Ayer’s Inductive Argument on Other Minds

**Abstract:** Problem of other minds is one of the most important problems in the recent philosophy of mind. I have for example no means of knowing that other people have sensation or feelings which are in any way like my own. And so each one’s experience is private to himself alone. Ayer says if I understand the meaning of a statement which refers to the feelings and experiences of another as I understand by my own then our acceptance is justified by means of inductive argument. On the basis of my own experiences I form general hypotheses that certain physical phenomena are accompanied by certain feelings. When I observe that someone is in a certain kind of physical state I thereby infer that he is having these feelings, feelings which are similar to those that in similar circumstances I have myself. If the skeptic objects to this argument saying that the conclusion is unverifiable. Then Ayer would argue that one in generalizing from a single instance can perhaps be countered by maintaining that it is not a matter of extending to all other persons, a conclusion which has been found to hold for only one, but rather of proceeding from the fact that certain properties have been found to be conjoined in various context is to the conclusion that they remain conjoined in further contexts. This theory has been expounded detail in this article.

**Keywords:** Mind, past events, telepathy, thinking, feeling.

**Introduction:**

The problem of other minds contains some very serious confusion, and that once these confusions are exposed, the problem of other minds, as it is normally understood, can be seen as something that needs only a careful analysis. From the historical point of view two important conceptions that are more relevant to the problem of other minds. One is from the Cartesian tradition and the other has been from the point of view of empiricism. Cartesians state that I am composed of two different kinds of substances, a physical body and a spiritual ego, mind or soul. My physical characteristics i.e. my size, weight, shape, color and so forth are property ascribed to my body; and my spiritual characteristics i.e. my thoughts, sensations, emotions, volitions and so forth are property ascribed to my mind. Since my body and mind are substances, and since substances are by definition, independent of everything else, it follows that my ‘ownership’ of my attributes, both mental and physical, is logically non-transferable. That is, I am a result of the ‘unity’ of two substances, and I am completely distinct from all other selves; thus my attributes, which are ‘modifications’ of the two distinct substances that compose my being, and which can never be shared by any other self other than my own.

The empiricists on the other hand, state that I am fundamentally a material body that is causally associated with a particular class of non-spatial thoughts, sensations, images, and the like. My physical attributes belong strictly to my body, that is, these are the characteristics of my body; but my sensations and so forth, which are clearly not physical don’t actually belong to a thing at all- for there is no indefinable thing such as an ego or soul to which they could belong; they are, instead contingently, associated with my body. For instance, a sensation of pain may be causally associated with my amputated hand. That is, in other words, my physical attributes belong to my body in the sense that they define its structure and material make up; but my experiences form only a loosely unified class that is intimately associated with my body.
In other words to say that given experience belongs to A is to say that it is causally associated with the body called A. Now, one particular body has a special class of physical characteristics P and it is associated with a distinct class of labeled experience E. This body belongs to a familiar kind, H and it is called ‘my body’. Since this body is of kind H, the experiences associated with it are not only my experiences (they are, of course, mine by above definition). They are also H-ian experiences, that is, the experience of an H-kind body. But as H-ian experiences, these experiences might have been had by some H-ian body other than mine; they might for instance, have been had by the body called “Jones”. That is, for example, the expression ‘pain’, which is applied to certain of my experiences, could also be meaningfully be applied to certain H-ian experiences for the body called “Jones” and for this reason the idea that my body and Jones’s might occasionally have exactly the same kind of experiences is perfectly intelligible. Since, my experiences are causally associated with the body called “my body”, a question may arise; ‘Do all H-kind bodies actually have experiences causally associated with them or is my body the only one that does?’ (Bruce Aune, Philosophical Review, 70, (3) P.321)

In other words, there are for example ‘simple’ experiences like pain, sensations etc, which are entirely determined in meaning by a kind of procedure that is essentially private. These words have meanings only in the sense that they stand for certain kinds of experiences which are entirely distinct from any publicly observable behavior or physical change that might regularly accompany them. So, if someone understands the meaning of such a word, it is only because he is able to associate it with a certain kind of experience that he himself had undergone or enjoyed or felt. That is to say, if the person has never actually felt the pain, for example, he couldn’t properly be said to understand even part of the meaning of the word ‘pain’. It is claimed that if I am in pain, for example, then I know that I am in pain and I know the quality of my pain as well, that is, I know whether my pain is intense or not. So, in such cases having or knowing of a sensation entails an ‘immediate’ knowledge of its character and identity. But in the case of other person one can never be “directly aware” of another’s sensation: one can never be aware, of anther’s sensations in the way one is aware of one’s own. These assumptions are generally thought to be necessary for the generation of traditional problem of other minds. In this manner the problem of other minds has been raised by the empirists. So the problem of other minds had its origin in the empiricism itself but it is only in the middle of eighteenth century that question came into prominence.

Ayer’s Problem & solution:

According to Alfred Jules Ayer, we may not be able to think of minds existing apart from bodies but it is a matter of commonsense that they are at least distinguishable or we can distinguish mind from body. Even if we don’t say mind is a substance, we are at least able to make a distinction between mental events and physical events. And we characterize mental events as somewhat private to oneself alone. As a result of this, we believe that our thoughts and feelings, our dreams and imaginings, our sensations and memories, are things to which we alone can have access. We may communicate to others but we cannot transfer them. It is true that many people share same thoughts and feelings in the sense that these thoughts and feelings are similar or proved from a similar causes and not that they are literally same. It has been stated that two different persons perceiving the same physical objects may have similar thoughts and feels, but these can’t be the same. And so we can reach the philosophical conclusion that “each one’s
experiences are private to oneself alone.” (Ayer, 1956, Pp. 199-200)

Thus, when we ask the question whether an experience is public or private we are asking the question language and question of language will determine whether our judgments are identical in relation to our experiences. Externally visible objects are publicly available to the viewers and so it is public because it makes sense to say of different people that they are perceiving the same physical object; but that is not the case with mental images, mental images are private because different people can’t have the same mental image of an object; they may be imagining the same object but their respective mental image can’t be of similar kind.

So, there is a necessary truth in our saying that each one’s experiences are private to oneself alone, they are really referring to private experiences that an individual alone can experience. Because there will be contradiction if we say that two peoples experiences or feelings are numerically identical to one another, it will be logically impossible that I should literally feel the pain my friend as he feels for himself.

Thus we are stating a necessary fact that an individual can’t feel or experience the feelings and experiences of another in the literal sense. I can’t therefore logically think of my friend’s thought, or dream his dreams, or enjoy his memories, or feel his pains. But does it hinder me from inspecting his thoughts, or sensations or feelings? His experiences are private to him in the sense that he alone can experience his feelings but does this mean that we can’t see or feel his feelings or experiences when he displays his feelings through his behaviour? It is impossible to say that an individual displays his feelings or experiences to himself alone. The behavior that an individual dispose are the inner experiences which are symbols for other people to know the individual’s inner mental state.

Similarly, apart from oneself we can say that it is admittedly conceivable that we can know what is happening to a person at a distant place. It is possible that we ourselves can go to that place and authenticate ourselves of someone being present there. But if we remain at our present place we can only know about the distant place and all the happenings only by inference. Therefore it is not possible that we should know what is going on at a distant place while we remain in our present place. This is what we call telepathy, and Ayer on this regard says that: “Let us suppose that the occurrence of telepathy were well authenticated, would not this be a case one person’s directly inspecting the private experiences of another? We quite often come to know that people are thinking or feeling simply by observing them. One looks at a man and sees that he is angry or perplexed or bored or amused. Why then should not we say that we have direct observation not only of his outward behavior but of his inner state?” (Ibid, P. 203)

Now, we can’t deny this and anyone can assert this judgment without appeal to critical reasoning. From the common sense point of view each one is inclined to say that there is some kind of unconscious process of inference that goes behind; an individual’s experiences are easily read off from his dispositions. Though it is not a conscious effort and we don’t proceed from one step to another we only try to understand his behaviour from the signs that he displays through his behaviour. It is also conceivable that one should come to know what another person is thinking or feeling even though he displayed none of the appropriate signs. This is what happens in the case of ‘directly observing the experiences of another’ or in telepathy. But even in telepathy one’s experience remains private to oneself. Because it doesn’t make any less sense to
state that such experiences are of oneself rather than that of another. It is logically independent of the experience of someone else, even if it purports to reveal to oneself. There would be no contradiction in stating that the experience of an individual existed even though the person who by means of telepathy is able to know that the other person’s experience did not exist. If that is the case it would not, indeed, be telepathic, if telepathy is taken to imply that it yields knowledge of the other person’s mental state. (Ibid, P. 206.)

While talking about the knowledge of past, Ayer argues that, just as it is not in practice possible to have non-inferential knowledge of the past yet it is nevertheless conceivable that one should do so, so although it is not in practice possible to have non-inferential knowledge of the thoughts and feelings of another yet it is conceivable that one should do so. Being the person one is, is to possess of certain properties of oneself; being another is to possess someone else’s properties; and thus it is practically impossible to abandon one’s own properties and possess another’s properties yet it is not logically impossible, it is not inconceivable. Ayer held that it was logically possible that one might have been another person. But logically it is impossible that an individual should be identical with another individual: Thus if I am not able to understand or feel the experiences of another then it is the fact that we are separate beings different from one another and I can’t make any kind of adjustment to recover from such kind of difficulty. There is no possible adjustment of my situation by which it could be overcome. But Ayer admits that even if it is logically impossible that I turn out to be another person while being maintain my own self yet it is not inconceivable that I should, whilst remaining myself, imagine myself to be another.

For he says: It is impossible that any other person should answer to it, while continuing to answer to the descriptions which sufficiently identify himself. It does not follow, however, that I cannot conceive of myself as answering to it.” (Ibid., p. 206) Now, what is logically impossible is inconceivable, and it must be impossible that I can express feelings or desires of another while being myself, for this would be to conceive that I would express to two incompatible feelings. Feelings of another individual leaving aside my own which is another, but the possibility that is not excluded from the fact that while I should, remaining myself, conceive how feelings would seem to a person of another. But this possibility, though it may be sufficient to establish that statements about the minds of others are meaningful to us, is not the conclusion that Ayer set out to establish: the possibility of our having non-inferential knowledge of the minds of others. The skeptical argument maintained that this possibility must exist if our inferences to the minds of others were to be legitimate. Ayer is now holding that imagining what life is like to another is sufficient for understanding statements about the experiences of another. Whether such kind of justification is right or not it is difficult to answer it here.

Coming back to the knowledge of the past he says that:

“It is not necessarily true that our knowledge of a past event is based upon our knowledge of other events occurring in the present, for it is not necessarily true that an event which happened to be past should be past and it is logically possible that I should have non-inferential knowledge of what is at this moment an event of the past, though I cannot have such knowledge at this moment. Since it is not inconceivable that events which are as a matter of fact now past should be present, then it is not inconceivable that we should check any conclusion about the past.” (Ibid, P.208)
Thus, by pointing out that being past is not an internal property of an event Ayer has certainly removed one unreal difficulty in the way of our knowledge of the world. This however is not the result that Ayer has removed all the skeptical difficulties. It does not remove for example about the knowledge of distant places. Ayer while answering to skeptics says that it is not possible in experience to have the experience of the past in the present and it also can never be. The reason is that it can never be tested by any means as the event has already taken place in the past. Thus, Ayer shows that the events of the past are not things that can never be shown to have existence in experience in the present context. And though this makes it clear that the conclusions of our inferences about the past could be tested, but it is impossible to make one contemporary observation both of a present and a past event.

According to Ayer some philosophers argue that all memory of the past necessarily takes place by means of a present memory experience, which they have treated by means of the analogy of a sense-datum. They say that such type of experience is the essential for remembering something. But on account of this few questions were raised questions like how do a memory experience different from other kinds of experience? How is a memory experience related to remembering a past event? And finally, how is that certain of our memory experiences are reliable evidences for the existence of past events? Ayer removes these three questions at one stroke by denying that remembering necessarily involves having any experiences at all.

Mental images may be helpful, but they play no logically essential part in any memory. Therefore, there are no memory experiences in the strict sense of the term, although there may be mental images which are as a matter of fact helpful to memory. There are no typical memory experiences, so we do not have to say how they differ from other experiences, nor how having one of them is related to remembering a past event, nor how it is that they are reliable guides to the past. The images that are related to the memory of the past events are answered, in the sense that they do not typically differ from other sorts of images, they are related to remembering a past event in the sense that they only assist in it, and some of them are reliable guides to past events while others are not. So these traditional problems concerning memory are all removed if it is true that to remember a past event is to know that it occurred, that is on the basis of having once had present experience of it. As Ayer says, but in claiming to remember one is not so much describing one’s present state of mind as giving an assurance that the event occurred, at the same time implying that one is in a position to know that it occurred. This however may be agreed upon but the upshot of the subsequent questions related to it may not satisfactorily be accounted in the philosophy of perception. If we believe, as Ayer does, that perception is essentially the having of sense-experiences, or sense-data. For how are sense-data distinguished from other sorts of experience, how is having sense-data related to perceiving physical objects, and how can we be sure that sense-data are indeed reliable evidence for their existence? These are the few questions that demand critical examination and as far as Ayer is concerned he seems to have not inquired about it.

Now, coming back to our main concern the obvious answer to the question how we know about the experiences of others is that they are communicated to us, either through their natural manifestations in the form of gestures, tears, laughter and so forth, or by the use of language. H. H. Price, in his article Our Evidence for the Existence of Other Minds, (1938, p. 430) states:
“One’s evidence for the existence of other minds comes from communication situations. For example, suppose a foreign body utters the noises ‘look! There is the bus’. I understand these noises, that is to say, they have for me a symbolic character, and on hearing them I now proceed to look round; and sure enough there is the bus, which I had not seen before, and perhaps was not expecting yet. This small occurrence, of hearing an utterance, understanding it and then verifying it for oneself, provides some evidence that the foreign body which uttered the noises is animated by a mind like one’s own.” Ayer on the other hand says:

“Ayer says if I understand the meaning of a statement which refers to the feelings and experiences of another as I understand by my own then our acceptance is justified by means of inductive argument. On the basis of my own experiences I form general hypotheses that certain physical phenomena are accompanied by certain feelings. When I observe that someone is in a certain kind of physical state I thereby infer that he is having these feelings, feelings which are similar to those that in similar circumstances I have myself.

Some philosophers have objected to this argument saying that the conclusion is unverifiable and the argument does not seem very strong. In defense to this argument Ayer says that one in generalizing from a single instance can perhaps be countered by maintaining that it is not a matter of extending to all other persons, a conclusion which has been found to hold for only one, but rather of proceeding from the fact that certain properties have been found to be conjoined in various context is to the conclusion that they remain conjoined in further contexts. Thus, he says that:
“I have discovered for example that when I have an infected toothache I feel considerable pain and that I tend to express this feeling in certain characteristic ways. And I have found that these connections hold independently of other circumstances such as the place where I happen to be, the way in which I am dressed, the state of the weather, and so on. On the other hand, I have found that it is not independent of the state of my nervous system. So when I observe that some other person is similarly affected and that he acts in a similar way, I may infer that a similar way, a similar feeling is also present, unless there is something in the circumstances that would make the connection fails” (Ibid, p. 216)

So, again he continues saying that:

“The question that I put is not: am I justified in assuming that what I have found to be true only of myself is also true of others? But having found that in various circumstances the possession of certain properties is united with the possession of a certain feeling, does this union continue to obtain when the circumstances are still further varied? We can broaden the argument by taking the difference of persons into the difference of the situations in which the psycho physical connections are similar.” (Ibid, p. 219.)

The skeptic maintains that, if this is the best evidence, he has no reason to be convinced; it does not even measures up to the standard of scientific proof. And in a way he is right. If it is required of an inductive argument that the generalization to which it leads should be based on a wide variety of experienced instances it is not possible. One has only a limited experience of the connection of ‘inner’ states with their outer manifestations. But these are not ordinary limitations; what is suspected about them is they are logically necessary.

The skeptic, Ayer says, rightly argues that this assumption cannot be justified. But, he says, the skeptic’s demand for justification is such that it necessarily cannot be met. ‘When it is understood that there logically could be no court of superior jurisdiction, it hardly seems troubling that inductive reasoning should be left, as it were, to act as judge in its own cause.’ According to him if we are able to justify the inferences that we make not to the extent of trying to do impossible nor to pretend that we have succeeded solving the problem. Then in a sense we solved the problem. Ayer is arguing that since it is logically necessary that argument by induction cannot be justified, then the fact that it cannot be justified is not troubling. This is true, but it does not follow that argument by induction is valid. The truth is that the principle of induction is contradictory, and it is for that reason that it is logically impossible that it should be justified and that the absence of justification is not troubling.

**Conclusion:**
I believe that Ayer falls into this error in the following way. He supposes that an inductive argument must be employed to justify every non-logical inference; in fact he calls every non-logical inference an inductive inference, following a common practice. Since he knows that some non-logical inferences are valid, he concludes that the principle of induction must be valid. He should have considered the strongest of the skeptic’s arguments, which concludes, not merely that the principle is unjustifiable, but that it is inconsistent. This is an example where a skeptical argument is valid and has the useful purpose of showing up an incorrect explanation of the foundation of scientific knowledge. The problem seems to me to lie in explaining how it is that, although the principle of induction is invalid,
yet carrying out experiments sometimes yields knowledge.

References: