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Telepathy, Other Minds, and Category Errors

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore several issues surrounding what is called “telepathy” in the context of the problem of other minds. I begin with a quick review of the conditions in which this notion arose and the difficulties to which it gave rise upon its introduction. This review will allow me, after having shown that the notion of telepathy provides no path to the problem’s solution, to draw a distinction between two discursive levels: an epistemological or ontological level, on the one hand, and a semantic or logical level, on the other. I maintain that it is at the second level that the deepest and most intractable difficulties relating to the “powers of the mind” arise. These difficulties occupy a blind spot in discussions involving the notion of telepathy (Alan Turing will provide a striking illustration of this). Finally, I suggest that this pseudo-solution (telepathy) is at root a response to a pseudo-problem—the inaccessibility of other minds—since the difficulties with the intelligibility of telepathy are parallel to those with which the problem of “other minds” is freighted.

The “problem of other minds” has sometimes been given pride of place, along with the mind–body problem, as “the two most important questions in the philosophy of mind.”¹ It is often presented as a question through which all claims to the understanding of others must pass. We might well accept that, in order for me to understand anyone, I must first *know* that he or she is in a particular state of mind. For example, only if I *know* that she is afraid of spiders will I be able to understand why she refuses to set foot in the barn; only if I *know* that he is jealous of his brother will I be able to understand his cutting remarks at the last family gathering; only if I *know* that he is in pain can I

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understand the meaning of his grimaces, and so on. Yet, the argument claims, these putative instances of knowing are epistemologically extremely unstable. For is one ever really able to *know* others' mental states? Can one ever be *certain* that someone else is really in a given state or is one not rather destined to *infer*, to *guess*, or to *imagine* that such is the case (with the ever-present and unavoidable risk that one might always be wrong)? The understanding and knowledge of others would inherit this instability and would thus be forever stamped with uncertainty: while I might well hope to understand and know others, I would never be certain of doing so. Other people would remain an unreachable horizon.

Taken to an extreme, this question of other minds gives rise to an assortment of thorny situations, the most recent of which is the possibility—one that has been discussed *ad nauseam* within contemporary analytic philosophy of mind—of *philosophical zombies*.² These zombies would be like the empty shells of human beings, lacking the “inner light” (e.g. “what it is like”, consciousness, access to *qualia*, etc.) yet nevertheless able to behave and act in such perfectly normal and expected ways that they are impossible to detect, thereby giving rise to the overwhelming suspicion that they may walk among us. Scenarios in which they are postulated are thus nothing like that put forward by Descartes in the fifth part of the *Discourse on Method*, in which humanoid automatons show themselves to be unable to put words together into speech or “act in all of life's occurrences in the same way that our reason causes us to act.”³ Fortunately, my concern here is not with the zombie problem. Rather, I will be focused on one element occasionally raised in discussions of the problem of other minds: telepathy. For, in some ways it is only for want of telepathic powers that the problem of other minds arises.⁴ The picture that governs the invocation of telepathy is as follows: our access to others is always indirect, hindered by insurmountable obstacles since others only present to us their bodies and “external” behaviours. The only hope of overcoming this would be to find a hidden but direct path to their interiority. And telepathy would naturally be the vehicle used to traverse that path. This image condenses within itself serious conceptual confusions and the invocation of telepathy is already riven by the difficulties that gave rise to the problem of other minds in the first place. Telepathy is thus not an intelligible alternative to our regrettable ignorance but is rather symptomatic of the problem itself.

1 | THE APORIAS OF TELEPATHY

The first problem with the appeal to telepathy concerns the delimitation of what the term is meant to include. Roger Luckhurst provided a useful genealogy of the term in his book *The Invention of Telepathy* and some of his historical observations will inform what follows.⁵ In December 1882, a text written on the initiative of Frederic Myers and signed by the “literary committee” of the *Society for Psychical Research* (SPR)—which was created in March of that year—coined the terms “telepathy” and “telæsthesia” (the latter term having since had a less prominent legacy than the former).⁶ It is striking that we still use the term “telepathy” today as if we had a real understanding of its use. It is just as striking that the definition given at the time of its coinage remains quite close to the one we would likely still give today.

For the new organisation, the president of which was the philosopher Henry Sidgwick, the terms “telepathy” and “telæsthesia” were proposed “to cover all cases of impression received at a distance without the normal operation of the recognised sense organs.”⁷ In the glossary of his impressive, two-volume *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*, Myers—shedding all constraint on his speculative tendencies—writes that “telepathy may still [20 years after the coinage of the term] be defined as ‘the communication of impressions of any kind from one mind to another, independently of the recognised channels of sense.’”⁸ The term is deliberately oxymoronic, holding that telepathy consists in the communication of a *sensation* or a feeling, but that this sensation takes place *at a distance*.⁹ While the term is certainly new, the idea is not especially so: in the first *Critique* Kant rejected concepts the possibility of which is groundless, among which were that of a “special fundamental power of our mind to *intuit* the future (not merely, say, to deduce it), or [...] a faculty of our mind to stand in a community of thoughts with other men (no matter how distant they may be).”¹⁰

More generally, the term “telepathy” appears at the end of the 19th century out of a will and desire to continue the study of purported anomalous phenomena while, at the same time taking distance from their infelicitous spiritualist and spectacular associations. First, the study of telepathy distanced itself from its spiritualist connotations: insofar as *telepathy* involves *pathos*, the operation in question remains part of the natural domain (*physis*): an unknown nature, but nature nonetheless. Telepathy is thus entirely in conformity with a physicalist perspective. It does not present itself as a *supernatural* channel (Myers here invented the term “supernormal” which also did not have the hoped-for success) but rather as the action of a measurable faculty (likely of the brain) whose principle would be left to discover. The remarkable breakthroughs, inventions, and discoveries of the physical sciences and technology in the Victorian era, which in some way all involved “action at a distance” (e.g., electromagnetic fields, radiation, vibrational resonances, ether, telephone, etc.) readily provided new models for believing that such a discovery in the realm of telepathy could be within the realm of possibility. Telepathy was thus not born, as is sometimes claimed, out of oppositional reaction to the “disenchantment” of modernity but was, from the beginning, entangled with it.

Second, the study of telepathy distanced itself from its association with spectacle. As a subject of serious study, telepathy would have to be set apart from fraudulent techniques and methods used during public performances (seances, coded signals, muscle reading, sleight of hand, etc.). The claim is that it is *real* (and not mere appearance).

It is worth noting the importance of the communicational aspect in the definition of telepathy, which is what justifies the introduction of the second term (“*telæsthesia*”) for purported cases of *clairvoyance* or of “perception at a distance” that would not pass through customary channels (vision, hearing, smell, etc.) but would also not be cases of communication. For our purposes and to return to our initial problem, the communicational aspect prevents telepathy from overcoming the epistemological obstacle mentioned earlier and offering a way out of the problem of other minds. Why? Because, if I were to receive a telepathic message, how could this message, whatever its form, contain within itself the guarantee of its authenticity? If I may come to doubt what my fellow humans seem to be saying to me verbally, why should I not also doubt what they seem to be telepathically communicating to me? What, moreover, would distinguish a telepathic reception from an identical hallucination? Even in the very terms of the problem, it is inexplicable how telepathy could extricate us: all communication (even so-called non-verbal communication) allows for the possibilities of both deception and miscommunication. And since it is precisely this possibility of deception that sustains the difficulty in the problem of other minds, the introduction of telepathy cannot allow us to overcome it.

A. J. Ayer, in an article in which he addresses the problem of other minds— while remaining constrained by the tenets of a logical positivism that cannot avoid giving rise to the problem—made several typical remarks consistent with the points made above: that it would be fruitless for anyone troubled by the problem of other minds to seek relief in telepathy since:

even if he were to achieve it he would be doing no more than add to his current methods of communication. What is strange about telepathy is that a message is transmitted apparently without the employment of any physical means.¹¹ But to be informed of another's feeling telepathically is not to share it; and even if it were to share it there would be exactly the same grounds here as in the case of any other shared feelings for saying that there were two feelings and not one. There is the experience of the person who makes the communication and the experience of the person who receives it. These experiences are necessarily different, since they are the experiences of different persons, and this remains true no matter how the communication is made. In this respect telepathy is no better than the telephone.¹²

It would thus still be true in a hypothetical case of telepathy that the recipient *does not know what the other person thinks*. As in any mode of communication, nothing prevents the other from lying, concealing her thoughts, leaving out crucial information, sending only what she wants to send, etc. with the result that the recipient *would not in any way be in a better position* to know what the other is really thinking.¹³ A telepathic recipient might always—even

while engaged in telepathic communication with the other—seek to understand or worry about failing to comprehend. Ultimately, a telepath might well, for these reasons, continue to doubt that there are minds other than her own.

2 | EXPERIMENT CONCEPTION AND CONCEPTS OF EXPERIMENTATION

The intensive clusters of experimentation around telepathy that have regularly occurred since the end of the 19th century have provided epistemologists with opportunities to examine the merits and limits of the construction of the experiments and conditions under which they were carried out. Reflections, that have been somewhat beneficial, on the place and role of controls in such experiments necessarily arise when one more closely examines the most notable studies claiming to demonstrate the existence of telepathic powers. All of them, sometimes for very different reasons, turned out to be unsatisfactory. The first experimenters are often viewed today as having been, in the end, quite naïve: insufficiently mindful of both the statistical methods that they claimed to be using and of the possibilities of trickery that they were likely to encounter. This was, in fact, the diagnosis put forth by Charles Saunders Peirce who, after initially taking interest in telepathy and having followed the development of the *SPR* quite closely, in short order levelled a harsh critique of the methodology used by some of the organisation's most eminent members, particularly Myers, Gurney, and Podmore:

Their most imposing arguments are based upon the doctrine of probabilities, and these I have examined with care. I am fully satisfied that these arguments are worthless, partly because of the uncertainty and error of the numerical data, and partly because the authors have been astonishingly careless in the admission of cases ruled out by the conditions of the argumentation.¹⁴

Even so, Ian Hacking has credited these first studies on telepathy, for which the *SPR* provided either patronage or the impetus, as the first steps in a new type of scientific methodology characterised by its use of randomisation and double-blind tests.¹⁵ One of the reasons for this is basic but worth mentioning: if telepathy is conceived as an action, it does not—as do most other elementary actions—surprise us when it fails but rather when it succeeds. Telepathy is by its nature rare and fragile. It is thus understood that such a hypothetical action will fail much more often than it will succeed and that it is in the gap between these (frequent) failures and the chance occasions of success that telepathy emerges as an object of study. This narrow gap requires, moreover, that a determination of the frequency of success due to chance be solidly established. To take a basic example: if people consistently prefer certain of the numbers that lie, say, between 1 and 10, then any experiment involving the “transmission” of the thought of a number in that range will have to take such preferences into account, acknowledging, for example, that there is a much greater chance of the number 7 being picked by both sides. In that case, it is evidently false that from the outset there was only one chance out of ten that the two subjects would pick the same number. Similarly, it is now also known that human beings are not very good at making successive choices in a truly random manner: instead, they tend to privilege certain patterns, to avoid repetitions, etc. These tendencies will thus have to be taken into account.

More generally, it will be readily admitted that there is nothing to be gained by repeating an experiment thousands of times if it was poorly conceived from the outset. While this is certainly true, I would like to focus on a certain ambiguity in this sort of critique. The claim that an experiment has been poorly conceived can be understood in two distinct ways. Here we should distinguish two levels of discourse: *experiment conception*, on the one hand, and *concepts of experimentation*, on the other. On the first level, an experiment is poorly conceived when its methodology is flawed, when the results it is likely to give are not reliable or are not reproducible, or when crucial variables have been left out, deception hasn't been controlled for, etc. This is the level at which the epistemological critiques of experiments in telepathy have often been located. Such critiques are obviously apposite and allow it to be established that the results of an experiment are unsound. This might mean showing that the experimenters too

frequently or too easily overlooked their biases, disregarded a breach of confidentiality, ignored a well-known statistical effect, and so on. On this level, the ends of the experiment are not discussed, only the means. The critique seeks to bring about *better* experiments, while not ruling out the possibility that such experiments may prove worthwhile. At a second level, that of the concepts of experimentation, an experiment is poorly conceived when the concepts used to describe the experiment are intrinsically problematic, incoherent or mutually incompatible, unintelligible, etc.¹⁶ This level is more fundamental and any critique from this level will be significantly more radical than first-level critiques. In a sense, one must assume (at least for the sake of argument) that there are no problems at this more fundamental level if one is to be capable of engaging in critiques on the level of experiment conception. On this more fundamental level it is therefore the coherence and intelligibility of the intended goals that can be examined and discussed. The objective of the critique is thus not to produce better experiments but rather to call into question the conceptual framework in which the experiments are carried out.

An analogy will be instructive here. Imagine a group of researchers who concoct the idea of investigating whether white can be painted black. Not, for example, whether a white wall can be painted black, but whether *white* itself—whiteness—can be painted black. They develop a special paint that can be applied to any surface and begin their experiments by putting this black paint on different white surfaces (e.g. tables, walls, pedestrian crossings, etc.). They then conclude that, since nothing has proven able to resist the power of this paint, the same will be true of whiteness itself, which can therefore be painted black. While it would perhaps be useful to point out any problems with this new paint indicating that it does not have the powers that they have ascribed to it (if, for example, I find a surface to which their paint does not adhere), I think we would all agree that *before being able to know or even seeking to find out* whether it is true or false that white can be painted black, we would already have to have *determined what we are talking about*. What does “white” (or “whiteness”) mean in such a discussion? We can understand, for example, that a white wall can be painted black (just as we also understand that it can also *not* be painted black). We also have no difficulty understanding that metonymic expressions like “the white” can be used as a shorthand for “the white horse” or “the white wall,” etc. These cases are not particularly problematic. But if our hypothetical group of researchers insist that the formula is not metonymic and that they want to know *whether white itself* can be painted black, we will naturally wonder what it *could possibly mean* to want to know whether white can be painted black. And we might readily answer: if “white” is a quality (specifically, a colour), then it is meaningless to seek to find out whether a quality (specifically, a colour) can take on a colour (or, to put it in the terms of an elucidation, “a colour has no colour”). One might then put forward, as further elucidations, statements like “a colour is not the type of thing that can be painted” or “only a surface can be painted,” etc. These statements belong to the level of concepts of experimentation and, more generally, are part of what one might call “categorial analysis.”¹⁷ The considerations that follow originate in this second level.

3 | POWERS OF MIND AND CATEGORY ERRORS

It is not unusual for a philosopher to notice (and deplore) that the very definition of the term “telepathy” is too vague or too accommodating since it seems to include—even among the influential members of the *SPR* who were the main protagonists of its dissemination—cases in which one struggles to understand whether they are of the same type as others: for example, the appearance or reception of the mental image of a loved one who is—unbeknownst to the receiver—in the course of dying on the other side of the world.¹⁸ The charge of vagueness is of course an important one and the ensuing demand that we precisely determine what we are talking about is entirely appropriate. Rather than dwelling on this aspect, though, I want to focus on the generic description of “powers of the mind.” The very idea of telepathy presupposes that the mind *has powers* and that among these powers is the telepathic ability to communicate from a distance. A first peculiarity: we must assume that the mind is a certain type of *thing* in order to be able to attribute powers to it (a power being always the power of *some thing*). The temptation to succumb to this first spell is enormous despite being in fact the source of vast philosophical difficulties: we are indeed naturally

prone to say things like “my mind can obviously do all sorts of things; it can calculate, imagine, represent, etc. Why should it not also be able to communicate telepathically?” From this perspective, telepathy would simply be one power of the mind among others, albeit one that is rarer and in no way universal (reserved for a small group or for initiates, etc.).

This position becomes unintelligible, however, if, instead of making the mind into a thing endowed with powers, one upholds a so-called “neo-Aristotelian” conception of the mind.¹⁹ In this conception, the mind is neither a separate substance (typical of dualism) nor part of a substance (e.g., the brain, typical of materialism) but should be understood on the model of a power or ability, or more precisely as a set of abilities. According to this conception, it would be inappropriate to speak of *the* mind (as if there were an implicit individuating clause): mental terms concern abilities and aptitudes, but there is no point in looking for specific *things* (substances) known as minds.²⁰ From this perspective, it is entirely devoid of sense to say of a power (or a set of powers) that it *has* a power. Powers do not “have” powers, no more so esoteric powers than exoteric ones. Seeing what we call “mind” as a set of abilities allows us to move beyond some familiar problems: for example, the question of whether to attribute mind to non-human animals will no longer depend on some mysterious metaphysical dignity (“we have a mind, animals do not”) nor on neurophysiological comparisons (“our brains are more developed than those of animals”) but will become a function of what animals can or cannot do. It will depend, therefore, on their abilities. It would be simply mad to declare, for example, that no non-human animal perceives anything, believes anything, attempts to do anything, is in pain, etc. That being said, every set of abilities must be strictly distinguished from the possessor of those abilities: one should therefore not confuse, for example, the ability to calculate, to imagine, etc. with the possessors of those abilities.²¹ But who are these possessors? They are animals who exhibit a particular range of behaviours, one that we utilise as a *logical* criterion for the attribution of those powers. The lesson to be drawn from this conception is that the mind is not in a category that would allow us to say that it has a power. As a result, the idea that telepathy would be a special power of the mind becomes deeply incoherent (in much the same way that it would be incoherent to say of an event that it is curled up in a ball).

This claim might elicit a—perhaps irritable—response like the following: “Let us stipulate that it is not a power of *the mind* but of the human being. That stipulation has no bearing on what matters in these discussions and in parapsychological research in general, namely that human beings have (or could have) such a power. That is not only an exciting prospect but precisely what we seek to discover. Such reflections on the proper subject of attribution are somewhat sterile and entirely miss what is extraordinary about telepathy! If one were able to show that human beings are in fact capable of communicating over distance using mere thought, it would be something altogether remarkable, and all the quibbling about *who* might have such a power in no way helps us either to confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis.”

What is noteworthy in this response is that it still assumes that it has already been established what “communicating over a distance using mere thought” might mean, thereby surreptitiously returning us to the level of experiment conception. The very description of the ostensible telepathic power is problematic from the outset. Before determining whether it is a hypothesis, it will have to be established that it is *meaningful*.²² Only if the description of telepathy is intelligible will we then be able to seek to find out if it is correct or not (i.e. true or false of human beings—or of some among them). And it is not at all clear that it is intelligible. I would suggest that the question of whether I can communicate using thought alone should be considered alongside the question of whether I can *dance* using thought alone. It will be readily accepted that one can *imagine oneself* to be dancing, but imagining oneself to be dancing is not to join in a certain kind of dance (a *mental* dance). If I imagine myself dancing, I might perhaps be preparing myself to dance (at some later time) or perhaps be recalling a past dance, but I am clearly not *actually dancing* in doing so. What other meaning could be given to “dancing in thought”? We have great difficulty saying. Similarly, to imagine oneself communicating or “communicating in thought” is not a certain type of communication (a *mental* communication). Here again, the risk is to see the mind as a kind of agent able to *do* things, when the mind is not an agent. It might be asked what the arguments are in favour of the non-agentive character of the mind, but that is to reverse the burden of proof: it is incumbent on the person who postulates *both* human beings *and* minds to

account for such a division. The person who prefers to speak only of human beings *without* speaking separately about their minds is not obliged to explain herself to anyone.

More generally, it will be easier to accept some occult power if one first postulates an occult subject that has this power. Reaffirming or emphasising that the mind is *in no way* an occult subject but, rather, a way of speaking about the capacities of human beings, has a preventive value and allows us to avoid the pitfall of adopting a second mystery (telepathy) because we had already adopted a first one (the mind as a thing, an agent, a substance).

4 | TURING AND TELEPATHY

By contrast, it will be recalled that in his discussion of the question “can machines think?” in his famous article from 1950 in which he also introduced his equally famous “Imitation Game,” Alan Turing devoted a few exceedingly-strange paragraphs to a response to the objection of telepathy, paragraphs in which he seems to take this objection very seriously, claiming that “the statistical evidence is [...] overwhelming.”²³ A person playing the role of the interrogator could in some way *cheat* at the imitation game if the other human involved were a capable telepath: the interrogator would need only, Turing claims, have the participants guess a great many times the colour of the card he is holding in his hand (and that he can see). The capable telepath, unlike the machine, will have statistically significant positive results where the machine’s results would be close or equal to those obtained by chance. Turing then gets embroiled in some unsettling speculation about some hypothetical power of psychokinesis that the interrogator might be able to use to manipulate the machine’s random number generator. At this point it is difficult to imagine why the interrogator would bother—if he wants to win the Imitation Game (and guess which of the participants is human and which is the machine)—attempting to modify through psychokinesis the response given by the machine. Nor is it easy to understand why this power would not in any case give him the solution he seeks (Turing also evokes the possibility of the interrogator winning immediately through clairvoyance). He concludes—before giving his solution to this objection—that “with ESP anything may happen.”²⁴ Such a conclusion is disconcerting to say the least: is it possible—one might ask as an analogical objection—for white to be painted black? Is it an option for an event to be curled up in a ball? It is striking here that Turing does not dwell on the question of what such a thing *might mean*. Certain images (rather than theories) must be directing one’s conception of the mind for one to be able to accept that such descriptions represent real possibilities (whose actualisation remains to be determined).

It is difficult to take seriously the solution that Turing adopts to maintain the validity of his test. It consists, he suggests, in putting the participants in a “telepathy-proof room.” Commentators are rightly circumspect and non-committal about the proper interpretation of these paragraphs and the gnomic solution Turing proposes. Some maintain that Turing was being ironic or facetious in the passage. Douglas Hofstadter notes with some amusement that Turing’s article has been reprinted with this objection having been expurgated, a remarkable occurrence that is symptomatic of the difficulty.²⁵ There is in truth no textual reason to believe that Turing was being ironic or facetious, and there are biographical reasons to believe that that was not the case.²⁶ Some of these reasons are linked to the context in which Turing was writing. On this point, David Leavitt has provided a remarkable statistic: in the month of September 1949 (i.e. a few months before the composition of the article in question), the term “telepathy” appeared sixteen times in the *London Times* even though the term had not appeared in the paper since 1932.²⁷ Moreover, several prominent intellectuals and scientists had championed parapsychological research by presenting it as the vanguard of a future revolution. It is likely that Turing himself had been impressed by the results (which we now know not have been impressive at all) gathered by the renowned John Banks Rhine of Duke University, mentioned earlier, as well as by the studies (that have also been shown to have been fraudulent) carried out by Samuel Soal and publicly supported by the Cambridge philosopher and active member of the SPR, C. D. Broad.²⁸

In the famous 1950 text, Turing seems to see this objection as particularly troublesome for his aims: “This argument is to my mind quite a strong one.”²⁹ We may deplore the fact that Turing discusses the objection without the slightest hesitation about the categories with which we are to understand it. He speaks of “disturbing phenomena”

and “new facts” and assumes that the reader is familiar with the meaning of terms like “telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and psychokinesis.”³⁰ Even so, familiarity with certain expressions is no guarantee of the coherence of those expressions. We can, for example, be entirely familiar with the expression “time travel” without realising that time travel is ultimately incoherent or meaningless.³¹ Incidentally, this also shows that nothing prevents us from *telling stories* of time travel, being enthusiastic about time travel stories, dreaming of travelling through time, etc. Nothing prevents these because, more generally, nothing prevents telling incoherent stories, being enthusiastic about unintelligible stories, or dreaming about the impossible.

5 | REPRESENTATIONS OF TELEPATHY

To return to telepathy, it is intriguing to observe that the representations (particularly cinematic ones) to which we usually resort in order to illustrate what telepathy might be are generally of two (non-exclusive) kinds. The first form of representation is the voice-over, which is the technique often used by filmmakers to represent two people communicating telepathically. In it, the voice of the character or characters is superimposed on—but dissociated from—their image. The spectator hears the voices of the characters (with their habitual intonation) while also seeing these characters and is meant to apprehend that the voices heard are diegetic and that the characters are actively involved in that communication. The second kind of representation of telepathy involves the face, in particular facial mimicry of intense concentration (a knitted brow, hands to the forehead, narrowed eyes, etc.) that is meant to be characteristic of telepathy. These two modes of representation are not enough to allow us to imagine ourselves having established that we are dealing with a “phenomenon” or a “fact.”

There is, moreover, something unusual about positing a telepathic power that would be modelled on perception (as when people speak of a “sixth sense” in such contexts). Perceptive powers have two features that fit poorly with any ostensible power of telepathy: the first is what is often called the *factive* dimension of perception.³² It is logically impossible to perceive something that is not there. If I perceive a dog on the side of the road, there must be a dog on the side of the road to be perceived. And if there is no dog, I will have to revise my initial statement: it *seemed* to me that I was perceiving a dog on the side of the road. Or: I did *not* perceive a dog on the side of the road. From this perspective, perceiving is not like searching (since I may search for something that cannot be found). It might obviously be the case that *I do not know* what I have perceived, but it is nevertheless the case that if I have perceived something, there must have been something in my perceptual field. It would be absurd or incongruous to want to use statistical methods to determine whether, when I perceive something, there is something that I am perceiving. Yet experiments on supposed powers of telepathy get entangled in precisely this absurdity. The second feature is the *cognitive* dimension of perception: if I perceive a tree before me, I *know* that there is a tree before me. Similarly, if I have seen who entered the room, I know who entered the room. This obviously does not mean that error is impossible or that it is senseless to speak of attempts, failures, or successes in cases of perception. It means that the senses (the perceptive faculties) are essentially cognitive faculties but nonetheless fallible and that their success depends on the conditions in which they are exercised. As we have seen, in the hypothetical case of telepathy, this cognitive dimension would be the exception rather than the norm.

The provisional conclusion of these reflections is that the recourse to telepathy can in no way provide a solution to the problem of other minds, but—more importantly—this solution nevertheless shares with the problem itself the very conceptual architecture that allows the problem to arise. Thinking that telepathy might provide a solution to the problem of other minds is thus not only an inadequate solution, given the terms of the problem, but it shares with that problem the category errors that gave rise to it, namely the error of conceiving the mind as either a kind of place in which internal processes unfold or as a kind of agent that launches mental events. Ayer maintains, for example, that “events that go on in other people’s minds” are “not even in principle accessible to our observation.”³³ This vocabulary of accessibility is at the heart of the problem, for even if it is only *in principle* that something is

inaccessible to me, to speak of “access” or of “observation” in such cases sustains a spatial (and exploratory) metaphor that has proven to be misleading when we are seeking to lucidly approach our relations with others.

Some contemporary philosophers question the idea that inaccessibility to others is a necessary truth, claiming that this inaccessibility is contingent: though it so happens that we have no access to the minds of others, we *could* have access to them. We could do it *modulo* a reliabilist conception of self-knowledge combined with a scenario involving telepathy.³⁴ However, we understand that the preceding considerations are, in fact, *prior* to such discussions: one must have already accepted the terms of the problem (especially the rhetoric of “access”) for the possibility or impossibility of such access to arise as a question.

We do not observe our own “mental events” even if we can—through self-reflection—say things about ourselves that others would be unable to say. It is therefore not appropriate to say that others cannot observe our mental events and that we cannot observe theirs. A great many psychological verbs cannot be categorised as events. If I believe that the Socialist Party will never again lead the country, there is no “mental event” or “mental process” involved: I might well be asked *since when* I have thought this, but one cannot, for example, interrupt my belief or conceive of it on the model of a continuous process. This problem of other minds is in fact sustained by certain forms of expression (e.g., “in my head,” “lost in my thoughts,” “to vent one’s hatred,” etc.) that indiscriminately convey the ideas of a place, a content, a substance, or a thing. The notion of telepathy retains all these seductive, but ultimately deceptive, associations.³⁵

6 | IMPOSSIBLE ACCESS TO OTHERS

At work within the problem of other minds, there is the rhetorical move of “speaking strictly”: *strictly speaking*, we are only conscious of ourselves. *Strictly speaking* we only have indirect access to other minds. *Strictly speaking*, we do not know how things stand for others, etc. But one must ask: is it really *speaking strictly* to say that one never knows that so-and-so thinks X or Y when we have *every reason to believe that he thinks X or Y*? Is it strictly speaking to say that we do not know whether he is really in pain despite seeing him writhe in pain while screaming “I’m suffering terribly”? Why in such a case would there be anything inappropriate or imprecise about speaking of him being in pain? This is not an appeal to the correct use of language (as when one says “one does not say ‘these sheeps’ but rather ‘these sheep’”) and this rhetoric is not about reminding the reader of basic rules that she may have forgotten. Saying that we know that our friend is delighted, sad, or hesitant is not inappropriate *in that way*.

From the “strictly speaking” perspective, knowledge of others—and therefore also understanding of them—is always mediated, indirect, and second-hand. What, then, would first-hand knowledge be? The response is obvious: “first-hand” knowledge is only what I myself see, think, believe, etc. One would have to take a *leap* to reach one’s fellow humans and, as always, there is an inherent danger involved. I have suggested above that this rhetoric and the various images that direct it can only lead us into error. “I have no access to the minds of others” would therefore be as incongruous as “I have no access to the days of the week”: before one can know whether there is an *obstacle* (and before determining the nature of that obstacle), one must be able to understand what has been claimed. Here as elsewhere, it is worth recalling that semantic considerations are prior to both ontological and epistemological considerations.

Finally and by way of conclusion, I would like to suggest that this case provides an instance of a logical error the history of which Peter Geach famously traced in his article “History of a Fallacy”: while it is certainly always possible for me to be in error in my dealings with my fellow humans, it is not possible that I always be in error in my dealings with them.³⁶ As Geach points out, this is a pattern of poor reasoning that hardly troubles us when illustrated with ordinary examples, but which we struggle to detect or identify in more philosophical contexts. Thus, nobody will conclude that there is someone for whom it is obligatory to govern from the premise that it is obligatory that someone govern. The problem of other minds depends on a move that is at least as problematic. What drives the problem is that I do not really know that I have not been duped or fooled; it is always possible that others are lying to me. But it does not then follow that it is possible that others are always lying to me.

More generally, this inversion in the order of operations may lead to two types of unfortunate consequence.³⁷ The first is the logical inconsistency which amounts to sliding from a truth to a falsehood. This is what happens when, from the premise “every French person has a social security number” (which is true), I conclude that “there is a social security number that every French person has” (which is false). The second unfortunate consequence is to move from a truth to an absurdity or a contradiction. This happens when moving, for example, from “it is always possible that the fruit I encounter is made of plastic” (which is true: on every occasion where I believe I have fruit before me, that fruit may turn out to be made of plastic) to “it is possible that the fruit I encounter is always made of plastic.” The second proposition is in fact absurd or contradictory because the possibility it presents is no possibility at all. One of the conditions of intelligibility for us to be able to say we have encountered plastic fruit is that there are (or that there were) fruit of which the plastic ones are imitations. Without fruit, there can be no plastic fruit, with the result that the possibility is in reality a pseudo-possibility. The absurdity of such descriptions is not as easily detectable as are textbook examples like “a square circle.” The case is closest to putative descriptions like “the only sibling of the father of my first cousin who has parents without grandchildren” which require a moment of reflection to establish that they are ultimately pseudo-descriptions. I have attempted to show that a (longer) moment of reflection was just as necessary to establish that the definitions provided of “telepathy” were also pseudo-descriptions.

--translated by Stephen Adam Schwartz.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Sean Nichols and Stephen P. Stich, *Mindreading: An Integrated Account of Pretence, Self-Awareness, and Understanding Other Minds* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 5.
- ² Philosophical discussion of such “zombies” originated in Robert Kirk, “Zombies v. Materialists,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 48 (1974): 135–152. The standard reference is now David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) in which such zombies are marshalled in service of an anti-physicalist argument.
- ³ René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*, trans. Ian Mclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 46–47.
- ⁴ See Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (1949; London: Routledge, 2009), 3, which, in presenting its target (the “official theory”), deems it relevant to mention telepathy: “But mental happenings occur in insulated fields, known as ‘minds’, and there is, *apart maybe from telepathy*, no direct causal connection between what happens in one mind and what happens in another” [emphasis mine].
- ⁵ Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy: 1870–1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- ⁶ W. F. Barrett, C. C. Massey, et al., “Report of the Literary Committee,” *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 1 (December 1882): 116–155.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.
- ⁸ Frederic W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, Vol. 1 (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1903), xxii.
- ⁹ The same sort of oxymoron—with the same force—appears in the later coinage of “extra-sensory perception” (ESP) by Joseph Banks Rhine, the most prominent “parapsychologist.”
- ¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 324 (B270/A223). This formula—“community of thoughts”—does not, however, give rise to exactly the same difficulties as those we will discuss below.
- ¹¹ Here we find the obvious tension at the heart of what telepathy is supposed to be: somewhere between a physical and a supernatural relation. Ayer suggests that telepathic messages should be transmitted without using any physical means. In so doing he either has forgotten or is unaware of the origins of the term with its ambivalent claims to scientificity.
- ¹² A. J. Ayer, “One’s Knowledge of Other Minds,” *Theoria* 19, no. 1–2 (April 1953): 5.
- ¹³ She would not be better placed than any other person able to communicate—by whatever means—with the person in question. Telepathy would add no value.
- ¹⁴ Charles Saunders Peirce, “Science and Immortality,” in *The Collected Papers of Charles Saunders Peirce*, Vols 5 and 6, eds. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 6.549–50, 370–371.
- ¹⁵ Ian Hacking, “Telepathy: Origins of Randomization in Experimental Design,” *Isis* 79, no. 3 (1988): 427–451.

- ¹⁶ There is an entire tradition (especially Wittgensteinian) to which I adhere, and which holds that, among the criteria for the identity and individuation of concepts, one must include the explanations that a speaker would give or accept for the meaning of the corresponding terms. It follows that concepts could prove to be incompatible with one another or incoherent if the explanations in question are incompatible. Moreover, if one associates the concepts with certain rules of inference, one can also acknowledge that there may be another form of incompatibility among concepts when those rules themselves are incompatible with one another. Similarly, if concepts are abstractions from our usage of words, there might yet again be a form of incompatibility (if the usages are incompatible: i.e. pull in opposing directions, etc.). It is therefore not necessarily improper to say of a pair or a group of concepts that they are *incoherent* or *incompatible* with one another, for it is not the case that only *utterances* or *propositions* can be incompatible or incoherent.
- ¹⁷ Our two levels may have a certain degree of permeability between them (or at least might allow for an intermediate level). For example, sometimes the law of conservation of energy is invoked as an obstacle to telepathy. Telepathy would thus go against a firmly established law of nature. The obstacle would not lie only at the level of experiment conception but would derive just as much from the concepts of experimentation in play: any putative telepathic action would ultimately be incredible or supernatural since it would violate the law of conservation of energy. There would therefore be something absurd about wanting to carry out experiments (in nature) on the supernatural.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Irving Thalberg, "Telepathy," *Analysis* 21, no. 3 (January 1961).
- ¹⁹ Hans-Johann Glock, "Minds, Brains, and Capacities: Situated Cognition and Neo-Aristotelianism," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (December 2020): Article 566385, 1–14.
- ²⁰ This, it will be recalled, was one of the points made by Gilbert Ryle in *The Concept of Mind*. Indeed, it was Ryle who popularised the expression "category error."
- ²¹ Specifically, it is not the abilities themselves that have causal powers but rather the possessors of those abilities, so it is somewhat misleading to say that "the mind is what has a causal power."
- ²² Vincent Descombes, in an illuminating chapter on "The Mental," draws a distinction between the question "Are there beliefs?" and questions like "Are there premonitory dreams?" or "Are there telepathic communications?" The great difference, according to Descombes, is that "when we ask whether premonitory dreams exist, we establish the domain as being that of dreams and we seek to learn whether, among those dreams, there are some that are real premonitions. We do not ask ourselves whether there are dreams and what they consist in; we already have sufficient knowledge about what they are. By contrast, when we ask whether there are really beliefs, we do not clearly establish a domain within which we might investigate whether there are beliefs. We haven't stated where we are supposed to look." This reflection applies equally well to the question of whether there are telepathic communications: given the domain of communications, we seek to determine whether—among the entities called "communications"—there are some that are truly telepathic. Without calling into question the distinction drawn by Descombes, I would like to suggest that, in order for us to be able to determine whether some communications are really telepathic, we would have to understand that it is possible for them to be so, and it is not at all obvious that we are here dealing with a genuine possibility. Having established the domain as that of communications, what are we really trying to find out? The description that we give of such communications, is it at all intelligible? That is not obviously the case. See Vincent Descombes, "Le mental," in *La maladie mentale en mutation: Psychiatrie et société*, ed. Alain Ehrenberg and Anne M. Lovell (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2001), 282.
- ²³ Alan Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 59, no. 236 (October 1950): 453. Recall that the game is originally one with three players (an interrogator and candidates of each of the two sexes) in which the interrogator engages in two (written) conversations and must blindly determine which of the two participants is a man and which a woman. Turing proposes to have one of the two participants replaced by a machine and to change the objective from determining the participants' sexes to one of determining their kind: human being or machine?
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 454.
- ²⁵ Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (1979; New York: Basic Books, 1999), 599.
- ²⁶ See Andrew Hodges, *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (1983; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 524.
- ²⁷ See David Leavitt, "Turing and the Paranormal," in *The Turing Guide*, ed. B. Jack Copeland, Jonathan P. Bowen, Mark Sprevak, Robin Wilson, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 351.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 352.
- ²⁹ Turing, "Computing Machinery," 453.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ See Rupert Read, *A Wittgensteinian Way with Paradoxes* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2013), 45–64.
- ³² See, for example, P. M. S. Hacker, *The Intellectual Powers* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 298.
- ³³ A. J. Ayer, "Symposium: Other Minds," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 20 (1946): 190.

- ³⁴ See, for example, Michael Sollberger, “The Epistemological Problem of Other Minds and the Knowledge Asymmetry,” *The European Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (December 2017): 1476–1495.
- ³⁵ These cursory remarks have of course been inspired by both the second Wittgenstein and by Gilbert Ryle, as well as by other philosophers like Friedrich Waismann, Norman Malcolm, Anthony Kenny, Bede Rundle, Peter Hacker, Hans-Johann Glock and, in France, Vincent Descombes who have extended, revised, clarified and synthesised the work of these two great philosophers. Within the confines of this article, I can only suggest that taking telepathy seriously is subject to deeper criticisms than the epistemological ones discussed earlier, a suggestion that these authors have fleshed out over the course of thousands of pages.
- ³⁶ P. T. Geach, “History of a Fallacy,” in *Logic Matters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 1–13.
- ³⁷ In order not to injudiciously apply formal logic to ordinary language utterances, Geach refrains from characterising the error as the result of an inversion in the order of operators. He prefers to call the error the “boy-and-girl fallacy,” a name taken from an example showing that one could not infer that “there is some girl that every boy loves” from the premise “every boy loves some girl.” *Ibid.*, 1.

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