THREE PROBLEMS OF OTHER MINDS

Chad Engelland

The traditional problem of other minds is epistemological. What justification can be given for thinking that the world is populated with other minds? More recently, some philosophers have argued for a second problem of other minds that is conceptual. How can we conceive of the point of view of another mind in relation to our own? This article retraces the logic of the epistemological and conceptual problems, and it argues for a third problem of other minds. This is the phenomenological problem which concerns the philosophical (rather than psychological) question of experience. How is another mind experienced as another mind? The article offers dialectical and motivational justification for regarding these as three distinct problems. First, it argues that while the phenomenological problem cannot be reduced to the other problems, it is logically presupposed by them. Second, the article examines how the three problems are motivated by everyday experiences in three distinct ways.

Three Problems of Other Minds

The traditional problem of other minds is *epistemological*. How can I know that there are other minds? Enthusiasm for this sort of question has waned in recent years, because the question can appear artificial or insoluble. Several philosophers have pointed to a second kind of question concerning other minds. The *conceptual* problem of other minds concerns how the concept of mind I have from experiencing one from the inside can be attributed to

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another whom I necessarily experience from the outside. Advocates for the conceptual problem rightly regard it as more interesting and fundamental than the traditional epistemological problem. Some philosophers have pointed to a third kind of question concerning other minds. The *phenomenological* problem of other minds concerns the puzzling way other minds are experienced.

In this article, I argue that there are at least three distinct problems concerning other minds: the epistemological (*E*), the conceptual (*C*), and the phenomenological (*P*). These concern issues of justification, of understanding, and of experience, respectively. I am not interested here in solving the problems but of providing a taxonomy of problems. In the first section, I argue that *P* is distinct from and irreducible to *E* and *C*. In the second, I show that the three problems emerge thanks to three different motivations. In short, I give dialectical and motivational justification for my claim that there are at least three problems of other minds.

1. Dialectical Considerations

Let me begin by reviewing the epistemological and conceptual problems in order to motivate recognition of the phenomenological problem. Approaches to *E* usually take as the point of departure a certain way of construing the available evidence. We know of ourselves in an immediate and direct manner through introspection. When it comes to others, however, our access is mediated and indirect: we see bodies and their movements but we do not see other minds. *E* concerns itself with bridging the gap between the available evidence and the belief that there are in fact other unperceived minds. In its classical form, *E* asks: 'What justification do I have for thinking that this human-looking thing is not a zombie (or in more Cartesian language, a mindless machine)?' Two common answers to *E* are analogical inference and reason to the best explanation. In analogical inference, I conjoin my mental states with my bodily behaviour

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and then analogously reason to hidden mental states conjoined with the bodily behaviour of another body. In reason to the best explanation, I puzzle about the behaviour of others and arrive at another mind as the most probable cause.

Following Nagel, some regard *C* as 'more interesting' than *E*.[1] I take it that it is more interesting for four reasons. First, modern philosophers have paid more attention to *E* than *C*, because modern epistemological interests occluded questions of intelligibility. The linguistic turn has upset the priority of epistemology over intelligibility, and by consequence, today the question of intelligibility appears more interesting than the well-worn question of justification. Second, *C* seems more natural than *E*, because what motivates *E* is the enactment of Cartesian-style hyperbolic doubt that helps itself to introspective evidence but calls into question other sorts of evidence (I will defend this claim in the following section). *C* is interesting independent of the artificial considerations that are at work in modern scepticism. That is, even if one does not adopt the Cartesian framework of immediate self-knowledge, there is still a puzzle concerning the inversion of perspectives from self to other. Third, *E* presupposes *C* in the sense that any answer to *E* must assume some answer to *C*, but the reverse is not the case: one could explain the conceptual problem without generating a criterion for its application. In this way, *C* is a more fundamental problem than *E* and, as more fundamental, more interesting, at least to a philosophical habit of mind. Fourth, *C* is more puzzling in that it requires a unique solution that cannot be applied to anything else. Bertrand Russell could appeal to a general principle of scientific inference to justify the ascription of mind to others, but a general principle won't do as an answer to *C*.[2] It has its own unique logic coming from the inversion of perspectives at work.

Whether or not one agrees that *C* is more interesting than *E*, one ought to agree that *C* is different from *E*. For *C* concerns the puzzle of making sense of minds: how can I, ineluctably tethered as I am to my own point of view, come to understand the possibility of another point of view? As Nagel

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points out, it is a question of conceiving one's own mind as but one instance of mind.[3] It is not a question of success as in *E* but instead a question of intelligibility. It admits of two modalities:

> Another animal: How is the other intelligible as another perceptual point of view?
>
> Another human mind: How is the other intelligible as another intellectual point of view?

That is, I take it that there are different concepts at work in making sense of another animal and making sense of another human mind. An ant marches by carrying a crumb of spice cake, and our friend muses about the delightful blend of flavours at work in the confection. For the first, we need to make sense of another perceiver acting within an environment to pursue sensible goods. For the second, we need to make sense of another person who not only perceives and acts within an environment but who enjoys the rich interior life that comes with having a human mind. Typical answers to *C* involve generalization of the concept of mind or the abstraction of mind from considerations of points of view. Again, my aim is to identify the three questions of other minds, not to evaluate the answers that have been given or that one might give to them.

Having iterated the two recognized problems of other minds, I am now in a position to argue that in addition to *E* and *C*, there is a third problem of other minds. *P* concerns how one experiences another mind or how another mind appears as such. This question is empirical but not psychological. Science has amassed an impressive array of data on the ontogeny of our awareness of others and the sorts of neurological, affective, and cognitive abilities it involves. But this third problem of other minds is a question only amenable to philosophical methodology. Specifically, the phenomenological question is trained on bringing to experience a necessary or *a priori* structure of experience. It does not seek

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psychological facts or neurological structures. Nor does it concern what it is it like to perceive another, where the emphasis is on our subjective experience. Rather, *P* considers the objective availability of another in order that he or she might be experienced. How is the other available as other to me? As with *C*, it admits of two modalities.

> How is the other available as another perceptual point of view?
>
> How is the other available as another intellectual point of view?

It evaluates the evidence: is the other perceived or inferred? Most of the answers to *P* take it for granted that the other mind cannot be perceived, but this is not universally acknowledged. Philosophers as diverse as Augustine and Wittgenstein maintain that the other is in fact directly given to experience without a detour through inference. For example, Wittgenstein writes,

> In general I do not surmise fear in him – I see it. I do not feel that I am deducing the probable existence of something inside from something outside; rather it is as if the human face were in a way translucent and that I were seeing it not in reflected light but rather in its own.[4]

How the other is given, how the other appears, is a live question.

Granting that there is *P*, the question becomes whether it is reducible to either *E* or *C*. For several reasons, I think it is genuinely its own independent problem.

First, *P* is logically distinct. It introduces the issue of availability rather than success or intelligibility. One may answer *P* without having an answer to *E* or *C*. For example, let's say the phenomenological analysis shows that the other is available to perception through animate

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movement which reveals another embodied agent of perception. That answer alone is not enough to generate a criterion for answering *E*; it might be that I can give no justification intrinsic to the experience for distinguishing genuine appearance from illusion. The answer alone is not enough to explain the intelligibility of another mind; it might be that I do not as yet know how another is intelligible as another even though I can give an account of how the other appears to me in his or her otherness.

Second, *P* is logically prior to *E*: One could work out how we have access to other minds without being able to guarantee success in a given case. It may appear just like another mind but in fact be a mindless robot. *P* wants to give an account of the how of availability; it leaves open whether there might not be other things available in precisely the same way. There are no grounds for criticizing an answer to *P* as falling short of an answer to *E*, because they are different questions. However, one could criticize an answer to *E* as phenomenologically inadequate. That is, suppose, as Wittgenstein maintains, the traditional approach to *E* is mistaken about the evidence. The other is not inferred from behaviour but directly perceived. This will give grounds for criticizing the answer to *E* in terms of analogical inference.

Third, *P*, while logically distinct from *C*, nonetheless aids it. To see why, consider Avramides's answer to *C*. To move from our mind to another's, she says we employ a concept of mind so abstract as to have no reference to point of view whatsoever. On this account, there is no need to transition from one point of view to another point of view, because, in deriving the concept of mind from our own, we leave aside its point of view. Hence, we can apply it without difficulty to another person.[5] I think this solution is artificial and mistaken. While it is true that in our everyday encounters we unproblematically make sense of others, I think we make sense of them as points of view on the world. The concept of another mind is tied ineluctably to a point of view. To leave point of view out is to leave out precisely what needs to be explained. Working

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out *P* shows another way to handle *C*. We are aware of others through the mirroring of animate movement. If that is how we are aware of others, we can see that another's point of view is essentially embodied and so is ours. If that is so, the phenomenological analysis can provide the means for making sense of the introduction of another point of view. We do not perceive some bodily thing which we have to puzzle over how to introduce a point of view into it, as it were. We perceive a fellow agent of perception evidently engaging his or her surroundings just as he or she perceives us engaging our surroundings thanks to our bodily movement. The phenomenological clarification does not quite answer *C*; it just sets the stage for its elucidation.

In short, *P* is an independent problem because it is logically distinct from *E* and *C* while nonetheless furnishing resources essential for answering them.

2. Motivational Considerations

Why should the three problems of other minds arise as problems in the first place? Ordinarily, it does not occur to anyone to wonder how one might know that someone else is not a zombie, nor does it occur to anyone to wonder about the interplay of the first- and second-person perspective, nor does it occur to anyone to wonder about how other minds are available to us in experience. Instead, we encounter people, make sense of their thoughts, and assess their intentions, without philosophizing about this at all. Why ask these questions? Here I identify the three distinct motives for regarding the problems of other minds as problems. Tracking the different sorts of motivations that inform the three problems allows us to see, in a manner that complements the dialectical considerations of the previous section, that philosophical questions of justification, of intelligibility, and even of the how of experience, are distinct.

Before I begin identifying motivation, I would like to introduce a general principle that is at work in this domain. When

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it comes to other people, the interplay of presence and absence is generally something that is charged with interest. For example, we don't want friends to be absent; we want them to be present. It is precisely this interest in personal presence that can motivate philosophical reflection. I will now work my way through the experiential basis of the three problems to show how different forms of unwanted absence or wanted presence are at work in each.

The everyday motive for *C* is solitude or communion, unwanted absence or wanted presence. The philosophical posing of the question is rooted in a certain perspicuity regarding one's own point of view. An experience of solitude can bring such an awareness about. Also, some kind of failure to communicate or understand another may occasion it. For example, when travelling in a foreign land that has an unknown language and unknown customs, one can feel isolated and one's own self then rises to prominence. But it can also happen in an everyday conversation with people whose language and customs match our own. We might find ourselves unable to express everything we feel, or explain everything we think, or we might find someone unable to do the same for us. In such circumstances, the difference between our points of view comes to the fore. Such unwanted absences can provoke reflection, but wanted presence can be equally thought-provoking. Consider the experience of looking into the eyes of a loved one, such as one's child or one's spouse. In such looking, we do not check to see whether the other person is paying attention to what we are saying; indeed, we may not even be speaking. Instead, we look to lose ourselves in the gaze of the other, the very life of the other. When we do that we cannot help but be struck with wonder at the mysterious and wonderful presence of the other as other to us. All the posturing of social interactions falls away and we confront the raw, naked presence of another person: here is another person like me. This wanted presence urges us to reflect on the other person as well as on other people as such. The experience of either loneliness or communion affords

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the opportunity to think about the otherness of others, and it is this otherness that forms the basis for posing *C*. Such an origin shows that the problem is not one of generalization. Rather it is a generalization of a problem that is not itself a problem of generalization, namely how can one's own understood point of view open upon the point of view of another? The posing of the question directly arises from the experience of wanting others to be present or being delighted in the presence of another person looking with love upon us.

The everyday motive for *P* is similar to that of *C*. In moments when we feel alienated from others and when we feel intimate with others we might wonder about how these others appear in their absence or their presence. But the experiential basis is wider than *C*. We pay attention to how others appear to us and we pay attention to how we appear to others. Each of us monitors the reactions of others to what we do and say. The parent looks to see whether the newborn appears content or distressed and the newborn looks to see such looks of interest. And actors and artists train their attention on the appearance of people for the sake of imitation or replication.

To arrive at *P* proper, the everyday experience of appearing people has to be transformed into wonder at the appearance of people. We have to shift from *what* appears to *how* it appears. The experience of how is resident right there in the first experience, but it comes into its own in those experiences of unwanted absence or wanted presence. For in the presence of the loved one we marvel not only at him or her in his or her particularity but also at his or her presence, and it is precisely this presence that comes in for consideration in *P*: What exactly is personal presence? How are people present to us? How do they come to be experienced? For example, we especially meet another in his or her gaze, in seeing his or her response to things, and in his or her touch. Consider, too, the rich experience of embracing a loved one: we feel ourselves feeling the other while we feel ourselves being felt by the

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other. The way in which we experience other people is puzzlingly different from other sorts of experiences.

The everyday motive for *E* is the familiar experience of being baffled by someone's behaviour. We wonder, 'Why did he do that?' If it is someone we thought we knew but he or she does something that is just unthinkable, we can be jarred into a kind of vertigo in which we do not know whom we can trust or whom we really know. Consider the betrayal felt by estranged lovers. They had felt they could totally trust each other; they had felt that their souls were transparently available to each; but now they stand dumbstruck before the enigma of the other person: who is this person really? The kind of puzzlement at work as the precursor to *E* does not of course have to be charged with such drama, but the more we care the more likely it is that we will think about it. In a routine social situation, especially when we are around people we don't know well, we might puzzle about something someone did or said, wondering what the person was thinking, what he or she meant by the action or speech. We want to understand each other; we want to trust each other. When we do experience another we are as it were let inside. We become intimates, knowing the person in a deep and personal way. Confronted with a negative experience of puzzlement and betrayal or a positive experience of understanding and intimacy, we wonder and reflect. Now, the more likely candidates for reflection will be the particular person involved, but it is possible to regard the person as an instance of a universal, and when we move in that direction we tend towards *E*: How do we know others? Who are other people really? Do we really know why people do what they do? But this line of questioning still falls short of *E* proper. We continue to assume that the puzzling behaviour is the behaviour of a real person and that there are real people. What experience forms the basis of the sceptical problem of other minds?

In *E*, we seek a criterion for determining whether or not an apparent person is a real person. And we ask only because it is possible for something to appear other than it is and for us

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to be fooled into thinking that what is not really is. Why might we be motivated to think that the people about us are not what they seem to be? Well, what appears to move purposively while not being capable of purpose? A machine. We can be fooled by the merely apparent purposiveness of robots. This need not mean, of course, that we are tricked into thinking that our robot vacuum cleaner and motorized toy are really conscious, striving beings; rather we see and feel that they are conscious even though we know they are not. Precisely this conflict between what seems and what is introduces the remote grounds for *E*. Now to get to *E* proper we have to have some reason for calling into question not this or that motive of a person or the character of a person but the very being of a person. The analogy with machines provides a background experience, but some further consideration is necessary.

When, in the *Second Meditation*, Descartes glances out of his window and wonders whether the hats and coats he sees conceal machines instead of real people he acts on something more than the experience of machines. Specifically, Descartes thinks he has good theoretical reason for thinking that people are hidden inside the machines that are their bodies. What the body is, for him, is simply an elaborate mechanism; a living body is no different from a corpse. Under the spell of such considerations, one wonders whether one's own neighbour might not be a machine. Given that I am a minded machine, can justification be given for thinking that other people aren't just mindless machines? I have noted above that *E* seems somewhat artificial, and what I mean is that it has no direct relation to everyday experience of betrayal or even being fooled by a machine. It rests on the artifice of theory, although it does have remote grounds in the sort of experiences I have iterated.

The three problems of other minds arise from everyday experience. *C* comes from the generalization of experiences of other minds at work in solitude and communion. *P* comes from generalization of the presence and absence of other minds at work in such things as solitude, communion, as well

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as more pedestrian encounters. *E* comes from the generalization of experiences of others such as betrayal and theoretical considerations concerning the being of machines. Insofar as understanding, perceiving, and knowing are distinct aspects of experience, the three problems are clearly distinct from each other.

Conclusion

There is a growing consensus that *C* deserves a prominent place alongside *E*. Building on this movement, I have advocated an even more generous treatment of other minds that will encompass yet a third problem, *P*. For dialectical and experiential reasons, I think there are three distinct problems:

(1) The epistemological problem: How can I know that this person is not a zombie?
(2) The conceptual problem: How can I make sense of the possibility of another mind?
(3) The phenomenological problem: How do I come to experience another mind?

I have not sought to defend any of the traditional answers to these questions. Perhaps all the answers typically given are inadequate. Within the horizon of this article, my interest lies solely with the questions. For it is only by posing them that the answers can be evaluated, and the questions can be posed only if they are understood in their distinction and interconnection.

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Notes

[1] Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 19. See Anita Avramides, *Other Minds* (London: Routledge, 2001), 217ff. On the conceptual problem, also see Colin McGinn, 'What is the Problem of Other Minds?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary vol. 58 (1984): 119–37.

[2] Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1948), 202 and 504.

[3] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 19–20.

[4] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. II, ed. G. H. Von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), §170.

[5] Avramides, *Other Minds*, 253.

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