UNIT 12: PROBLEM OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF OTHER MINDS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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12.1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to

- define what is the epistemological problem of other minds
- analyse the different arguments offered by philosophers as solution to the problem
- discuss critically the feasibility of these arguments in overcoming the problem

12.2. INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall discuss the philosophical problem called the problem of other minds. It is one of the classical problems of contemporary epistemology. In ordinary understanding the existence of other minds is not an issue to ponder over. Living in a human society, we quite easily accept it as a universal fact while communicating with others. But, there is a section of philosophers, the sceptics, who question the certainty of such knowledge. They question the possibility of the knowledge which entails us to belief that other human beings do have inner lives similar to us.

The problem gets its root in the philosophical ideas of Descartes, who draws a line of difference between mind and body. Through the process of methodical doubt Descartes arrives at the cogito which is a private consciousness. Farther, he asserts that the essence of the psychological consciousness or mind is thought and it is different from the physical existence or body the essence of which is extension. To establish the interaction between these two substances he brings in the concept of God who serves as a bridge between the two. Descartes' theory implies that each individual has a mind and only he can have access to his own mental states. It is strictly denied of public access. In this backdrop solipsism develops and the sceptics express doubt about the existence of other minds and it arises as an epistemological problem.

The problem may be formulated through the following questions.

a) How do we know that other individuals have thought or feeling?
b) How are we justified in believing that other individuals have thoughts and feelings?
c) What is the basis for our belief that other individuals have mental lives that resemble our own?

It is exactly a problem of the justification of our belief that others also have minds like our own. The epistemological problem of other minds is primarily based on the basic difference between our access to our own mental states and the mental states of others. We are always certain about our own mental states like, I am in pain, or I am depressed or happy and so forth. We know our mental states directly. We experience them. But, the same direct knowledge of others' mental states is not possible. We can never know directly in whatever mental states others are. The problem is between the directly known and directly not-known. However, it does not indicate lack of knowledge. It only indicates absence of direct knowledge. Hence, the arguments offered in support of the knowledge of other minds take help of the possibility of indirect knowledge of the inner life of others.

Here, we may take note of another point that in the contemporary philosophical analysis we come across another problem quite close to the problem of other minds that is the problem of the other. It is otherwise known as the problem of intersubjectivity. Sometimes both the issues are discussed with somewhat similar argumentations merging the differences between them. But, these differences are not to be overlooked. While one may be interpreted as epistemological problem, dealing with our knowledge of the existence other minds, the other dimension is said to be ontological, dealing with the issue of intersubjectivity as the fundamental aspect of our relation to the other. The difference between the problem of other minds and the problem of intersubjectivity is so thin that it often gets merged in some discussions. However, the ontological aspect is dealt with by the phenomenologists in particular and we find deeper analysis of the epistemological issues prominently in the discussion of the analytical philosophers.

There are various theoretical solutions offered by the analytic philosophers to the problem of other minds. We shall discuss them with critical estimations in the following.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Which trend of philosophy focuses on offering solution to the problem of other minds?

Ans.: ……..……..

Q 2: Who is known for advocating solipsism and dualism?

Ans.: ……..……..

12.3. THE ARGUMENT FROM ANALOGY

The most prevalent and oldest argument on the problem of other minds is the argument from analogy. The issue of the justification of the

existence of other minds raised by the sceptics attracts the interest of the analytic philosophers who offer certain solution to the problem through a kind of inference on the basis of particular observations.

The argument claims that it is possible to have reasonable knowledge of other minds observing the similarity in behaviours of other individuals with that of mine in similar situations. The argument goes like this--I notice that the other's body is similar to me. Further, I see similarity between any of my experience and my expression of it. I also notice a similar expression in others and agree the existence of similar connection between their bodily behaviour and mental states related to that. Hence, from the observation of their publicly observable bodily behaviour I infer the existence their minds. For example, whenever I have a pain I cry or groan. Similarly, when someone else does the same I can infer that he is in pain.

The argument from analogy gets supported by different philosophers as an authentic solution to the problem of other minds. W. T. Stace holds that our justifiable belief in other minds depends only upon the argument from analogy from bodily behaviour. He claims that the argument is not a mere fiction or useless construction, but a logical justification for our belief in other minds. With different interpretations philosophers like H.H. Prince, Ledger Wood, Stuart Hampshire and A. J. Ayer supports the argument from analogy as a genuine solution to the problem of other minds.

However, Critics like Malcolm, point out that the argument being an inductive argument lacks strength in legitimately establishing the existence of the other minds as it proceeds from only one instance case, myself, as the basis for inference. This point is attempted to get nullified by A. J. Ayer with certain reformulation of the original argument. Ayer claims that we my take example of our more than one behaviour and their correlation with respective metal states. Observing our different behaviours correlated with different mental states, we find that mental states are causes of our bodily behaviours. Since it is evident in my case, we may legitimately infer that

other's behaviours are also caused by their inner mental states and establish that other minds do exist. But, such reformulation of the argument also fails to get approved since there is always a possibility that other's behaviour may not be caused by their mental states but by mere brain states, which is again a part of the body. Further, critics point out that it is not possible to legitimately infer the mental states of others on the basis of my own experiences as I cannot verify them to be true or false. I cannot verify the statement, "you are in pain". The emphasis is that the analogical argument is not sound as its conclusion is not capable of independent verification.

Max Scheler criticises the argument from analogy for underestimating the difficulties involved in self experience and overestimating the difficulties involved in experience of the other. Denying the need of any inference to get acquainted with the other he holds that while facing the other we do not confront a mere body or a mind but the other as a unified whole. However, though it does not provide a sufficient solution to the problem of other minds, the argument from analogy, at least, sustains the reason to believe in the existence of the Other and thus stands against the Cartesian isolated 'I'.

12.4. PHILOSOPHICAL BEHAVIOURISM

Against the indirect process of establishing the existence of other minds various arguments are offered by philosophers claiming its direct knowledge possible. These arguments appear as reply to or criticism of the argument from analogy. Philosophical behaviourism is such a reply. Gilbert Ryle is one of the exponents of this form of argument. Refuting the Cartesian dualism between mind and body Ryle holds that all psychological acts find expression in behaviour which is publicly verifiable. Hence, it is not necessary to make any inference regarding the inner mental states of other human beings. The knowledge of other minds no more remains a process from what is publicly observable to what cannot be publicly observed. Mental states are claimed to be fully understood in terms of behaviour. Though argument from analogy also proceeds from public

behaviour to private mental life, behaviourism differs from analogy on the point that in behaviourism there is no need to infer the mental states. The theory considers mental states and behaviours as logically equivalent.

But, critics find major drawbacks in this interpretation as well. They point out that there is no physical expression which can guarantee that I am in pain. The first person psychological statements cannot be fully apprehended through mere physical behaviour. Because, when I say that I am in acute pain I do not assert it on the basis of my behavioural observation. What I feel and the way I behave are not identical. So is the case with others. Hence, it is not logically possible to give behaviouristic solution to the problem of other minds.

12.5. WITTGENSTEIN'S LINGUISTIC ARGUMENT

Wittgenstein offers a solution to the problem through his linguistic interpretation. His argument is against the advocates of private language. These linguists hold that mental states are essentially private and hence, not accessible to others. They claim that only I can know that I am in pain. Others can only make a guess without being able to know it. Wittgenstein criticises this doctrine of epistemic privacy and argues that there is no private language. In Philosophical Investigations he argues that it is not possible to have a private language because language is developed always with others, living and communicating with others in an intersubjective society. It is not possible to develop language being absolutely cut off from other human beings. So, when my personal experiences are expressed in words it becomes public.

If it is claimed that the inner is hidden from us and can never be known, the same argument should have been operative in case of the future. But, astronomers do not guess but certainly know when there will be eclipse. Hence, such claims are not valid. He argues that there is similarity between first person sensation statements and natural expression of emotions and sensations. When I say "I am in pain", that itself is the expression of pain. First person statements similarly operate in others as well. The view that

the ego has the privilege over the knowledge of his mental state is a view of solipsists. There is no private language as such. Hence, the mental states of other persons can be known through their expression in language.

In our daily interaction the other people's being minded is as true as their being alive. We need not arrive at the belief in other minds through some thought process. Rather, it is part of human nature. No proof, no inference is needed to establish it. Wittgenstein denies any dualism between body and mind and holds that we experience mind directly in bodily expressions. Seeing the red face and big eyes we see the anger of a person. Austin also subscribe to the same view. Angry looks and actions are not mere symptoms of anger; they are ways of expressing it.

12.6. THE CRITERIOLOGICAL THEORY

However, P.F. Strawson does not agree with this view and argues that Wittgenstein has a strong prejudice against the inner. The inner life of a person cannot be overruled. There is always a difference between self ascription of the mental life and other ascription of the same. While giving definition of person, Strawson insists on the ascription of both M-predicate and P-predicate to one and the same subject. While M-predicate is ascribed to material bodies, P-predicate is added to signify a subject as person having both physical and mental states. Farther, Strawson significantly claims that the condition, under which we ascribe mental states to ourselves, similarly operates on mental states to others. The necessary condition of first person use of P-predicates is their second and third person use. Hence, the problem of the knowledge of other minds does not have any significance. However, Strawson again insists on the significance of bodily criterion for ascribing P-predicates to others. For Strawson, other ascription can take place only on the basis of bodily behaviour. Thus, as John Pollock observes Strawson's theory again alternatively moves back to argument from analogy. While argument from analogy considers the bodily criterion as a contingent ground, Strawson considers it as logical.

12.7. A FEW MORE COMMENTS

Against the agenda of argument from analogy G.E. Moore, in Philosophical Studies comments that there is no necessity of any inference to establish the existence of other minds. Almost everyone believes that there exist other persons having similar thought and perception to his own. This belief is based on our direct perception. We directly communicate and get effective response. Moore offers the example of presenting paper in public. He holds that when I read a paper to my audience, I have perceptions which I could not have unless they were hearing my voice. Such experience serves as significant ground for the belief in other minds.

J.L. Austin also says that the doubt about the knowledge of other minds is a philosopher's artificial doubt. To believe in other minds is natural. There is nothing to justify it. Rather its doubt may need justification.

Apart from the analytic philosophers the problem attracts the attention of some phenomenologists as well. Edmund Husserl and Heidegger are two prominent names from this trend who offer their argument in line of the problem of other minds. However, the specific problem emphasised by them is not related to the knowledge of the mental states of some other person existing beyond oneself. Rather, the focus is basically on a problem regarding the self-other relation or the problem of intersubjectivity i.e. the ontological dimension of the issue which discusses the fundamental aspects of our relation to the other.

Edmund Husserl, the father of the Phenomenological movement, is credited for introducing a serious turn into the discussion of the problem of the Other, through the mode of intersubjectivity. Husserl emphasises on the necessary existence of the Other as a meaning giver to this inter-monadic world. For him, the Other is the "veritable guarantee" of the object's objectivity. As both my psycho-physical self and the Other exist here in this world as phenomena, hence, the Other, according to Husserl, appears necessary to the very constitution of the self. As he holds, "My empirical Ego and the Other's empirical Ego appear in the world at the same time".

Again Heidegger, going totally against the argument from analogy, claims that the existence of the intersubjective world is primary and no individual exists alone to discover the Other in a later experience. According to him, "I do not exist first in order that subsequently a contingency should make me encounter the Other. I apprehend 'being-with-others' as an essential characteristic of my being". Hence, according to him, the problem of the Other remains no more a problem to carry further.

Whatever said or done on the issue of other minds one point it brings to focus that other minds are never fully accessible in the same sense in which I can access my own mental states. But, the uncertainty about the specific beliefs or intentions of other persons does not put the very existence of the Other in question. As Merleau Ponty states that our relation to others is deeper than any specific uncertainty we might have regarding them. This constitutional imperfection, in knowing the Other, recognises the other as other with its distinctive nature from myself.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

Q 3. State whether the following statements are true or false

a) Argument from analogy proceeds from the existence of body to mind/mind to body.

b) Mind-body dualism is accepted/ rejected by Behaviourism

b) Strawson assigns P-predicate/ M-predicate to material bodies

Q 4: State whether the following statements are True or False

a) Wittgenstein holds that inner mental states are not knowable. (T/F)

b) Argument from analogy is a deductive argument (T/F)

c) Descartes advocates mind body dualism. (T/F)

Q 5: Mention two differences between the argument from analogy and philosophical behaviourism?

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12.8. LET US SUM UP:

In this unit we have discussed the problem of other minds from the epistemological perspective. Let us review the unit through the following points:

- Any justified belief in the existence of other minds is questioned by the sceptics.
- The problem arises against the backdrop of Cartesian solipsism.
- The problem is of the justification of our belief that others also have minds like our own.
- Argument from analogy is the oldest and most prevalent argument that offers solution to the problem through indirect knowledge possible.
- It argues that there is a close connection between my mental states and bodily behaviour, since others have bodies similar to me and express bodily behaviours, they must also have also have mind.
- Against argument from analogy philosophers like Ryle, Wittgenstein, Austin and Strawson offers arguments claiming the possibility of direct knowledge of other minds.
- However, no theory is immune from drawbacks.
- There is a certain constitutional difference between the self and the other which cannot be merged claiming complete knowledge of other minds.

12.9. FURTHER READINGS

1) **Chakravarty, D. K.** (2000). Fundamental Questions of Epistemology and Metaphysics. New Delhi: Omsons Publication.

2) **Moran, D.** (2000). Introduction to Phenomenology. New York: Routledge.

3) **Zahavi, D.** (2005). Subjectivity and Selfhood, Investigating the First Person Perspective. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

12.10. ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans.to Q. No. 1: Analytic Philosophy

Ans.to Q. No. 2: René Descartes

Ans.to Q. No. 3:

a) Body to mind
b) Rejected
c) M-predicates

Ans. to Q. No 4: a) False b) False c) True

Ans. to Q. No. 5. The difference between argument from analogy and philosophical behaviourism can be put forth in the following way.

Firstly, the argument from analogy operates on the possible difference between the mind and the body. Mind- body dualism is not overruled here. Whereas, in Philosophical behaviourism, mental states and bodily behaviours are considered to be logically equivalent. There is no difference between them.

Secondly, in argument from analogy the argument proceeds from the publicly observable behaviour to the probable inner mental states through inductive inference. But in philosophical behaviourism, there is no need of such inference since there is no gap between the two.

12.11. MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Objective Questions

Q. 1. Mention two advocates of the argument from analogy with their views.

Q. 2. What is Wittgenstein's opinion on the doctrine of epistemic privacy?

Q.3: Mental states and behaviours are equivalent. Which theory holds this and in what reference?

Q 4: What are the two predicates formulated by the Strawson in context of the concept of person?

B) Short questions (Answer in about 100-150 words)

Q.1. Write a short note on Argument from analogy

Q 2: Explain briefly the criteriological theory..

Q 3:

c) Long Questions: (Answer in about 300-50O words).

Q.2: Discuss the views which consider other minds to be directly knowable.

Q 3: Explain the criteriological theory

Q 4: Discuss Wittgenstein's linguistic argument on private language

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