

Is our ordinary way of knowing about the minds of others plausible a kind of perceptual knowledge? If not, what is the best way to characterize this way of knowing?

Solipsism is the philosophical notion that we can only be sure that our own mind exists. The problem of other minds is an argument for solipsism, and argues that while we can see how a person feels, what they are thinking (atleast we can guess), we cannot see the thoughts and feelings themselves. Therefore we cannot be certain that these genuine thoughts or consciousness exists in other minds, such that everyone else could be a zombie that behaves as if they had a mind. The reason that philosophers seem to believe that knowledge of minds seems to pose particularly difficult problem is that we can't see other minds, that is they are unobservable. We can only know of our own minds and we can only observe the results or consequences of what we assume to be other minds.

Dretske doesn't believe that the problem of other minds has any sort of special epistemological significance different from our knowledge of ordinary objects around us. This is because our way of knowing that other people have minds is the same as our way of knowing that objects are around us exist, indirectly by our senses. However despite Dretske's attempts to convince us that knowledge of other minds has no special status, we seem to be able to interact and engage with objects in a physical state more convincingly than we are able to interact with the mind of another person. However perhaps we have been thinking of minds entirely wrongly in the problem of other minds. Do minds have states or are they simply sequences of events? If they don't have states but are rather just consisting of instantaneous events (caused by physical states/events) then perhaps that is why they seem less accessible and tractable than real objects. However there doesn't seem to be a problem with the knowledge that events in the real world are genuine. But this isn't really addressing the problem at hand, the question of whether we can know with the same certainty that other people have minds and that other people exist. Dretske offers a second suggestion as to why the problem of other minds is no greater than the problem of whether external objects exist. "Whether or not something can be seen is, logically speaking, quite unrelated to the ease with which we can visually detect and identify it". While this is true logically speaking,

David Furlong

practically speaking I don't think this justification is sufficient to eliminate the problem of other minds.

As such I would like to introduce a thought experiment with which I hope to show that the problem of other minds reduces to a problem of whether we can identify/detect physical objects, making it the same as the "brain in the vat" hypothesis. Consider in a future time when we are able to instantly clone a person entire physical composition. I think it is reasonable to take physicalism to be true over any other theory, and as such the mental is physical or not spatiotemporally related. Consider further that in this future time we have the ability to observe through some scan the exact physical state of an entire brain. Now we compare the brain of the person and his clone at the instant that the clone is created. We can observe via this machine the physical state of the brain just as we observe a lamp or any other proximal object in the external world. If two brains are physically identical then they are surely mentally identical (otherwise physicalism is false, or the mental is completely intractable). The conjunction of these claims implies that the person knows his clone is not a "zombie" and has a mind with the same way of knowing and certainty of knowing as this person knows that he has hands. This resolves the problem of other minds for people with identical brain states, but not for any other brains. But this thought experiment highlights the fact that the problem of other minds is an illusion. For now suppose we have very good, perhaps perfect knowledge of how the brain functions, as well as physics. Now this person can take a brain state and apply a complex function to get a mental state which must exist in this person for claiming otherwise would be to deny physicalism, or any kind of functional relationship between the physical state of the brain and the mental, neither of which most philosophers are prepared to deny. It should be clear now that the problem of other minds is only an issue in the same sense that I don't know for certain that this piece of skin is made of skin cells only because I don't have the right microscope to see them.

To investigate this "problem" any further would simply be lending merit to a philosophical view which sees the mental as non physical or non computable which is a view not supported strongly enough to justify considering this problem in that framework of reality.