

## Notes and Discussions

### A Defense of Mill on Other Minds

Charles SAYWARD\*

#### ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explain why the argument from analogy seems strong to an analogist such as Mill and weak to the skeptic. The inference from observed behavior to the existence of feelings, sensations, etc., in other subjects is justified, but its justification depends on taking observed behavior and feelings, sensations, and so on, to be not merely correlated, but connected. It is claimed that this is what Mill had in mind.

#### *1. Introduction*

In ordinary cases we would be satisfied if someone said that she knew someone else was in pain and the basis she gave was observed behavior (for example, she saw him wince and heard him cry out). It is alleged that we shall see a problem about whether we could really know whether the person was in pain as soon as we reflect on the fact that the observed wince and cry are items of bodily behavior whereas the pain of which knowledge was claimed is an item of inner experience. It is alleged that since no one can literally observe another person's feelings or sensations, everyone, in ascribing feelings to others, makes an inference from observed behavior to unobserved conscious experiences. It is alleged that this inference, which is assumed in practice, has no obvious or common sense justification. The idea is that philosophical reflection shows that we do make this inference and that the inference is dubious.

Some philosophers reject the allegation that we infer from something outer to something inner when we base a claim to know someone is in pain on the basis of that someone's behavior. Trying to establish this is one approach to the problem. Others agree that there is an inference but that it is justified. Trying to establish this is a second approach to the problem. This is the approach of John Stuart Mill, who writes (Mill 1979, p.191):

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? The most strenuous Intuitionist does not include this among the things that I know by direct intuition. I conclude it from certain things, which my expe-

\* University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Email: csayward@unlserve.unl.edu

rience of my own states of feeling proves to me to be marks of it. These marks are of two kinds, antecedent and subsequent; the previous conditions requisite for feeling, and the effects or consequences of it.

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 modifications of my body, the middle is feelings, the end is outward demeanor. 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. In my own case I know that the first link produces the last through the intermediate link, and could not produce it without. Experience, therefore, 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 generalizations which I know by experience to be the true theory of my own existence. And in doing so I conform to the legitimate rules of experimental enquiry.

This paper is a defense of Mill's approach to the problem.

## 2. *Three Theses*

Our exposition of the problem of other minds uses the example of pain. This is for simplicity and because the example is standard in the current literature. The following three theses yield the problem:

- Thesis 1        The empirical thesis. It is an empirical matter whether other people suffer pain; and so our knowledge of this fact must be based on observation.
- Thesis 2        The behavioral thesis. When we observe a person who is clearly in pain what we observe relevant to his or her being in pain is the person's behavior.
- Thesis 3        The inner/outer thesis. We can distinguish between a person's behavior when he or she is in pain from the pain that person is in.

By theses 1 and 2, we can tell another person is in pain only if we observe that person's behavior. By thesis 3 we can distinguish between a person's behavior and that person's being in pain. So how can we tell another person is in pain?

When we take in the fact that we can distinguish between a person's being in pain and the person's behaving in certain ways we realize that we can not read off the fact that a person is in pain simply from the person's behavior. The simple point that we can observe only behavior and that behavior alone cannot tell us that someone is in pain gives rise to our problem. The problem presents itself as a problem of figuring out how we can establish some kind of connection between certain types of behavior and states of being in pain.

Our initial reaction is one of bewilderment. While it is obvious to us that other people feel pain, we do not see how we know this. There is no obvious answer to the question "How can we know that another person is in pain?" This expresses the first stage of the epistemological inquiry into our common knowledge of other people's pains. Now we shall consider Mill's response to our problem.

When a philosopher like Mill considers the distinction between pain and behavior, the philosopher views pain as an inner sensation and behavior as outward movement. Behavior is movement of a physical body. It can be seen, measured, photographed. Pain,

on the other hand, cannot be seen or otherwise observed by other people. It is neither spatial nor physical. Nor is it a quality or property of physical things (like color or shape). Pain and behavior are viewed as radically different types of things.

Now if a philosopher understands the inner/outer distinction in the way just expressed, and if that philosopher accepts the other two theses, he or she is compelled to turn to some form of argument from analogy to solve the problem:

Premise 1 Other humans behave in such and such ways.

Premise 2 I behave in these ways.

Premise 3 When I behave in such and such ways I am usually in pain.

Conclusion When other humans behave in these ways they too usually are in pain.

Obviously there are a great many similarities that can be appealed to. Some philosophers are impressed by the great similarity between the nerve structure of different humans. More often philosophers focus on more common similarities.

### 3. *Connection and Correlation*

The stage is now set for a direct confrontation between the analogist and the skeptic. Whereas we can provide examples for the analogist, Mill, for example, we cannot provide examples of the skeptic. What we have is a position. Skepticism is the affirmation that the problem of other minds is a real problem and the denial that it has any solution.

Two objections to the argument from analogy yield the skeptical position. First, the argument from analogy is ineffective because it is based on one case. Second, it is ineffective because its conclusion cannot be independently verified, that is, verification of the conclusion is possible only by making use of the argument.

These objections have the interesting property that they utilize considerations that seem to be the very considerations that necessitate the argument to which they are objections. If we could verify that someone was in pain apart from behavioral observations then the argument would not be needed. If we could know someone was in pain apart from this argument then it would not be needed. Thus the analogist concludes the argument is needed, and if it is not perfect it will have to do.

The skeptic agrees with the analogist to this extent. The skeptic agrees that no independent verification is possible. The skeptic agrees that you can make use of no case other than your own. But then the skeptic concludes that the argument is an impossibly weak argument. So we have a kind of agreement about the facts, but a dispute about the significance of these facts. We need to explain how the argument can seem adequate to some and impossibly weak to others.

Let us turn to actual instances of the argument from analogy. Mill bases his analogy on general facts about bodily structure, bodily modification, and bodily behavior. Mill appeals to science. Mill agrees that what he discovers in his own case is not that different items are correlated, but that the different items are connected. For Mill what is key is not that this sensation and that bit of bodily behavior happen to occur at the same time or one right after the other. For Mill what is key is that the sensation caused the behavior. It is a causal connection that is given, not merely a joint occurrence but a joined occurrence of related items.

In contrast, philosophers who have argued skeptically have viewed the argument as proceeding from mere correlations. These distinct items (feelings of pain and behavior) as it happens occur at the same time.

This suggests the following hypothesis: If we think of what we can know in our own case as some kind of intimate connection then the argument from analogy seems reasonable. But if we think of what we can know in our own case as a mere correlation of distinct items then this argument seems unreasonable.

#### 4. Two Illustrations

*Illustration 1.* Suppose a man has a bunch of clocks. Each clock can be examined on the outside, but only one can be taken apart. All these clocks are both similar and different. For example, some have different long hands, but all have long hands. Let us suppose these clocks are the only artifacts this man had ever seen, and that he is unfamiliar with mechanisms. He takes apart one clock. He sees that it contains many odd shaped bits of metal. He notices that when one bit clicks inside the long hand on the face moves one notch. He notices that when he moves the hour hand, a little round thing turns on the inside. Now he turns to the other clocks and notices that their long hands move from notch to notch. He tries turning their hour hands and succeeds. He reasons to himself:

“These objects are, all in all, quite similar. Now when this long thing on the outside of this object skips along there is a little bit inside that clicks. And when I turn the shorter thing on the outside of this object, a little round thing turns on the inside. Seeing how all these objects are pretty much the same, those other objects also have little turning and clicking bits on the inside.”

The man begins to tinker with the other clocks. He finds a little nob on the top of each and tightens it. Now the hands on the face move. But if he does not tighten the nob, he finds the hands don't move. Now he takes his one clock apart. There he discovers that the nob tightens a spring that makes the one part turn and the other part click and that when the one part turns the short hand moves and that when the other bit clicks the long hand moves one notch. The man reasons to himself:

“Well, it is clear that my clock could not work if it did not have these two bits inside. All the clocks can be made to work by twisting the nob on top. Thus they must contain pieces inside just like the turning piece and clicking piece in my clock.”

Again, we have an inference from the observed to the unobserved. Again, the points of similarity are essential. But now the argument is not that, since these clocks are similar in various observed respects, they will also be similar with respect to the last two pieces. The other clocks must be similar to these last two pieces or they would not work.

In both of these cases we have an argument from analogy. But they are arguments of quite different degrees of forcefulness. The first argument is far less strong than the second. What is the source of this greater strength of the second one? It does not lie in the fact that now there are more similarities packed into the analogy. The important discovery is not that all the clocks have twistable nob on top. Nor is it that the man discovered that none of the things would run unless the top nob is twisted. As mere *similarities* these new facts would be on a par with finding out that all the clocks had black backs. The essential addition is the man's discovery that the operation of his one clock depended upon the nob twisting operating the hands through a mechanism. In his second reflections he is able to say those things *must* all have the same stuff inside. Otherwise he cannot explain the twisting of the nob and the turning of the hands. His second argument is still analogical. But now certain similarities have become more important because they can be used to provide an explanation that now seems demanded.

*Illustration 2.* A second illustration may be helpful. A person Y finds a number of boxes in a room. They have roughly the same shapes and sizes and a variety of pastel

colors. Y opens up one of the boxes and finds some pink paper inside of it. Y notes the box itself has the same shade of pink. Y argues: "Since the other boxes are similar to this box, they also probably contain paper of the same color as the respective box".

Now consider a person Z. Z finds the same boxes in the room. Z opens up one of the boxes and finds some pink paper inside of it. Z handles the paper and sees that her hands are stained the same shade of pink. She rubs the paper against a bit of its uncolored part and sees the box gets stained right through with the color. Z observes the box carefully and sees that it is unevenly pink. Z sees that it has been stained. Z looks at the other boxes and sees that they too have been stained. Z argues: "Since these boxes are stained in the same way this one is, they too must contain paper of the color of which they are stained".

It is clear that Z's argument is better than Y's. Y's argument relied only on a correlation between the color of the box and the color of the paper inside. Z discovered the paper inside the box had stained the box. Z discovered a connection.

Y's argument is purely analogical. It is a projection of a correlation on the basis of similarities. Z's argument is also analogical since it makes a projection based on similarities, but it contains an added element. Z projects a connection that allows her to argue from explanation. Z's conclusion could be wrong. But Z inferred her conclusion with greater persuasiveness. This persuasiveness is not the result of picking up another similarity. Z's argument would not have been made particularly stronger if she had discovered that each box was stapled together.

With the discovery of the stain Z obtained the means of explaining why the boxes should contain paper of such and such colors. For Y there was nothing to explain because Y knew of no connection between the color of the paper and the color of the box.

### 5. *Observational and Non-Observational Knowledge*

Mill is a philosopher who argues from analogy. So he must begin with his own case. How will he make use of his own case? That is, how does he come to know about his feelings of pain and his behavior and their relation to one another? He does not tell us. There are two alternatives. His knowledge could be either observational or non-observational knowledge.

When I say he might have found out about himself observationally, I mean that he might have gone about finding out about himself, as he would go about finding out about others. When I say he might have found out about himself non-observationally, I mean that he might have gone about finding out about himself as we normally do.

Some examples are in order. Think of the case where someone is scratching her ear. She knows she is scratching her ear though she does not see herself doing this and does not pay particular heed to how her hand or ear feels. Contrast this with a case in which someone's hand is numb and he has to look at it to see that a finger is moving. In the latter case the person has to stop what he is doing and look at himself to find out that his finger is moving, just as he would have to stop and look to see that someone else's finger was moving. In the former one just naturally knows. One does not have to look in the mirror to find out whether one is scowling or smiling.

Let us imagine Mill came to know about his behavior by observational means. Imagine him giving himself various pains while standing before a mirror. He would have observed his behavior by observing himself in the mirror. Or he might have asked his friends to keep record of his behavior while he kept a record of his pains. The result will be a chart or graph in which behavioral reports are correlated with feeling reports.

Now let us imagine that Mill came to know about his behavior by non-observational means. Then he knows that he is wincing, for example, without anyone telling him or without having to look in the mirror and even without paying any special heed to how his facial muscles feel.

In the case of non-observational knowledge the behavior and the pain are given as related items. My hypothesis is that if we view our own behavior in a non-observational way, the argument from analogy will appear adequate; but if we view our own behavior in an observational way, the argument from analogy will appear inadequate.

It is clear that our knowledge of ourselves is non-observational. Beyond doubt Mill did not go through the rather absurd procedure we imagined for observational knowledge of oneself. What we did imagine in the case of observational knowledge of oneself is an illustration of what it would be like to know of oneself as one knows of others. Now if someone observed himself or herself in that way after having made the radical distinction between pain and behavior in the case of others then that person would see his or her own behavior in that way. But if one returned to one's own case and recognized things about oneself in the ordinary, non-observational way, then one would see one's own behavior as a natural expression of one's own pain.

When an epistemologist such as Mill returns to his own case he does not experience the radical distinction he discovered when he considered his knowledge of other people and he comes to view his behavior differently. Behavior seen in this way then becomes the basis of his analogy. In projecting what he knows to be true in his own case to the case of others he comes to see their behavior as he sees his own. Despite his original distinction he again comes to see behavior as naturally expressing pain, as being connected and not merely correlated with pain.

The skeptic, on the other hand, fully preserves the original distinction in his or her own case. This has the result of seeing oneself as one sees others. Thus the imaginative example of observational self-knowledge was appropriate. The skeptic is limited to an argument like the first box argument of the previous section. For the skeptic the argument from analogy must be purely from analogy.

Whether or not an analogist such as Mill says that he is limited to a purely analogical argument, he in fact incorporates elements of an argument from explanation. The move from pure analogy to explanation corresponds to the move from correlations to connections. At some points Mill seems to realize that his argument has this added element. He appeals to the canons of scientific explanation in his summary of his argument. He says that if we do not assume the existence of inner feelings and sensations we cannot explain the data at our disposal (Mill 1979, p. 191).

The thing that opens the door to the explanatory element is the fact that behavior is seen as naturally expressing pain. The fact that this belief may not be clear in someone's mind is beside the point. This is how behavior is seen. Analogously a person may see the box as stained without ever explicitly framing the proposition "To say the box is stained is to say that something has produced its color in such and such a way". Once we see a stained box, the question "What has stained it?" is before us. Analogously, once we see a behavior as the natural expression of pain, the question "What has produced this behavior?" is before us. We may not explicitly pose this question. But seeing the behavior that way makes it seem reasonable to say, "The person is in pain". Analogously, seeing the box as stained makes it seem reasonable to say, "Something has stained it".

The force of the argument from analogy does not consist merely in the many similarities that can be drawn up; it consists in the character of the similarities. We do not think of human bodies moving in certain ways. We think of people crying out, groaning, wincing, and so on. We feel that we understand this behavior only if it expresses the pains we have when we act that way.

Thus seeing behavior in a certain way makes me feel that the argument is a strong argument. It is not necessary that the argument explicitly incorporate the element of explanation.

### 6. *A Comparison with Hume*

Here is a philosophical analogy. Consider Hume's analysis of causation. It proceeds through the raising of possibilities. Hume points out that any effect can be imagined to occur without its usual cause and any cause can be imagined to occur without its usual effect. Further, we can imagine events occurring without any causes or effects. Thus, events designated by the terms 'cause' and 'effect' are totally separate events. This is analogous to the epistemologist saying that we imagine pain without the behavior usually associated with it and the behavior without the pain. Thus, pain and behavior are totally separate phenomena.

Just as Hume analyzes the series of related events into a series of distinct events, so the epistemologist replaces the connection denoted by 'behavior expressing pain' by the correlation 'behavior-pain'.

For Hume the cause and effect relation is not an internal relation of distinguishable events. It is merely an observed correlation of separate events. On the Humean analysis the ordinary description 'This pane of glass has been shattered' ought to be replaced by 'This once whole pane of glass is lying in pieces'. To say it is shattered is to imply that something shattered it. But this, Hume claims, cannot be read off from what we observe, since it is conceivable that nothing caused this once whole pane to go to bits and pieces. When we are taking in Hume's distinctions we indeed feel as though we are going beyond the observable facts in saying that the window was shattered. But ordinarily we just use this kind of language to describe what we see. When we begin by seeing a broken pane of glass we directly have the question 'What broke it?' But when we begin with a pane of glass lying in bits and pieces all on its own then we do not have any question at all. This simply happened. We can, of course, ask: 'What happened just before it went to pieces?' But the answer to this question does not tell us what produced the shattering. All we have on Hume's analysis is temporal sequence and spatial contiguity. We lose our sense of the connection of events. Given a careful retention of Hume's initial distinctions we cannot regain this sense of connection. But as soon as we put those distinctions aside and again look at the pane of glass we see it as shattered.

Now Mill uses the concept of cause in his argument from analogy. He says that he discovers in his own case that his feelings cause his behavior. We can illustrate this through the non-observational reports we would be likely to make; for example, the pain was so intense I couldn't help crying out.

The skeptic is like Hume. He or she reinserts his or her initial distinctions in each subsequent case, including his or her own case. The skeptic is thus limited to mere correlations and the subsequent analogical projection. And the skeptic is right that any purely analogical argument that proceeds from a single base case to a conclusion that

cannot be independently verified is a pitifully weak argument.

The analogist (for example, Mill) does not reinsert his original distinction into his own case and can thus analogically project a connection and not a mere correlation. This gives his argument an element of explanatory necessity and makes it a stronger argument.

In failing to reinsert his distinction in his own case Mill fails to fully retain the distinction that creates the problem he sets out to solve. But Mill does justice to his own case. If he does not give us a solution to his own problem, he at least makes it clear that the cost of acknowledging that problem is that we not lose our natural sense of the connectedness of pain and behavior in our own case but also lose our natural view of the behavior of others – a view in terms of which the behavior of other people is something that is open to explanation.

### 7. Final Remarks

Here is an objection to Mill: That sensations are causally efficacious in any sort of direct way has been denied, not just by philosophical skeptics but also by other philosophers. Mill's position here is thus simply not obvious – or anyway, not obvious enough to convince someone worried about knowledge of other minds. The non-obviousness of the causal connection is how one sort of epiphenomenalism gets going.

How does Mill know that a causal connection exists in his own case? Mill gives no argument to establish the point. I think he just takes it for granted.

Here is how Mill might have answered the objection: "When we consider our own case the pain and the behavior are given as connected items. The behavior is a natural reaction to the pain. We say such things as, 'The pain was so intense I could not help crying out'. I could and would describe my own pains in terms of my behavior and vice versa."

If it transpires that a person was only pretending (feigning, hoaxing, and so on) to be in pain then he or she was still, for example, groaning. The person would not have been pretending unless he or she was groaning and the person was not pretending to groan but was pretending to be in pain by groaning. If a person is only pretending then we say that person was putting on the groaning. We do not say the person was not groaning, but we say the person groaned intentionally, on purpose, with an eye to fooling us. How do we view groaning when a person *is* in pain? In some cases we say the groaning was intentional. "He was in pain, but it wasn't *that* bad." But groaning basically is not intentional. It is a natural reaction to pain. Groaning is not an action we perform while in pain. When I say that pain-behavior is an *expression* of pain I mean to stress this fact about pain-behavior. To groan is not, in the basic case, to do something intentionally but is to naturally react to pain. I think this connection, whether causal or something else, is one Mill is justified in claiming to hold in his own case.<sup>1</sup>

### REFERENCES

- John Stuart MILL, 1979. *An Examination of Sir W. Hamilton's Philosophy and of the Principal Questions Discussed in his Writings*. Editor of the text, J. M. Robinson. Introduction by Alan Ryan. Volume 9 of the series, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press.

<sup>1</sup> I thank two referees of this journal for their help.