

# On the Road to Solipsism

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The first task, in the philosophical therapy that opens the way to constructive appropriation of the theological tradition, must be to examine one's notions of the soul.<sup>1</sup> The very idea of the mind, let alone of the soul, has been eliminated by one powerful philosophical school – exemplified here by Quine. We are far more likely, however, to endorse, or unwittingly host, a certain incipient Solipsism. John Stuart Mill's argument from analogy for our knowledge of other minds may be classical, but it is not free from objections. On the contrary, it only confirms the myth of the Little Man inside the shell of the body which it is intended to refute. The problem is not intra-theological. The difficulty of the relationship between mind and body, and between myself and others, may be illustrated by some quotations from Proust. This brings us to the threshold of a re-examination of the work of Wittgenstein on the philosophy of psychology – but his work is best read in the context of further work by John Wisdom and Stanley Cavell, two of his finest interpreters, in this matter at any rate.

## I

One line is to eliminate talk of the soul altogether. This could not satisfy Catholics, or any other Christians who regard themselves as obliged to make sense of the tradition which they have inherited. We may well feel strongly tempted by a Platonizing dualism that longs to release the soul from the barnacles and cirripeds with which it is encrusted in this present life (*Republic*, 612). But out and out behaviourism can have little attraction for people who find themselves at home, or even simply searching, within any Christian tradition. It is hard even for us to imagine what the allurements might be of any such strict materialist theory of consciousness. Quine's eliminative physicalism will do as an example.<sup>2</sup>

Quine counts as a major figure in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. He is regarded as a logician, but (like many logicians) he is also a master of rhetoric. His abrasive and aphoristic prose is one of the joys of current philosophical writings. His curt way with the mind/body problem is summed up in a famous address given in 1954: "All I am or ever hope to be is due to irritations of my surface". We are physical objects, as he says, "sitting in a physical world". In this sedentary posture one is exposed: "Light rays strike my retinas; molecules bombard my eardrums and finger-

tips". But this prompts retaliation: "These waves take the form of a torrent of discourse about tables, people, molecules, light rays, retinas, air waves, prime numbers, infinite classes, joy and sorrow, good and evil". The deliberate way in which Quine rhetorically interweaves mention of "people", feelings, and values, with the jargon of elementary physics and mathematics, of course *says* far more than any logical arguments that he has ever produced, here or anywhere else. The way that one is able to "strike back", with this "torrent of discourse", comes from one's having assimilated the culture of the community to which one belongs – "all this training", as Quine says, which has consisted of "an impinging of physical forces, largely other people's utterances, upon my surface, and of gradual changes in my own constitution consequent upon these physical forces". A human being is a physical object with a surface that reacts to irritation by the utterances of other beings of the same kind. As Quine says: "All I am or ever hope to be is due to irritations of my surface, together with such latent tendencies to response as may have been present in my original germ plasm". The person upon whose transcendental subjectivity such grand privileges are held to descend (e.g. by theologians) remains, according to Quine, the product of "surface irritation". The whole of civilisation may be described in the same sort of fashion: "All the lore of the ages is due to irritation of the surfaces of a succession of persons, together, again, with the internal initial conditions of the several individuals". Thus, what cannot be described by physics and physiology, will be accounted for by a Pavlovian associationist psychology of the human animal. Quine, indeed, goes on to describe how a child learns the word "red". This learning process, as he says, goes by many names; but the principal ones turn out to be *association* and *conditioning*. In quintessentially Quinean style a theory is then sketched out to show how "language is occasionally descriptive in a way that other quiverings of irritable protoplasm are not". The "quiverings of irritable protoplasm" which become language extend eventually into science. This happens when "system" is introduced, together with "an artificial proboscis of punch cards and quadrille paper" (a characteristically Quinean poetic conceit).

On Quine's account, then, people are basically the product of the mutually interacting surface irritations characteristic of a certain kind of physical object. This picture needs to be contrasted with what Quine takes to be the only available rival. This turns out to be "mentalism" – which is the belief that the mind is a repository of mental entities. Each sentence that one utters somehow "copies" or "reveals" some pre-existent or concomitant mental entity (a meaning). Thus it comes about, as Quine says elsewhere,

“in mentalistic philosophy there is the familiar predicament of private worlds”. We are each, that is to say, locked into our private world and communication becomes an almost insuperable problem. It becomes difficult even to be sure that other people *do* have minds. If such solipsism were indeed the sole alternative, then of course one might be more content to be described as the product of surface irritations to a certain physical object.

## II

“Other Minds”: that is one of the standard topics in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. From an agenda unintentionally set by Descartes, Locke and Hume, at the dawn of what is (laughingly) called “Modern Philosophy”, an immense literature has developed. The key text remains Chapter 12 of John Stuart Mill’s famous attack on the so-called “Scottish philosophy” of Thomas Reid and William Hamilton, in his *Examination* of the latter’s work (first published in 1865). Reid had argued, against Hume, that if “my mind is but a series of feelings or, as it has been called, a thread of consciousness”, then “the proposition that I have any fellow creatures, or that there are any Selves except mine, is but words without a meaning”. Mill refuses to go along with Reid’s *reductio ad absurdum* of what is supposed to be Hume’s theory – “All that I am compelled to admit if I receive this theory, is that other people’s Selves also are but series of feelings, like my own”. There is thus an *argument from analogy* for the existence of other minds. Mill puts the following question to himself: “By what evidence do I know, or by what considerations am I led to believe, that there exist other sentient creatures; that the walking and speaking figures which I see and hear, have sensations and thoughts, or in other words possess Minds?”. His answer runs thus: “I conclude it from certain things, which my experience of my own states of feeling proves to me to be marks of it”. Thus, that the walking and speaking figures that I see and hear do in fact possess minds is a *conclusion* that I draw from my own *states of feeling*. Mill goes on as follows: “I conclude that other human beings have feelings like me, because, first, they have bodies like me, which I know, in my own case, 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 a uniform sequence, of which the beginning is modification of my body, the middle is feelings, the end is outward demeanour. 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. Experience, there-

fore, obliges me to conclude that there must be an intermediate link; which must either be the same in others as in myself, or a different one: I must either believe them to be alive, or to be automata: and by believing them to be alive, that is, by supposing the link to be of the same nature as in the case of which I have experience, and which is in all other respects similar, I bring other human beings, as phenomena, under the same generalisations which I know by experience to be the true theory of my own existence”.

That sounds perfectly straightforward and innocuous to many people. It seems entirely right to start from one’s own state of feelings; what could be more certain and transparent? It sounds acceptable enough that one must believe that other human beings, as phenomena, are sentient like oneself if they are not automata. It seems all right to say that one comes to believe that other people have feelings like one’s own as the conclusion of a process of deductive inference from premisses such as their having bodies and their exhibiting certain acts, in the way that Mill indicates. Surely we confront one another, each a radically enigmatic hunk of space-time, each signalling (occasionally) to the other about something that means a great deal to him or her in the privacy of his or her own mind or heart. Don’t I have to decode your signals? Don’t I have to “read” what you are signalling to me – interpreting as hard as I can? Aren’t we each isolated monads, gesticulating desperately at one another, across all the physical and sociological barriers? Isn’t the basic thing that I at least have a certain faith that you are similar to me in your constitution? Where should we be if we did not grant each other the benefit of the doubt at this primitive level?

Alfred Schutz (1899- 1959), although his principal work appeared in German in 1932, is only now achieving recognition as one of the foremost figures in the philosophy of the social sciences, since the English translation of 1967. Schutz belongs to that constellation of thinkers, including Max Weber, Scheler and Husserl, who have had an incalculable influence also on European Catholic thought. His book contains this marvellous passage, which needs to be cited in extenso:<sup>3</sup>

“Suppose that you and I are watching a bird in flight. The thought ‘bird-in-flight’ is in each of our minds and is the means by which each of us interprets his own observations. Neither of us, however, could say whether our lived experiences on that occasion were identical. In fact, neither of us would even try to answer that question, since one’s own subjective meaning can never be laid side by side with another’s and compared. Nevertheless, during the flight of the bird you and I have ‘grown older together’; our experiences have been simultaneous. Per-

haps while I was following the bird's flight I noticed out of the corner of my eye that your head was moving in the same direction as mine. I could then say that the two of us, that *we*, had watched the bird's flight. What I have done in this case is to coordinate temporally a series of my own experiences with a series of yours. But in so doing I do not go beyond the assertion of a mere *general* correspondence between my perceived 'bird in flight' and your experiences. I make no pretence to any knowledge of the content of your subjective experiences or of the particular way in which they were structured. It is enough for me to know that you are a fellow human being who was watching the same thing that I was. And if you have in a similar way coordinated my experiences with yours, then we can both say that *we* have seen a bird in flight".

Schutz's sense of how we come to know that we are having the same experience seems much more precarious than Mill's. I set to work to interpret your behaviour from a starting-point which is the famous "egocentric predicament". The best that I can do, when I am having my "bird-in-flight" thought inside my head, is to deduce from the movement of your head – which "I noticed out of the corner of my eye" – that you too must be having a "bird-in-flight" thought inside your head. Of course, one sometimes (even often) observes something, on a walk in the open, and then finds that one's companion had actually been thinking of something else, or of nothing whatsoever. As I was having my "bird-in-flight" thought, the strain on your face may have meant that you were reciting "The Windhover" to yourself, or wishing that I should keep my eyes on the track rather than have these ornithological rhapsodies. How can I ever know for certain what you have in mind? We are each in a radically private world.

The stoical resignation with which Schutz accepts that his companion's stream of consciousness very probably runs parallel with his own draws on a deep and widespread feeling that communication between such solitary souls as we human beings apparently are is all but impossible: "It is enough for me to know that you are a fellow human being who was watching the same thing that I was".

That a touted philosopher of the *social* sciences should have this radically *solipsistic* epistemology of Other Minds may well give rise to ribald thoughts. That John Stuart Mill goes so far in the same direction is a much more serious matter. He is, after all, by far the most important British thinker of the nineteenth century. His *System of Logic* (1843) and *Utilitarianism* (1863) circumscribe the metaphysical and ethical space within which British culture has continued to think – with a certain recurrent ambiva-

lence never better articulated than in Mill's own indispensable *Autobiography* (1873). But there is far more to this solipsism than that. Philosophical attempts to express and neutralize solipsism are merely the tip of an iceberg.

### III

At this point there should be some examples to show how deeply mainstream Catholic piety and thought (not to mention the bizarre asceticisms that flourish on the fringe) remain marked by radically solipsistic-dualistic assumptions. The very idea of "spirituality" still carries bodiless and individualistic implications. People often say that they never pray when discussion soon shows that they mean only that they never have an inner stream of pious thoughts to accompany their acts of worship. People still believe that his first letter to the Corinthians shows that St Paul rejected sex, marriage, women, and the body, whereas the text shows him arguing against Christians who are inclined to do so and (in the process) drawing upon a relatively balanced sense of the corporeal and the corporate. And so on. Obviously, when having to reflect on the matter, everybody thinks that he or she is free of philosophical solipsism. In fact, however, even those whose heads rise philosophically above the water often suffer just as much as anybody else from paranoid perceptions. The doctrine that nobody exists but me only mirrors the doctrine that I matter to nobody. A few failures to communicate with certain people soon lead to treating them as if their minds were as inaccessible as those of aliens from some other galaxy. Retreating irrevocably into one's private world often leads to confinement in a public institution for people who have lost all their individuality. Scepticism about our knowledge of other people's minds, far from being simply a perverse philosophical theory, has roots in the very deepest fears that we have about how much we have in common with our kind.

Nobody has described our difficult relationship with the physical more beautifully than Proust. Consider the following two passages.<sup>4</sup> First, when Marcel's grandmother has a stroke:

"I went upstairs, and found my grandmother not so well. For some time past, without knowing exactly what was wrong, she had been complaining of her health. It is in moments of illness that we are compelled to recognize that we live not alone but chained to a creature of a different kingdom, whole worlds apart, who has no knowledge of us and by whom it is impossible to make oneself understood: our body. Say that we met a brigand by the way; we might yet convince him by an appeal to his personal interest, if not to our own plight. But to ask pity of our body is like discoursing before an octopus, for

which our words can have no more meaning than the sound of the tides, and with which we should be appalled to find ourself condemned to live”.

That unknown thing, her sick and dying body, was responsive now only to the mercury in the thermometer and the quinine in the analgesic: substances that were contemporary with the earth's first inhabitants – “long anterior to the creation of *l'homme qui pense*”. The mind eventually fails to know the body; the body, then, responds better to substances that have existed immemorially longer than *thought*.

Earlier, in the same volume, Marcel realized that he could never know what his aunt's cook thought of him:

“At any rate I realized the impossibility of obtaining any direct and certain knowledge of whether Françoise loved or loathed me. And thus it was she who first gave me the idea that a person does not (as I had imagined) stand motionless and clear before our eyes with his merits, his defects, his plans, his intentions with regard to ourself exposed on his surface, like a garden at which, with all its borders spread out before us, we gaze through a railing, but is a shadow which we can never succeed in penetrating, of which there can be no such thing as direct knowledge, with respect to which we form countless beliefs, based upon his words and sometimes upon his actions, though neither words nor actions can give us anything but inadequate and as it proves contradictory information – a shadow behind which we can alternately imagine, with equal justification, that there burns the flame of hatred and of love”.

Hearing from somebody else (Jupien the tailor) that Françoise disliked him when he had supposed that she “adored me and lost no opportunity of singing my praises” Marcel allowed his disillusionment to develop into out and out metaphysical scepticism:

“I realised that it is not only the material world that is different from the aspect in which we see it; but that all reality is perhaps equally dissimilar from what we think ourselves to be directly perceiving; that the trees, the sun and the sky would not be the same as what we see if they were apprehended by creatures having eyes differently constituted from ours, or, better still, endowed for that purpose with organs other than eyes which would furnish trees and sky and sun with equivalents, though not visual”.

Of course the conclusion is extravagant. The young capitalist would never have seen the servant's true face anyway. The notion that beings with some alternative perceptual apparatus would relate to everything differently from us verges on the much-debated question of how different conceptual frameworks may be.<sup>5</sup> And so on.

The point here is only that philosophical scepticism about how direct and certain our knowledge of other people's minds may be, has roots deep in ordinary everyday experience. At some time or another, most of us must have had the shock of discovering that we had totally misread somebody else's expression.

#### IV

The first of the Proust passages stands at the head of John Wisdom's paper at the Aristotelian Society symposium on "Other Minds" in 1946. His famous series of articles on the same theme, published in *Mind* 1940-43, came out as a book in 1952. Although little read today, it is a classic. The central aim of Wisdom's work was to lay bare what it is about one person's knowledge of another's mind which allows some philosophers to say that it is simply knowledge of the reactions of an organism to its environment (the Quinean line), while others want to say that such knowledge is inevitably indirect and inferential (along Mill's line), or radically impossible altogether (as Schutz seems to say). As noted at the outset, behaviouristic reduction of talk of mind to talk of surface irritations would not tempt theologically minded people. The standard view is no doubt the argument from analogy: I observe the association between my mental states and certain physical states or activities of my body; I observe other bodies similar to mine and notice that they exhibit states and activities similar to those of my body; thus I conclude, by analogy, that mental states like the ones that I experience are associated with those other bodies in the same way that my mental states are associated with my body. That seems to stem the tide of solipsistic claims (fears and/or desires) that what other people are thinking, feeling, experiencing, etc must remain radically private and inaccessible. We can watch one another and work out, by inferential processes that, with experience, become as fast as lightning, what the other must be thinking, etc. That seems to do justice to the realities of the "inner life", in a way that the Quinean philosophy of surface irritations fails (and intends to fail) to do. At the same time it rules out any idea that one's mind may lie transparently open to anybody with special powers of telepathy, second sight, etc.

But it won't do. It suggests, as John Wisdom says, that we know the state of the soul in a body which isn't ours in the way we know the state of the inhabitant of a house we never enter – by *analogy*. The curtains are drawn in the house across the street, the stereo is on and there is a clink of glasses: such are the outward signs that allow us to infer what is going on inside. When I see tears on your cheeks I deduce that you are having feelings of distress – at least if there is no smell of onions. The model of the house and its inhabitant, the Little Man inside the carapace, has a



firm hold of our imagination. We are never really very far from the traditional mythology of the body as prison of the soul – in Donne's words:<sup>6</sup>

no stubborn sullen anchorite,  
Which fixed to a pillar, or a grave doth sit  
Bedded, and bathed in all his ordures, dwells  
So foully as our souls in their first-built cells.  
Think in how poor a prison thou didst lie  
After, enabled but to suck and cry.  
Think, when 'twas grown to most, 'twas a poor inn,  
A province packed up in two yards of skin.

All the time, the assumption is that conversation is making noises at one another, in an almost impossible attempt to transfer meanings or ideas from the inside of one closed chamber to the inside of another. But what is all wrong with this picture is simply that talking is *acting* together.<sup>7</sup> And then, with Wisdom and Cavell, we are back in Wittgenstein's school. It is when people already share certain reactions, when they can jointly take part in certain activities, when they participate in the multifarious practices, customs, traditions and institutions that constitute a way of living (a community and a common order), that the fears and the desire of others have grounds to develop that scepticism with regard to knowledge of other minds which brings us to the brink of sanity.

Wittgenstein had a profound respect for the body: consider only that isolated note of 1931 (*Culture and Value*, p 11): "The delightful difference of temperature of the parts of the human body". He also – and therefore – had fundamental remarks to make about the soul (ibid. p 23): "The face is the soul of the body". But when we come to spell out such remarks we best do so with the help of some passages from the writings of Wisdom and Cavell – philosophers who, like Wittgenstein himself, bring poetry and psycho-analysis to bear on their explorations of epistemology. Consider this passage by Cavell:<sup>8</sup>

"The necessity of the task is the choice of finitude, which for us (even after God) means the acknowledgement of the existence of finite others, which is to say, the choice of community, of autonomous moral existence. The impossibility lies in the options of community that the older grown-ups have left, which no one could want, not with a whole heart".

Or consider this passage by John Wisdom:<sup>9</sup>

"On the road to Solipsism . . . there blows the same wind of loneliness which blows on the road to the house with walls of glass which none can break. In the labyrinth of metaphysics are the same whispers as one hears when climbing Kafka's staircases to the tribunal which is always one floor up. Is it perhaps

because of this that when in metaphysics we seem to have arranged by a new technique a new dawn then we find ourselves again on Chirico's sad terraces, where those whom we can never know still sit and it is neither night nor day?"

*To be continued*

- 1 Cf "Wittgenstein and Theological Studies", *New Blackfriars*, December 1982.
- 2 The essay cited is reprinted as chapter 22 in *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*, by W. V. Quine, revised and enlarged edition 1976.
- 3 My attention was drawn to this by Roger Poole's splendid essay in *The Body as a Medium of Expression*, ICA lectures 1975.
- 4 The quotations come from *Remembrance of Things Past*, Volume Five, p 408 ff and p 83 f.
- 5 Proust seems to have been quite keen on reconstructing human physiology – when Marcel gets to the point of kissing Albertine (Volume Six, p 75) he runs into difficulty: "I had never stopped to think that man, a creature obviously less rudimentary in structure than the sea-urchin or even the whale, is nevertheless still unprovided with a certain number of essential organs, and notably possesses none that will serve for kissing", etc.
- 6 "Of the Progress of the Soul: The Second Anniversary".
- 7 See *Must We Mean What We Say?* by Stanley Cavell, 1969, p 33.
- 8 See *The Claim of Reason*, 1979, p 464.
- 9 See the last but one paragraph of *Philosophy and Psycho-Analysis*, 1953.

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