

24.500 Topics in Philosophy of Mind

Other Minds

Spring 2003/handout 1

PASS symposium on Other Minds

Wisdom

The comparison with boiling is rather confusing[ed], but the thrust of the first few pages seems to be that we don't "know the thoughts and feelings of others by analogy" (125). (Re the boiling kettle, cf. PI, §297.)

And an analogy for the argument from analogy is this: arguing "from the lights behind the blinds and the clatter of the cups that the people opposite [i.e. in a house across the street] are having tea" (124).

Wisdom briefly makes the point that if "one had never stepped outside one's own front door" this argument would be unpersuasive. But the main problem is supposed to be that, unlike the tea example, in the other minds case "we do not know what it would be like for this condition to be fulfilled, what it would be like to observe the state of the soul which inhabits another body". (Notice that these two ways of putting what we do not know are not equivalent.)

If the "argument from analogy" for other minds differs from the "inference to the best explanation" in that the former, but not the latter, appeals to "one's own case", then Wisdom's objection is directed at both sorts of argument.

However, this objection seems mistaken (see the Hyslop and Jackson discussion of "principle (P)").

After some confusing[ed] comparisons with thistledown, etc, we have the following "result...reached on p.126" (141), namely that 'We cannot know the mind of another' admits of two readings. On one reading it states a (contingent) fact, namely that we aren't telepaths; on the other it is a "tautology". An analogous sentence is said to be 'We can't look into the future'. On one reading it states a fact, namely that there are no crystal balls; on another, it is a "tautology", something like 'Whatever we see exists at the time we are seeing it'. (I daresay this is false, and hence far from a tautology, but you get the idea.) Similarly, the "tautology" in the mental case (taking pain as an example) is

supposed to be something like: ‘I can only feel/know *my* pain’. (Cf. *The Blue Book*, 49, on the “metaphysical proposition ‘I can’t feel his pain’”, and the “experiential proposition, ‘We can’t have (haven’t as a rule) pains in another person’s tooth’”). (It is unclear whether Wisdom thinks that a similar point can be made for states like belief. On the face of it, the cases are different. Since the idea of a “token belief” is quite dubious, there isn’t any clear sense in which I can’t have *your* belief, and so no good candidate for a “tautology”.)

The “tautology” is supposed to “reveal something about the world” (138-9, presumably echoing the *Tractatus*).

The final section asks the question (touched on before): “How *can* two people attach the same meaning to a statement, when the one can check it in a way in which it is impossible for the other to do so?” (Note that this question is only especially pressing for verificationists.) Ayer, at any rate, finds it hard to divine Wisdom’s verdict on the matter (192).

Ayer

The main problem, as Ayer sees it, is that although

we can have good reason to believe in the occurrence of events which we are not actually observing, if it can be established that in suitable circumstances we should be able to observe them...

...the situation is very different when the events in question are not even in principle accessible to our observation: and this, it will be said, is true *ex hypothesi* of the events that go on in other people’s minds (190)

As he put it in *LTL*:

no argument can render probable a completely unverifiable hypothesis. I can legitimately use an argument from analogy to establish the probable existence of an object which has never in fact manifested itself in my experience, provided that the object is such that it could conceivably be manifested in my experience.

And the difficulty is that the experiences of others are not objects of this kind.

In LTL, Ayer proposed a behaviorist account of third person mental ascriptions, while maintaining account of first person ascriptions as reporting the existence of private sensations (and hence was apparently committed to denying that A and B “attach the same meaning” to the statement ‘I am in pain/believe that p/am angry’, as uttered by A). As Ayer later came to realize (Reply, 599), this position is incoherent.

In *Other Minds*, Ayer tries to deal with the difficulty that I can’t observe “another man’s thoughts” by claiming that in principle I could: others’ experiences are merely “practically impenetrable”, not “theoretically impenetrable”.

Aust[i]n

1. Knowledge and assertion

Austin seems to think (149) knowledge is not a “constitutive aim” of assertion: it is permissible to assert p even though one does not know p (for a contrary view, see Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*, ch. 11).

2. How do you know p?(151)

(a) I am in such-and-such a position to know p (so-and-so training, so-and-so sources, etc.)

(b) I have such-and-such evidence for p.

Failure to note type-(a) replies can encourage the thought that our evidence for perceptual beliefs is psychological. “How do you know that it’s magenta?” “It looks magenta.” The reply might state how I am in a position to know, rather than stating my evidence.

3. Testimony

Testimony is one important source of knowledge, and Austin has a (currently) fashionable view of it: “It is fundamental in talking (as in other matters) that we are entitled to trust others, except [in] so far as there is some concrete reason to distrust them” (154). And: “believing in other persons, in authority and in testimony, is an essential part of the act of communication... We can state certain advantages of such performances... But there is no “justification” for our doing them as such” (186-7).

Cf. Burge on “entitlement”:

I take the notion of epistemic warrant to be broader than the ordinary notion of justification. An individual's epistemic warrant may consist in a justification that the individual has for a belief or other epistemic act or state. But it may also be an *entitlement* that consists in a status of operating in an appropriate way in accord with the norms of reason, even when these norms cannot be articulated by the individual who has that status. We have an entitlement to certain perceptual beliefs or to certain logical inferences even though we lack reasons or justification for them. ("Our Entitlement to Self-Knowledge", PAS 1996)

Cf. the "internalism/externalism" debate(s) in epistemology (see, e.g., Kornblith, ed., *Epistemology: Internalism and Externalism*). On testimony, see in particular Coady, *Testimony*.

4. Ordinary reason-giving and objecting

"It's a goldfinch." "How do you know?" "By its red head."

Objections (without "disputing my facts") (155):

- (1) Goldfinches don't have red heads
 - (1a) That's not a goldfinch (by your own description)
 - (2) Plenty of other birds have red heads

Re (2):

- (a) The objector must have in mind "some more or less definite lack".
- (b) Enough is enough: the bare possibility of a *stuffed* goldfinch isn't relevant (a stuffed goldfinch isn't a goldfinch, although a stuffed sofa is a sofa). (Cf. "relevant alternatives" theories, and Dretske's painted mule in "Epistemic Operators".)
- (c) One's perceptual evidence need not be "describable in words".
- ((d) may be ignored.)

Further challenges: (1) to one's "credentials" and (2) to the alleged "facts".

(1), the challenge to "credentials", seems to involve various "skeptical hypotheses"—stuffed goldfinches, funny lighting, ornithologically vivid dreams, etc.

- a. “These doubts are all to be allayed by means of recognised procedures (more or less roughly recognised, of course).”
- b. “There are recognised ways of distinguishing between dreaming and waking (how otherwise should we know how to use and to contrast the words?)” (Cf. the “paradigm case argument”, and Stroud, 74.)
- c. The doubt or question “*must* have” a “special basis”.
(Austin’s peeve about ‘real’ is developed in S&S, VII.)

(2) takes us off on something of a digression, the main claim of which is that there are no statements (e.g. “I’m in pain”, “Here is something that looks red to me now”) such that “when they are correct and made by X, then X knows that they are correct”.

5. *Against luminosity (the “original sin”)*

The claim is that (trivial exceptions aside), there are no conditions (e.g. the condition of seeming to see something red) that are *luminous*, in Williamson’s sense: conditions C such that when S is in C, S is in a position to know that he is in C.

In support of this, Austin gives some examples (not knowing whether it looks magenta to me, not knowing whether it tastes like Lapsang to me, etc.), and a rather compressed argument:

Any description of a taste or sound or smell (or colour) or of a feeling, involves (is) saying that it is like one or some that we have experienced before: any descriptive word is classificatory, involves recognition and in that sense memory, and only when we use such words (or names or descriptions, which come down to the same) are we knowing anything, or believing anything. But memory and recognition are often uncertain and unreliable. (163)

Note that the issue is not whether, when I’m in C, I’m always right about whether I’m in C—rather, it’s about whether I am in a position to *know* that I’m in C.

What is the relevance of Austin’s remark that “memory and recognition are often uncertain and unreliable”? His point seems to be that there are *some* circumstances in which I seem to see something magenta (e.g.), but that my belief that I do is unreliable, in which case I don’t know. Hence the luminosity principle is false.

This is not too far distant from Williamson's argument. Suppose (i) I seem to see something magenta, and thereby know that I seem to see something magenta. Consider a situation (ii) in which I am almost as confident as I am in (i) that I seem to see something magenta (although something slightly more bluish than in (i)). (ii) must be a situation in which I really do seem to see something magenta, otherwise my belief in (i) would be too unreliable to count as knowledge. Since in (ii) I seem to see something magenta, by luminosity I can know in (ii) that I seem to see something magenta. Consider now another situation (iii) in which I am almost as confident as I am in (ii) that I seem to see something magenta (although something slightly more bluish than in (ii)). By the same argument, I seem to see something magenta in (iii). After repeating these steps, we eventually reach the contradiction that seeming to see something sky blue (and so not magenta) is seeming to see something magenta. Hence the luminosity principle Austin takes from Wisdom is false. (See Williamson, ch. 4.)

"I am feeling pain" and "I know what I am feeling": I know that I am feeling pain (not the direct object locution: I know S, where S is a particular sensation of pain). There isn't "something which I am *both knowing and feeling*" (168).

6. *The "descriptive fallacy"*

"When I say 'I know[that S is P]', I *give others my word: I give others my authority for saying that 'S is P'*" (171). Austin suggests that there is a further comparison with explicit performatives ("I promise/name/bet/...") in that utterances of 'I know p' do not "describe" or 'report' or 'constate' anything...[they aren't] 'true' or 'false'" (from *How to do Things with Words*—the quote concerns explicit performatives, not 'I know').

To think that 'I know p' does "describe" is to fall prey to the "descriptive fallacy" (which isn't much of a fallacy; cf. Searle's "speech act fallacy" in *Speech Acts*.)

7. *Symptoms and signs*

"Surely we do not consider that we are never aware of more than symptoms of anger in another man?" (179) This doesn't seem to be so much a remark about "ordinary usage" as the more interesting claim that (sometimes) one's belief that Fred is angry is not based on (distinct) evidence. (Cf. Austin on the pig, in S&S.)

8. *A concession*

“there is a further and quite *special* difficulty in the latter case [knowing that another man is angry]” (182). (2) and (3) on 183 are similar to “inverted qualia” and “absent qualia”. These special difficulties arise because of the possibilities of deception, misunderstanding, and involuntariness (which don’t arise in other sorts of cases, for instance knowing that it’s a goldfinch). However, “There is no suggestion that I *never* know what other people’s emotions are...”. A further difficulty: “A unique place is reserved for [the man’s own statement] in the summary of the facts of the case. The question then is: ‘Why believe him?’” (185). Humeanism about testimony is rejected (186), and our entitlement to others’ testimony is reaffirmed. We are also entitled to our belief that there are other minds.