

Behavior and Other Minds: A Response to Functionalists

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Functionalists argue that the "problem of other minds" has a simple solution, namely, that one can attribute mentality to an object iff an object functions in a particular manner: given certain inputs, certain outputs will occur. For human beings, we simply need to observe their behavior and we can safely attribute mentality to them since, according to functionalism, mental states just are functional states. If we accept the functionalist account of the mind, we certainly have no problem of other minds. In fact, it recently has been argued¹ that since functionalism *does* solve the "problem of other minds," we should accept it as the best theory of mind. I will argue, however, that the ability to solve the problem of other minds is not a sufficient reason to accept functionalism. Moreover, I will argue that functionalism is an incomplete theory of mind, that behavior is not the solution to the problem of other minds, and finally, that we need not revert to radical skepticism concerning the problem of other minds.

Elliot Reed has recently argued that because a functional account of the mind solves the problem of other minds, it is surely the best account of mind. If mental states just are functional states then there should be no worries about whether or not the people we see every day have conscious mental experiences. However, is this a sufficient reason for accepting a functional account of the mind? I think it is not. I find it odd that we should accept any theory of mind because of its pragmatic value alone. In other words, it seems to me that just because functionalism gives us an apparent solution to the problem of other minds we should not assume it is the correct theory, especially if there are sufficient reasons for rejecting functionalism, which I

think there are. First, then, I want to show how functionalism does not follow from its ability to solve the problem of other minds.

It is worth noticing something about the nature of the problem of other minds, namely, that it is an epistemological problem, which is to say that we want to *know* whether others have minds. Our concern with ascribing mentality to others is an epistemological one. Now, if we consider the philosophy of mind, we quickly realize that we are not concerned so much with epistemology, but metaphysics, that is, what the mind really *is*. Elliot Reed recently argued that because functionalism solves this epistemological problem of other minds, we should accept it. However, how does any theory of mind, that is, a metaphysical theory, follow simply from its apparent ability to solve an epistemological question? Quite simply, it does not. I am certain that the correct theory of mind may indeed solve the problem of other minds, and in fact discoveries about reality certainly do help us in answering epistemological concerns. The mere utility of the theory, however, is not a sufficient reason to prove that the theory is correct.

Elliot Reed seems to start his investigation into the mind by asking how can we know other minds. He concludes that only a functional account of the mind provides us with a solution. Therefore, he concludes, a correct account of the mind must be a functional account. His argument looks to me like the following:

1. We have a problem in that we cannot know if others have minds.
2. Traditionally, citing others' behavior has solved the problem.
3. This solution only works if we accept a functional account of the mind.
4. Therefore, a correct theory of the mind must be functional.

I think it is obvious that this is a bad argument.

There are at least two problems with it. First, we can have serious doubt as to whether the third premise is true, and second, even if it were true, the conclusion simply does not follow from the premises. Let us assume for now that functionalism is the only theory that uses behavior to solve the problem of other minds.² There are still two premises that need to be added to the above argument. For the argument to be valid, the argument would need to look like this:

1. We have a problem in that we cannot know if others have minds.
2. Traditionally, citing others' behavior has solved the problem.
- 3. Citing other behavior *is* the solution to the problem of other minds**
- 4. The correct theory of mind must solve the problem of other minds**
5. This solution only works if we accept a functional account of the mind.
6. Therefore, a correct theory of the mind must be functional.

Now if these added premises are correct, and we assume that what is now the fifth premise is correct, then it seems to me the conclusion does follow. However, why should we accept premises three or four? Let me consider these premises in reverse order. The fourth premise assumes that the correct theory of the mind necessarily solves the problem of other minds. But why? There is simply no good reason to think that the correct account of mind will solve the problem of other minds. Let us assume, however, the correct theory of mind *will* solve the problem of other minds. The argument still fails since we can resist the third premise. It seems to me that the validity of the third premise is assumed and not obvious. I do not know of any argument that shows behavior is the only *possible* solution to the problem of other minds. Perhaps what is much more problematic with this argument is that it begs the question. No-

tice that the third premise can be stated as a premise iff one knows something about the mind, namely, its ontology. The third premise can be assumed iff a functional account is assumed, which is circular since it is functionalism that the argument seeks to prove. In other words, why would you accept the third premise if you did not first accept a functional account of the mind? In fact, I do not think *any* solution to the problem of other minds is possible unless one first has the correct ontology of mind. How could we solve the problem if we do not yet know what the mind *is*? If we do not know the ontology of the mind how can we determine the necessary and sufficient conditions for mentality? The very fact that one would accept behavior as *the* solution to the problem of other minds reveals that one has already assumed at least one necessary feature of mentality, namely, behavior.³

I think the problem is that Reed approaches the philosophy of mind with the epistemological problem of other minds dictating what theory of mind is correct. The opposite should occur. We should first seek the ontology of mind, then seek to solve the epistemological problem of other minds. If we let the epistemological problem drive the ontological project, we are only doing so out of utility. If this occurs, then the philosophy of the mind becomes primarily an epistemological project (which it clearly is not), and we are concerned not with what the mind *really is*, but only with whether it satisfies our curiosity about the existence of other minds.

In short, functionalism does appear to give an account of how we can know whether others have minds, but there is no good reason to suppose that such account is sufficient to give us the correct ontology of the mind. If functionalism is correct, it is because it correctly describes the ontology of the mind, not because it satisfies our epistemological concerns. Surely, if functionalism is correct, it is not *because* it can solve the problem of other minds, but because mental states *are* functional states. The utility of any correct theory of mind is a nonessential characteristic of the theory,

and not the criterion on which we should accept or dismiss the theory.

So far, I have sought not to show that functionalism is false, but rather to show that a theoretical solution for the problem of other minds is not sufficient to prove any theory of mind. I do not think many functionalists would disagree with what I have argued so far. It seems just plain obvious that a solution to the problem of other minds is not sufficient to prove a theory of mind. If it were sufficient, then on what grounds are we to favor functionalism over other theories that maintain behavior is the solution to the problem of other minds?⁴ If functionalism is to be preferred over other theories, such as philosophical behaviorism, then it must be because it correctly describes the ontology of mental phenomena⁵. That is to say, if functionalism is to be preferred over philosophical behaviorism, then it must be because mental states are not wholly translatable into terms of behavior, but rather, mental states just *are* functional states.

So what about functionalism as a correct theory of mind? I have shown how Reed's initial argument does not prove functionalism to be correct. More importantly, however, I think it can be shown that there are good reasons to reject functionalism as an incomplete theory of the mind. I will only mention two arguments here.

Reductio ad absurdum

If mental states just are functional states, then it seems to me that we could ascribe mentality to virtually everything. Functionalists maintain that something is a mind just in case it functions like a mind. If this is true, it does not take long to notice that we can ascribe mentality to virtually everything since even a pencil falling off a table can be described in purely functional terms. On this account, we may even ascribe intentionality to the pencil, which it clearly does not have. The error of functionalists here is the failure to distinguish between "as-if intentionality" and genuine intentionality (Searle 78-82). If we can ascribe mentality to anything, then this is clearly a *reductio ad*

absurdum that functionalism cannot avoid.

Reed has responded to this problem by saying that the problem lies not with functionalism, but our notion of consciousness as it is used in language. However, this is unlikely since the fallacy occurs precisely when we use *functional* language to account for mentality. If mental states just are functional states, then the number of things to which we need to ascribe mentality is ridiculously high. The problem lies neither in our conception of consciousness nor in linguistic ambiguity, but in the functional account of mentality.

Absent Qualia

Perhaps the best argument against a functional account of the mind is the 'Absent Qualia Argument'. The argument is as follows:

1. At least some mental phenomena – the sensation of seeing red, for example – have qualitative content (qualia);
2. Any correct theory of mind must account for qualia;
3. Functionalism leaves out qualitative content completely;
4. Therefore, functionalism is an incomplete theory of the mind.

I know of no response from any functionalist that adequately addresses this problem. In fact, it seems to me that qualia are usually trivialized by functionalists in order to disarm the 'Absent Qualia Argument'. For example, Reed has recently argued that, if we must account for qualia, then the problem of other minds is unsolvable since we could never distinguish between people with qualitative conscious experiences and zombies. This epistemological problem of other minds, as we have seen above, is not a sufficient reason for accepting or rejecting an ontology of mind, and so also it is not a sufficient reason for discarding qualia from an account of mind. Perhaps it is true, though I suspect it is not true, that including qualia makes the problem of other minds unsolvable, but the correct theory of

mind *must* account for qualia since we do know that qualia are intrinsic to at least some mental phenomena. If qualia are intrinsic to at least some mental phenomena, then why would we accept an account of the mind that leaves qualia completely out? If it is merely to satisfy the problem of other minds, then that is not an adequate reason. It is important here to notice that functionalists trivialize qualia as if they were insignificant characteristics of some mental phenomena. Qualia, however, are not theoretical items in folk psychology. We do not postulate qualia; we *experience* them (59). Qualia are just a plain fact in at least some mental phenomena. We cannot account for mental phenomena without including qualia. If this inclusion means that we cannot solve the problem of other minds, then that is simply an unfortunate consequence of the nature of minds.

Functionalists like Reed will undoubtedly disagree at this point. How can we ignore the problem of other minds? He might dig his heel in the ground and insist that this is a crucial question and that including qualia simply makes the problem unsolvable. I think I have shown that he is wrong to approach the philosophy of mind by trying to solve an epistemological problem. Nevertheless, Reed might insist that we need to prove others have minds. The mistake of functionalists and, I think, many philosophers, is to assume that mentality needs to be observable to exist. On the contrary, I think it can be shown that behavior does *not* solve the problem of other minds. Notice that if behavior is not the solution, then functionalism is false since being functionally equivalent does not necessitate ascribing mentality to something.

I think the best argument on this subject is John Searle's Chinese Room Argument.⁷ In fact, I think it is a knock-out blow to functionalism altogether. However, I will mention three other thought experiments that Searle uses to show that consciousness is independent of behavior.

Searle asks us to imagine the following. Your brain is deteriorating in such a way that you are losing your eyesight. With technological and medical expertise, doctors re-

store your vision perfectly by plugging silicon chips into your visual cortex. Now imagine your entire brain is continuing to deteriorate so that doctors slowly continue to implant more silicon chips until your whole brain is entirely replaced by silicon chips. If this were to happen, at least three outcomes are possible. First, we may imagine that the silicon chips have perfectly duplicated all mental phenomena, including qualia and consciousness.

A second possibility is that the silicon chips have failed to duplicate your conscious experience and that you are losing control of your external behavior. You find that when doctors ask you if you can see the object in front of you, you want to tell them you can see nothing since you are going blind. Still you have no control over your behavior and you find yourself, against your own will, saying that you do see the object. Your conscious experience continues to diminish while your external behavior remains the same.

Finally, it is possible that the silicon chips have perfectly duplicated all conscious experiences, but that your external behavior diminishes to paralysis. You have the exact same mental experiences as before. When the doctor asks you if you see the object he is holding in front of you, you cannot give any sign that you do in fact see it. Because the doctor sees no external behavior to indicate mental experiences, he may conclude that you have no mental life at all, although you know you do (68).

These three thought experiments establish at least the following. First, we may conclude that consciousness is independent of behavior. This is demonstrated by the second scenario in which one may act as though one had conscious experiences, but in fact did not, and the third scenario in which one may have a full mental life, but not be able to externally demonstrate it through behavior. These thought experiments also demonstrate that the ontology of the mental is essentially a first-person ontology and that "epistemically speaking, the first-person point of view is quite different from the third-person point of view." (70)

I hope it is clear from the above thought experiments that a functional account of mind, which holds that mental states are to be understood purely in terms of inputs and outputs, is untenable and, moreover, that behavior (the output in functional theory) is not the solution to the problem of other minds. What then of the problem of other minds? Are we left doomed to be skeptical about whether our fellow human beings have minds? We have already seen that consciousness is independent of behavior; does that leave us with an unacceptable problem?

I think the best approach to the problem of other minds currently available to us is common sense. Now notice I am not proposing the best *solution*, but rather the best *approach currently*⁸ available. For example, how do I know my dog has a mind? John Searle insists that we can be sure of a dog's conscious experiences because we can both observe behavior that is appropriate to having mental states and see that the causal basis of the behavior in the dog's physiology is similar to our own (73). Although this may seem unconvincing, we make this sort of inference everyday when we assert the principle that the same causes have the same effects or that similar causes have similar effects. We can see that the physiology of the dog is similar to ours, and, therefore, we can recognize the causal basis for mental states. Again, we can suppose that other humans have mental states similar to our own both because their physiology is very similar to our own and because their behavior is appropriate to having mental states. I think it is worth adding that the problem of other minds really is not an everyday problem. As Searle points out, it is only a problem for philosophers. We just do not go through our everyday life seriously questioning the existence of conscious experiences in other people simply because we do not observe their consciousness. Why would we, since consciousness is essentially a first-person ontology? We cannot observe the mentality of others simply because mental phenomena are ontologically subjective.

At this point, some philosophers, perhaps Reed, would

insist that although the problem of other minds is not really a problem in everyday life, philosophers do see this as a problem that needs to be solved. Well, if Searle is correct that consciousness is caused by the behavior of the microlevel biology of the brain, then once we have a mature neuroscience, we should be able to identify what neurophysiological phenomena are both necessary and sufficient for consciousness (74). If this were to occur, then the problem of other minds would vanish completely.

I think I have shown that the epistemological problem of other minds is not a sufficient reason for accepting any account of mind, let alone a functional account, and that functionalism itself is an incomplete theory of mind. Finally, I think it has been shown that behavior is not the solution to the problem of other minds and that denying that behavior is the solution need not lead us into radical skepticism regarding other minds. I think a common sense approach to the problem of other minds is appropriate until we give neuroscience time to grow out of its infancy. If this is an unsatisfactory approach to the problem of other minds for functionalists like Reed, then this dissatisfaction seems to testify only to the pragmatic value of functionalism and not its veracity.

Notes

¹ See Reed, Elliot. "Functionalism, Qualia, and Other Minds". *Episteme* 2002.

² Both Philosophical Behaviorism and Functionalism maintain behavior is the solution to the "problem of other minds." Therefore, some other criterion is needed to prefer one to the other. This alone demonstrates that solving the "problem of other minds" is not sufficient for a correct theory of mind. I think, however, that this argument is overkill since I have already shown that choosing a theory of mind on purely pragmatic grounds is the wrong way to approach the entire discussion.

³ I think it is just plain obvious that behavior does not solve the problem of other minds and that the only way to maintain that it does is to beg the question of the ontology of mind.

⁴ I hope the problems with Reed's argument are clear. His problems are

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even greater since many theories of mind cite behavior as the solution to the problem of other minds.

⁵I find it extremely odd that any philosopher of mind would start with an epistemological question concerning other minds. If we start with this question, we clearly are not concerned with what *is*, but rather what theory we can use to address our skepticism.

⁶See Searle, 1980.

⁷I think that this is probably the most convincing argument against functionalism and I am aware of no response to Searle on this matter. If ever there were a fatal blow to a theory of mind, this is certainly it.

⁸“Approach” is not semantically equivalent to “method.” By “approach” I mean something closer to “attitude.” If Searle is correct – and I think he is – then we simply do not have a mature enough neuroscience to solve this problem quite yet. Until then, we can use common sense not to *prove* others have minds, but be *confident* that others experience mental states similar to our own.

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