

# The Problem of Other Minds

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## Abstract

Are you all alone? Examine the “problem” of Other Minds and decide. In your discussion show how the issue emanates from Cartesian philosophy, and also examine the so-called Argument from Analogy which has been used by various philosophers to justify our belief in other minds. Finally, examine at least one attempt to “dissolve” (rather than solve) the problem and decide if this approach is fruitful.

## 1 What is the “problem” of Other Minds?

There is no doubt that we believe others to exist, and that there'd be other minds with similar feelings, and thoughts as our own. In fact, as Bertrand Russel stated in his essay *The Analogy Argument for Other Minds*, “we find ourselves believing in them [other minds] when we first begin to reflect...what I am discussing is the possibility of a postulate which shall establish a rational connection between this belief [other minds] and data...” So we can see here that the question is not one of skepticism. And that although many philosophers may argue the non-existence of other minds, it's only at a professional level. The “problem” or question is *how* exactly is it to be proved that other minds *do* indeed exist!

Our belief in the existence of other minds, that can have feeling and pain, is with such certitude, but seems to exist on no rational basis. Here is where the philosopher steps in, in an attempt to ground this belief onto a rational base. There have been various explanations to this “problem” of other minds, but much like arguments in other philosophical arenas, these solutions have their holes.

## 2 Analogous Argument

Since we are inclined to strongly believe in the existence of other minds, then it is imperative to come up with a rational argument for it. One such argument was the argument through analogy. This is a type of inductive reasoning by which we can see antecedent and subsequent bodily states to conclude that another does have similar feelings to us.

John Stuart Mill put forth an argument to the following effect:

1. Initial modification of the body.

2. My feelings caused by (1).
3. My subsequent bodily change (as a reaction to (2))

When looking at others, Mill argued, you can see condition one and condition three but not directly experience condition two. However, condition two can be directly inferred from analysing similar situations occurring to oneself.

There are several problems with the traditional argument from analogy. One problem with the argument is that we cannot check up on the accuracy on the actor's feelings. Using this argument, is based on a *probability* that there is another mind which exists. However, we are so sure that other minds exist, this demonstrates that there is a lack in reason.

Lastly, and more devastating is the generalisation problem. The inductive reasoning to conclude (2) from directly experiencing (1) and (3) is based on one case from which the argument makes a generalisation. Usually, in inductive reasoning you have many individual cases which can be analysed and come up with a conclusion. But here there is one case, your experiences, from which you apply to everyone else. For example, the argument applied to another field can be seen as follows. If a primitive person sees one tree, an apple tree. From this he concludes that all trees are apple trees.

### 3 Behaviourist Argument

Another argument for the existence of other minds is the behaviourist argument. It's main aim is to discount consciousness and concentrate on observable behaviour *only*. If a human or dog performs similar behaviour to mine when it steps on a nail, then one may infer that it experiences pain. It forms a reduction from mental bodily states to physical bodily states.

There are several problems with the behaviourist argument. Firstly, behaviour can be faked, as in the case of actors in a movie, or preprogrammed automata. An entity could be in pain and not necessarily show it, as in a stomach ache, or minor toothache. Additionally, we can show pain without having it (to get a doctor's note off of school, for example.)

We can extend the behaviourist argument problems to computers which are programmed to respond to various input. Another example may be made of a maple tree, whose syrup pours out after a cut in its bark. It's responding to a violation of it's "body." But it begs the question: does it really have a "mind." So what we have is a condition where behaviour is neither a

necessary nor sufficient condition to demonstrate pain, and inversely the existence of “other minds.”

## 4 Language Understanding

This concept takes the traditional analogous argument and extends it (patches) such that it implies involuntary communication. H. H. Price stated that the problem with the traditional analogical theory is that it would only provide evidence of the existence of other minds, but not justifiable *proof* thereof. Price, then proceeds to bring forth what is called, the *Intuitive Theory*. This means that there is (involuntary) communication between two bodies, any sort of information exchange only so long as you recognise and understand it.

Any statement (aka stimuli) has a symbolic characteristic. You merely entertain this stimuli until you can verify it. When it's verified, it may be said that there exist another mind. Take, for example, the following scenario:

1. you perceive (sense) stimuli
2. you understand (or symbolise) this stimuli
3. you verify this stimuli

Furthermore, repeated occurrences strengthen your belief that the originator of that stimuli is actually another mind. Price also stated that we can never have conclusive contact with other minds. Hence, sufficient evidence is the most that really can be demanded, proof is nonsensical.

Norman Malcolm states that this is still an analogous theory which presents a different problem. Malcolm states that the additional problem with Price's theory is that you are lead to believe that if intelligible symbols were coming from inanimate objects, under Price's theory you must believe that these inanimate objects have a (disembodied) mind. Malcolm also brings up the statement that by introspection he knows that when he feels a certain way, he would enunciate certain combinations of sounds. So if I see these combination of sounds in another thing, that they must be feeling what I feel. It does very little to solve the problem of lying &c, because one still cannot verify the feelings of this other person.