispute the view of the mind as predominantly representational, and there is a corresponding advocacy of forms of expressivism. This position defends the semantic priority of expression over representation, and thus links in with claims to the genesis of theoretical knowledge from practical experience/knowledge in many continental philosophers. Rather than committing its advocates to forms of irrationalism, it arguably involves a disciplining of rationality (or the propositional) as

the dominant mode of interacting with the world, and expressive behaviour is viewed as meaning saturated, often in such a manner as to deny the need for inference.

Despite the common understanding of him as a dualist, Sartre is also committed to a form of expressivism regarding others when he states that nothing is hidden in principle. Modes of conduct of bad faith are nothing separate from the way they are enacted in the world: style, mannerisms, and comportment. In a very different way, in *Difference and Repetition* and other texts Deleuze also advocates a form of expressivism and this is one of the reasons why Spinoza and Nietzsche are increasingly popular in continental circles.

Levinas' philosophy likewise attempts to negotiate that difficult balance between respecting the alterity of the other and yet nonetheless insisting on the immediate communicability of bodily expressivism. Levinas is famous for his discussion of the face-to-face in which in an encounter with the other we experience the other as an ungraspable infinity, rather than as a graspable totality, as is the case with our appropriative relationship with other objects. What the 'face' expresses is precisely the other's transcendence (Levinas 198). As such, expression does not give us the other's interiority, but nor does it hide this realm (Levinas 202). Another's mental life is not waiting to be encountered and known in the manner of an object; rather, it expresses itself in an unfolding and unpredictable dynamic (Overgaard 262). As Overgaard argues, the "notion of expression is both intended to convey something more than a merely contingent relation between mind and body, and to reflect a certain inaccessibility of the mental lives of others" (Overgaard 256). As he goes on to suggest, "the Cartesian thinks the counterpart to my possible uncertainty regarding the mental states of another is her certainty, but this is precisely wrong" (Overgaard 267), since even if I were certain about the other's mental states (and surely we

sometimes are), there would still be a difference between the perspectives. Focusing upon epistemic access thus seems a misleading way to explain this, and what becomes clear in the work of all of these philosophers is that expression is not a representation of an inner realm. It is an *entre nous* (between us) that is differently experienced by the expressive face and the apprehension of it by another expressive face.

Expressivism, however, remains a marginal view within analytic philosophy, a position that is more commonly associated with so-called 'postanalytic' philosophers: Charles Taylor, John McDowell, and to a lesser extent, Robert Brandom. It is also important to note that both Taylor and Brandom trace expressivism back to its roots in romanticism, suggesting that the historical contestation between romanticism and more reason-oriented views of the enlightenment heritage is an important precursor to the analytic/continental divide.

CONCLUSION

Many analytic philosophers would have at least two responses to this, concerning not only the putative immediacy of relations with others, but also any priority that is accorded to this mode of comportment. First, it might be suggested that such a position threatens to make deception and misinterpretation in our relations with others impossible and that the asymmetry of perspectives is thereby occluded. Second, analytic philosophers often maintain that these kind of phenomenological descriptions do not foreclose on the possibility that representations or simulations undergird such experiences, and that these phenomenological descriptions may hence simply be 'wrong'. A variant of this objection might be the response that it is psychologically necessary that we *think* that we know and interact with others, as A. J. Ayer says

against Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger's analyses of inter-subjectivity, but that this does not provide any kind of access to the other's mind or more general proof that they do in fact exist (Ayer 1982 221). While good responses can be made to both of these worries, the key question concerns whether phenomenological descriptions are platforms from which necessary and essential conditions might be established, or whether they are defeasible psychological descriptions of experience that are of little philosophical significance. I cannot definitively resolve this here, of course, but it seems that we are returned to the background issue of the mind and how it works. Is intentionality predominantly to be understood as involving representational content, and thus we represent the other as having beliefs and desires? The answer is 'no' for most continental philosophers, and we have already seen some background reasons why this might be so: it is partly because of this general reluctance to solve issues with epistemology, probability, and other sophisticated judgments of this kind, at least if they fail to take account of our primary immersion in a social milieu. The concern is that if one hypostasises a reasoned relation to the world that is dependent upon a more practical one (genetically, developmentally, etc.), then one will never be able to reconstruct what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'perceptual faith', and the way in which this necessarily opens upon perspectives other than our own.

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ⁱOr, occasionally, (2) 'quite a bit, but it's a special-purpose learning system, or the unfolding of an innate conceptual framework, or the like' (cf. Lewis 17-25).

ⁱⁱOr, occasionally, (2) 'not at all - we just run our other systems 'offline', using first-personal data to solve a third-personal problem' (cf. Goldman 1989 161-185). Thanks to James Chase for this taxonomy, to James Watt for conversations about the problem(s) of other minds, and the Australian Research Council for providing financial support for this project.

ⁱⁱⁱThink of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*, Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, which has a chapter on 'Other Selves and the Human World', and Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*, which argues that ethics is first philosophy and that responsiveness to the other is a condition of subjectivity. More recently, such themes have continued in Lyotard, Derrida (somewhat notoriously in the *Gift of Death: tout autre est tout autre*), Paul Riceour (*Oneself as Another*), Jean-Luc Nancy (*Being Singular Plural, Inoperative Community*, etc), and many others. Concerns with the other also feature in Deleuze's work. In *Difference and Repetition* and *Logic of Sense*, what Deleuze calls the other-structure and its difference from the perverse-structure occupies an important place in these major texts. In addition, I have also already alluded to Apel and Habermas on

discourse ethics and the centrality of the *Lebenswelt*.