

Revisiting the Problem of Other Minds

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ABSTRACT

The Problem of Other Minds remains as a puzzling issue in the philosophy of mind. One well-known proposed solution to the Problem of Other Minds is called the Analogical Inference, but this solution fails to achieve its goal of probabilistically entailing that one can know that other people have minds. I propose a new solution called the Revised Analogical Inference that builds on the original Analogical Inference by introducing propositions about the nature of physicalism and basic human biology that, once posited, do manage to probabilistically entail that one can know that other people have minds.

KEYWORDS

Other Minds, Physicalism, Analogical Inference, Human Biology, Probabilistic Arguments

You are conscious. You have a mind. You have thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, all of which are accessible to you by introspection. These thoughts, feelings, and beliefs all cause you to act in ways that are much like the behaviors of other people.¹ Like other people, you are prone to eat at certain times of the day; like other people, you look both ways before crossing the street (I hope). You know that you eat at certain times of the day because you believe doing so will alleviate your hunger, and you know that you look both ways before crossing the street because you believe doing so will help you avoid injury. Since other people's behaviors match yours in these ways, it's intuitive to think they have minds, too, which cause those behaviors. People constantly talk of their feelings and beliefs, so after years of social interaction, it's easy to form and hold onto this intuition.

But should you?

The only direct, introspective knowledge you possess for the existence of any mind is your own. People might behave as though they have minds like you (even going so far as to explicitly assert that they have minds), but who's to say if they really do? It's entirely possible that every other human you encounter is not even conscious at all. Their brains might instead work like computers, processing inputs through the senses and, through a complex procedure, producing appropriate outputs in the form of behaviors, as opposed to relying on some conscious process to produce their behaviors like the one you rely on. Without the sort of direct access to their thoughts like the kind you have to your own, it's impossible to tell one way or the other.

This puzzle has come to be known as the Problem of Other Minds, a classic problem in the philosophy of mind. A multitude of potential solutions have been proposed to explain how it is we can know that other humans have minds, but none seem to enjoy majority support because they fail to adequately rebuff some important objection posed against them.

Here, I shall endeavor to propose a new solution to the Problem of Other Minds. This new solution will be based on a previously-given solution called the

1. This sort of intuitive view about the characteristics of the human mind is not without its share of objections, most prominent of which is Eliminative Materialism. Eliminative Materialism is the view that we are simply mistaken when we assert that we have mental states or are even conscious (Ramsey). However, the issue being discussed here, Problem of Other Minds, is a puzzle specifically for common-sense views about the mind, which is why I assume such a view at the outset. The question of whether a common-sense account is a more or less attractive philosophical account than a view like Eliminative Materialism is a matter to be decided elsewhere.

Analogical Inference. My solution, however, will differ in that it will be tailored to resist the objection against the Analogical Inference. Before I explain the solution, however, it will be appropriate to explain the Analogical Inference itself and the typical objection given against it.

1. THE ANALOGICAL INFERENCE AND ITS OBJECTION

The argument starts with the premises that you share many similarities with other humans. Not only do you behave like other humans, you are very similar to them biologically, as well. That is to say, not only do you react in similar ways as other humans do in similar situations (examples of which include the street-crossing case from earlier), but you also have the same bodily structures in the same configurations performing the same functions as other humans (for example, you have a liver that does the same thing in your body as what it does in other humans' bodies).

Given this multitude of similarities you share with other humans, the argument makes the inference that the feature of having a mind is a characteristic you must also share with other humans (Mill 1889, 243–44). This argument is convincing because it closely follows our own implicit, day-to-day reasoning process about why we think other humans have minds. Surely it can't be, we think, that other humans, who are so much like me in a number of fundamental ways, don't possess the fundamental quality of having a mind like I do?

The trouble with this line of reasoning is that there are an equally large number of characteristics that you do not share with other humans. No one is physically identical to you (arguably barring an identical twin), no one has the same personality as you, no one has behaved in the same ways as you or at the same times as you have, and so on. Given this, it's not clear why possession of a mind ought to be classified as a characteristic shared by everyone as opposed to a characteristic unique to you, as the probability that the possession of a mind is a member of either one of these categories looks to be about equal. The reason that the probabilities look to be the same here is that the Analogical Inference bases its conclusion that the possession of a mind is a characteristic shared by everyone on the basis of the confirmed case of only one person, you (Malcolm 1962, 152). Since you can only directly know that you yourself have a mind, it doesn't make sense to extrapolate and say that the possession of a mind is a

feature shared by everyone because you have just as much reason to conclude that the possession of a mind is a feature unique to you.

2. THE REVISED ANALOGICAL INFERENCE

If we wish to revise the Analogical Inference to account for this objection, it will need to be able to provide an explanation as to why it is at least more probable that the possession of a mind must be a feature shared by everybody.

My revision of the Inference will attempt to provide just such an explanation.

For the sake of the argument, I will need to assume the truth of a physicalist account of the universe, which is to say that I will need to assume that everything in the universe is in some way physical, including minds (Stoljar). Whether or not this physicalist account is actually true will have to be set aside and re-examined after the rest of the argument is clearly established.

I start with the knowledge that I have a mind. I also know that my mind is the direct cause of my conscious behavior. By this, I mean that my mind is the cause of those behaviors that require the formation of beliefs, such as the ones mentioned earlier (eating when hungry, crossing the street, etc.) In addition to this, I can observe that other humans engage in behavior of this sort, too (although I cannot yet know whether such behavior stems from their actually having beliefs or not.) These assumptions so far look relatively uncontroversial.

However, granting physicalism allows me to make other assumptions that otherwise would be very controversial. I can now accept that the cause of every human's behavior must be physical and biological in nature, since in general all possible causes are physical, and whatever the physical cause is in this case looks like it has something to do with the biology of the human body. I can also assume that my mind is physical and biological in nature, too, for similar reasons. The addition of these two assumptions, however, will not be enough to prove that other humans have minds. I know now that everyone has some physical, biological cause for their having behavior, but whatever this cause is can vary from human to human. Sure, for me that cause is having a mind, but for other humans it could very well be some other, non-conscious physical and biological structure. More premises will be required to come to know that I'm not the only human with a mind.

The first of these premises is that there exist physical, biological structures that produce a collection of physical, external symptoms of their continued

function. Furthermore, the recognition of the presence of these symptoms can be used to identify the presence of the physical, biological structures they are caused by. The lungs, for instance, can be classified as a physical, biological structure that produces the rise and fall of the chest in a person. Such chest movement may be considered to be an external symptom of the continued function of the lungs, since observing the rise and fall of a person's chest actually can be used to successfully identify the presence and continuing function of that person's lungs.

This assumption is true so long as it is also considered true that all instances of a particular type of physical and biological structure produce the same external symptoms of their continued function. Every pair of lungs will produce the rise-and-fall action as an external symptom, every heart will produce a measurable pulse as an external symptom, and so on. There's no physical and biological structure that produces some unique external symptom of its continued function that is never observable for any other person who has the same particular kind of physical and biological structure. Otherwise, the assumption concerning the identifiability of a physical and biological structure by its corresponding external symptom simply wouldn't be true. It wouldn't be possible to recognize the presence of a physical and biological structure by the presence of some external symptom because there would be no general matching system to inferentially take us from external symptom to physical and biological structure in every case. However, it looks like we actually can inferentially move from the presence of an external symptom to the presence of a corresponding physical and biological structure, like in the chest movement to lung inferential case I described earlier. For this reason, it looks like the assumption that every instance of a type of physical and biological structure produces the same external symptoms must be in fact true.

The premise required next is a little more contentious. If a particular instance of a type of external biological phenomenon is considered to be a physical symptom for some particular physical and biological structure, every instance of that type of external biological phenomenon must then be considered a physical symptom for *some or other* physical and biological structure. What this means is that if some external physical phenomenon is considered to be a physical symptom in one case, that type of phenomenon, *in general*, must always be considered a physical symptom in every case; it's not possible for something to be considered a physical symptom for one person but not a physical symptom for another person. Motivating this premise is a modest kind of appeal to the biological similarities

between humans. On its own, the supposition that humans are very biologically similar to each other and to myself seems too weak as justification for the claim that other minds exist, as previously mentioned. However, this sort of supposition does not seem too weak to motivate the claim that if something is a physical symptom for one human, like me, then it must also be a physical symptom of *some kind* for other humans, too. The fact that something is a physical symptom in general doesn't seem like it ought to change from person to person, given that we all possess a biological system of at least a roughly similar kind.

Note that the inclusion of these new premises to the argument will still not be enough to justify the claim that I can know the existence of other minds using the knowledge that I have a mind. In order for that to follow, one more premise will need to be introduced.

That premise is this: each instance of a type of physical symptom is caused by an instance of the same type of physical and biological structure for every case. That is, every physical symptom has only one possible causing physical and biological structure. For every human, the rise and fall of the chest will always correspond only to the continued function of the lungs; for every human, measureable pulse will always correspond only to the continued function of the heart; and so on. Paradigmatic examples such as these intuitively motivate the claim (but more on this later). If true, this premise, along with all the others described, will be enough to successfully infer that other humans have minds from the knowledge that I have a mind.

The way this is done is by asserting that my mind causes an external symptom of its continued function, my behavior. From this, I can successfully infer that behavior in general for other humans is an external symptom of some sort. For other humans, there must be some corresponding physical and biological structure that causes their behavior. However, I also know that every physical symptom of the same specific type has only one possible corresponding causing physical, biological structure. Since for me that causing physical and biological structure is my mind, it must be the case that everyone else has their behavior caused by their having minds, too.

Thus, from knowledge that I have a mind, I can infer that other humans have minds.

3. OBJECTIONS TO THE REVISED ANALOGICAL INFERENCE

My original intent in formulating the Revised Analogical Inference was to have it be able to avoid the objection given against the original Analogical Inference. It thus seems natural to begin the evaluation of the argument by seeing whether it actually manages to avoid the objection.

The revised version of the Analogical Inference does manage to avoid the objection posed against the original Analogical Inference by making the general inference that all humans have minds based on the confirmed existence of only my own mind a rationally justifiable one. The original Analogical Inference does not provide any reason to suppose that the possession of a mind is a feature shared by everyone aside from the observation that I share a lot of similarities with other humans, which isn't enough to validate the conclusion because I also share as many dissimilarities with other humans. My revised version of the Analogical Inference provides additional reasons to infer that other humans have minds. These reasons, which take the form of the argument just elaborated upon, make the inference from only my own case to the case of everyone else justified, which cannot be said of the original Analogical Inference.

So far, so good. But being able to resist the objection given against the original Analogical Inference does not preclude the Revised Analogical Inference from suffering from a unique objection of its own. So, does the formulation of the argument make it vulnerable to such an objection?

In fact, it looks like it does. According to this objection, the last premise of the given argument doesn't appear to be justified, or for that matter even true. That is, it doesn't appear to be true that each instance of a type of physical symptom is caused by an instance of the same type of physical and biological structure for every case. As an example, the objection could provide the case of someone with an artificial heart which causes a pulse of exactly the same kind as a heart made of flesh would. It now seems that a detectable pulse can be caused by either the function of an organic heart or the function of a synthetic heart, which goes against the premise as stated. In fact, there seem to be numerous such cases that can be invented for a variety of different physical symptoms. In each case, some other candidate can be conceived which looks just as eligible to be the physical cause of the external symptom as whatever biological structure we typically think of as being the cause. That person's chest isn't rising and falling because their lungs are working, it's because they've got an air pump in there that replicates

the motion of the lungs in exactly the right way! And so forth. This makes the premise stating that each external symptom has only one possible cause simply false. Without this premise, the argument collapses because it becomes possible for other people to have some non-conscious cause for their behaviors, unlike me.

However, I posit that this objection does not actually get rid of the needed premise as intended. This is because this objection only rebuts the premise if the premise is intended to be necessarily true in all cases. It does not rebut the premise if it is only probabilistically true, which is exactly what I posit it to be.

There certainly are cases in which there are multiple candidates for the possible physical cause of an external symptom. However, such cases do not actually occur frequently in real life, because most of the time different physical causes result in noticeably different symptoms. A person might spasm in such a way as to make their chest rise and fall, but this rise and fall is far more erratic than if it was caused by the function of that person's lungs. Furthermore, cases in which there isn't any noticeable difference between two symptoms with different physical causes look relatively rare. The use of heart transplants are a good deal more common than the use of artificial hearts, and whatever other cases that can be conceived look far more bizarre and uncommon than that. How often does one expect to find someone's smooth chest motion to be caused by an internal air pump instead of an actual pair of lungs? For these reasons, we can expect the premise that external symptoms only have one possible physical and biological cause to be true most of the time.

This renders the argument to be probabilistically true in nature as opposed to necessarily true. In our usual day-to-day interactions, we are justified in believing that other people have minds, even though it is still (technically) logically possible for other people to not have minds. This conclusion certainly looks a little weaker than we might like, but I think it's the best we can muster right now.

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