MIND-READING | Michaelmas 2018 | Maarten Steenhagen (ms2416@cam.ac.uk)
http://msteenhagen.github.io/teaching/2018mre/

Session 1: **Sympathy, empathy, and the problem of other minds**

Norman Malcolm (1958), 'Knowledge of Other Minds', *The Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. 55, No. 23, pp. 969-978.

Our knowledge of other minds

We are remarkably good at:

1. predicting other people's behaviour in a wide range of circumstances
2. attributing mental states to others
3. explaining the behaviour of others in terms of their possessing mental states

It seems that we have a grasp of other people's minds, over and above our observational access to their bodies and overt patterns of behaviour. But how do we have access to other people's minds? Surely, the only immediate access to any mind we have is restricted to our *own* mind.

Philosophers have discussed this question under various headings: mind-reading, theory of mind, empathy, sympathy.

History of sympathy and empathy

Sympathy started out mainly as a concept in cosmology and medicine. But David Hume is the first to appropriate it in an exclusively psychological context. Hume recognised that we possess a remarkable capacity to be affected by other people's minds and register others's mental states.

> No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own. (*Treatise*, Book II.1.xi)

In the German tradition, the English term 'sympathy' (*sym*, with + *pathos*, feeling), used by Hume and Adam Smith, was translated as *Einfühlung*, which means 'feeling into'. The German term *Einfühlung* was subsequently translated in 1909 by Edward Titchener into English as 'empathy' (*em*, in + *pathos*, feeling).

Empathy started out mainly as a concept in aesthetics. Vernon Lee (pen name of Violet Paget) explains aesthetic perception in terms of empathy:

> *The mountain rises*. What do we mean when we employ this form of words? (…) All we mean is that the mountain *looks* as if it were rising. (…) The mountain *looks*! Surely here is a case of putting the cart before the horse. No; we cannot explain the mountain *rising* by the mountain *looking*, for the only *looking* in the business is *our* looking at the mountain. And if the Reader objects again that these are all *figures of speech*, I shall answer that *Empathy* is what explains why we employ figures of speech at all, and occasionally employ them, as in the case of this rising mountain, when we know perfectly well that the figure we have chosen expresses the exact reverse of the objective truth. (Lee 1913, 61)

Problems of other minds

Notice that there are two different issues here. The first one is a sceptical worry: how do we know others have minds at all? How are we justified in our attributions of mental states to others? (Consider Lee's mountain: we're prone to ascribe *rising* to it, but this cannot be literally true.) The second issue is a question of possibility: how is it possible for us to be so good at 1–3, given that we only have access to our own mental states?

The argument from analogy

J.S. Mill responds to the first problem as follows:

> I conclude that other human beings have feelings like me, because, first, they have bodies like me, which I know to be the antecedent condition of feelings; and because, secondly, they exhibit the acts and other outward signs, which in my own case I know by experience to be caused by feelings. I am conscious in myself of a series of facts connected by an uniform sequence, of which the beginning is modifications of my body, the middle is feelings, the end is outward demeanor. In the case of other human beings I have the evidence of my senses for the first and last links of the series, but not for the intermediate link. I find, however, that the sequence between the first and last is as regular and constant in those other cases as it is in mine. (Mill 1865, 208)

This is known as the Argument from Analogy. It is an inductive inference, based on the observation of (i) the patterns one has discovered in oneself and (ii) the patterns of overt behaviour of others.

1. Whenever I burn myself, this leads to pain, and this leads to my wincing
2. My being in pain explains my wincing
3. Whenever someone else burns themselves, this will lead to their wincing
4. Also their being in pain explains their wincing (analogical premise)
5. Therefore, sometimes other people are in pain

The argument from analogy is controversial. First, it is at best a piece of inference to the best explanation. Second, as a piece of inference to the best explanation, it necessarily has a sample size of 1. Third, it extrapolates from past experience into a domain that is unverifiable in principle.

Norman Malcolm criticises the argument on different grounds:

> the assumption from which Mill starts is that he has no criterion for determining whether another "walking and speaking figure" does or does not have thoughts and feelings. If he had a criterion he could apply it, establishing with certainty that this or that human figure does or does not have feelings (for the only plausible criterion would lie in behavior and circumstances that are open to view), and there would be no call to resort to tenuous analogical reasoning that yields at best a probability. If Mill has no criterion for the existence of feelings other than his own then in that sense he does not understand the sentence "That human figure has feelings" and therefore does not understand the sentence "It is probable that that human figure has feelings." (Malcolm 1958, 970)

So, fourth, the argument from analogy presupposes that we lack a public criterion for pain, and so makes attributing pain to others meaningless. And relatedly, fifth, because the argument presupposes that we lack a public criterion for pain, it assumes that being in pain is a private or subjective condition.

The descriptive problem of other minds

Just as Hume's problem of induction has two sides (normative and descriptive), the problem of other minds has these two sides. The sceptical problem is a normative one. The more recent debate about other minds follows up on the descriptive question: how do we form beliefs about other people's mental states?

We can distinguish reductionist approaches and non-reductionist approaches. Reductionists try to explain the process of mindreading in terms of capacities that are not fundamentally capacities for mind-reading. Theory theory and simulation theory seem to be reductionist in this sense (though there are caveats). Non-reductionists defend the idea that mind-reading is a *sui generis* capacity.