

What the Problem of Other Minds Really Tells us about Descartes

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Ever since the first generation Cartesian Gerauld de Cordemoy wrote a self-standing book dedicated to the problem of other minds philosophers have proceeded as though Descartes' work entails some version of the problem.¹ In this paper I evaluate Descartes' own contribution to creating and answering skepticism about other minds. It is my contention, first, that for most of his working life Descartes did not see the problem as distinct from the problem of the external world. Second, that when he was finally presented with the problem in a late letter from Henry More, Descartes looked not to behavior, but to a body's origins as a guide to who does and does not have a mind. Specifically, the response Descartes offers to More appeals to a shared "nature," something which has struck many readers as an ineffectual response, even as a response which begs the question. On the contrary, and this is my third contention, Descartes' response is a fairly plausible one when read as utilizing the meaning of "nature" as *complexio* found in Meditation Six.² Though it may be translated as "complex," *complexio* is really a technical Latin term coming from the medical tradition, likely introduced into the lexicon at Salerno in the tenth- or eleventh-century. It means, roughly, a unique composition of elements or qualities distinguishing species (and individual members of a species) from one another. By emphasizing our shared *complexio* Descartes is telling More that having resolved the problem of the external world we can rely on God's uniform action in the world to entail joining a mind to members of our species. Thus, if the question is, as More suggests, whether the existence of other bodies can by itself imply the existence of other minds, then Descartes' answer, surprisingly, is yes, so long as we take their origins into account.

Before collecting the handful of remarks Descartes makes about our knowledge of other minds, I begin by arguing that what motivates the problem of other minds is a specific conception of body as much as, if not more than, a specific conception of mind. In section two I argue that Descartes' various claims about other minds do not add up to an awareness of the skeptical problem distinct from the skeptical problem of the external world. Here I show, among other things, that the language test from the *Discourse* is meant to establish only that a mind is not present in a given body; i.e. it does not license any inference about a mind being present. This leaves us, so I claim in section three, with Descartes' late correspondence with More. In this section I show that Descartes' treatment of other minds skepticism depends on the "nature" Descartes appeals to, and ultimately on the last sense of "nature" described in Meditation Six. Finally, in section four I suggest this answer to More has the markings of Aristotelianism given that it shuns dualism in favor of viewing the mind or soul as the form of the human body. In effect,

¹ The work to which I refer is Cordemoy's *Discours physique de la parole*.

² Such a realization is precluded by readers of the contemporary English editions of the *Meditations* in which, to take the Cottingham edition as an example, the word is neither translated nor mistranslated, but rather skipped altogether. Seventeenth-century English translations of the *Meditations* do a better job, rendering *complexio* as "Complexion," which meant something different than it means to us today.

Descartes lacks the appropriate conception of body to motivate other minds skepticism; a point which helps explain why he never seems to see it as a distinct skeptical problem. I end by tentatively suggesting that we can read the opening from the *Treatise on Man* and a number of other Cartesian texts as committed to a roughly Aristotelian conception of the human body, even if such texts were ultimately taken by Cordemoy to require asking “Whether it be necessary, that all the Bodies, which I see to be like mine, be united to Souls like mine?”

Representation in Spinoza's Theory of the Imagination

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A number of critics take Spinoza to hold that ideas of imagination represent both the images of things to which they correspond and also the external objects that are the partial causes of those images.³ I argue that it is best to take ideas of imagination to represent only external objects.

The interpretation of Spinoza on this question may initially seem to be a matter of preference. If one wants to describe to an audience today what Spinoza's ideas of imagination represent, in the sense that most of us today understand "represent," then one might claim with some justification that ideas of imagination, for Spinoza, represent both images of things and external objects. Michael Della Rocca argues well for this view, emphasizing the fact that, for Spinoza, ideas of imagination have cognitive content relating both to images of things and also to external objects. Having cognitive content related to an object is sufficient, most people will agree today, for representing it. If one prefers, on the other hand, to describe Spinoza's own use of the term *representare*, one ought to notice that he reserves the verb for the expression of a relation between ideas of imagination and external objects.⁴ Spinoza uses *representare* only five times in the *Ethics* (twice at II/82, and at II/106, II/122, and II/160), and always in relation to an idea of imagination's representation of an external body.

I argue that an important difference between the sense in which ideas of imagination are of images of things and the sense in which they are of external objects underlies Spinoza's narrow use of *representare* and so makes the interpretation of his view of representation something more than a matter of preference. Ideas of imagination represent external objects in virtue of the causal role of those objects, a role that images of things corresponding to the ideas cannot play. Causing an image of a thing in the body is necessary and sufficient for being represented by an idea of imagination, in Spinoza's use. This point may be difficult to recognize from the examples that Spinoza offers because the cognitive content of an idea of imagination in Spinoza's accounts typically relates to the relevant external object in a confused way, as when my sensory idea of the sun involves beliefs about the sun. An object is represented by an idea, however, in virtue of its causal role in producing the image corresponding to that idea, not in virtue of the idea's cognitive content. If, as may happen on Spinoza's account in the case of imagining universals or fictional entities, I am affected by one external object but have thoughts about a different external object, my idea will, on Spinoza's use, represent the

³ For discussions explicitly concerning representation in Spinoza, see J. Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984) §37 and M. Della Rocca, *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996) pp. 46-64. Related discussions include H. Barker, "Notes on the Second Part of Spinoza's *Ethics* (I), in *Studies in Spinoza*, ed. Kashap (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 142; M. Wilson, "Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge," in the *Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp. 103-104; and D. Radner, "Spinoza's Theory of Ideas," *The Philosophical Review* 80 (1971), pp. 346-350.

⁴ The consistency of Spinoza's use may be clouded by Edwin Curley's translation, which renders *representare*, in some cases, as "presents" and, in other cases, as "represents."

object that affects me rather than the object about which I have beliefs.⁵ An interpretation of Spinoza, such as Della Rocca's, on which ideas of imagination represent external objects in virtue of their cognitive content cannot explain why an idea represents one particular external object rather than another when its cognitive content is confused in this way. So it fails to capture Spinoza's position.

The best textual evidence for my view may be found at, 2p16, 2p17 and 2p17s. At 2p16, Spinoza argues that the idea of any mode of the human body produced by the causal interaction of the body with an external body will involve the nature of both bodies. Spinoza generally associates a thing's nature with its causal power, and this particular argument is a consequence of a general thesis about the interaction of bodies on which any interaction between two bodies is the effect of both bodies' natures (A1'' at II/99). Then, at 2p17, he describes such ideas as those that represent the external bodies that are their partial causes as present. That is why I take the external body's causal role to be necessary for representation.

One might hold that some particular cognitive content—referred to in 2p17 as regarding a thing as present—is another necessary condition for representation. Spinoza's definition of imagination at 2p17s suggests, however, that the causal role alone is sufficient for representation: “the affections of the human Body, the ideas of which represent external bodies as though present to us, we shall call the images of things, even if they do not reproduce the figures of things. And when the Mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines.” The body's sensory mechanisms are imperfect, on Spinoza's view, and he allows here for the possibility that the images of things do not reproduce the figures of the external objects that cause them and that they represent. Supposing that the cognitive content of an idea of imagination is fixed by the content of the image to which it corresponds, this point suggests, what further examples in the *Ethics* confirm, that the cognitive content of an idea may vary widely and may not concern the object that, by 2p17, the idea represents. An idea of imagination, then, represents the external cause of the image even when its cognitive content refers to something else.

⁵ For example, one's cognitive content may include beliefs about a universal, when what is represented are various individuals (2p40s1 and s2). Spinoza does not use the term *representare* at 2p49, but I think he suggests there that an idea of imagination that includes beliefs about Pegasus represents its causes, not Pegasus.

Malebranche on the Passions: Biology, Morality, and the Fall

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Malebranche has a Janus-faced perspective on the passions. He says that “one must almost always allow oneself to be led by the passions in order to conserve one’s body”, and he also says that “we never love the true good when we follow...the passions.” Malebranche even says that human beings *should not* love those things to which they are led by the passions.

This perspective on the passions reflects the influence of Descartes and Augustine, the acknowledged sources of Malebranche’s philosophy. Malebranche follows Descartes in maintaining that the function of the passions is to promote the survival of the embodied human mind, and he follows Augustine in recognizing the baleful influence of the passions in diverting agents from their true good. What’s distinctively *Malebranchean* about this approach to the passions is the attempt to marry Descartes’ optimism and Augustine’s pessimism about the passions in a coherent philosophical anthropology.

Paul Hoffman charges that this philosophical marriage of Descartes and Augustine is doomed. “The problem with [Malebranche’s] stance towards the passions,” he writes, “is that it is contradictory. Since Malebranche defines love as a movement of the soul towards something, to follow the movement of the passions is already to love that thing.” Although Malebranche insists that agents ought not to love the objects of their passions, Hoffman claims that when an agent undergoes a passion, s/he must love the object of that passion.

Hoffman’s objection to Malebranche’s account of the passions implicitly challenges Malebranche’s overarching philosophical project. In the first sentence of the body of *The Search After Truth*, Malebranche says that “error is the cause of man’s misery; it is the bad principle that produced evil in the world, and we ought not to hope of solid and true happiness, without working seriously to avoid it.” Throughout his philosophical career, Malebranche emphasizes the importance of avoiding error and sin in order to achieve genuine happiness, which of course consists in the love of God. Indeed, the point of the investigation of the faculties of the mind undertaken in the first five parts of the *Search after Truth* is to clarify the nature and function of those faculties so that agents may only use them in their proper spheres and thereby avoid error and sin. But if Hoffman is correct that agents who follow their passions must also love the objects of their passions, then human beings, who are supposed to follow their passions in order to preserve their bodies, can never love only God, and therefore must sin. This consequence would of course be most unwelcome to Malebranche.

In what follows, I defend Malebranche’s account of the passions against Hoffman’s objection. To this end, I elucidate Malebranche’s account of the passions, and I show how Malebranche’s account of the passions fits into the project of *The Search After Truth* in particular and Malebranche’s philosophy in general.

In Section 1, I examine Malebranche’s conception of the nature of the passions in order to explain why Malebranche believes that the passions function to preserve the

body and to direct agents to seek out the good of the body, and how the passions are supposed to fulfill this function. A subsidiary aim of this section of the paper is to bring out what's distinctive about Malebranche's account of the passions, which I think deserves far more attention than it has hitherto received. In Section 2, I explain that it is because the passions function to preserve the body that they now dispose agents to error about their true good: on account of the Fall, the passions lead agents to (mis)take the good of the body for their true good. A subsidiary aim of this section of the paper is to illustrate the significance of the Fall for Malebranche's philosophy, which has received relatively little sustained scholarly attention, especially from English-language commentators. In Section 3, I argue that although, in virtue of the Fall, agents are disposed to love the goods of the body, they need not do so. Consideration of Malebranche's distinction between natural and free love reveals why Malebranche is entitled to claim that agents may follow the passions to conserve the body without (sinfully) loving the objects of the passions, and clarifies what it means for agents to follow the passions without loving the objects of the passions. I conclude that Malebranche, *pace* Hoffman, succeeds in crafting a coherent philosophical position that marries Descartes' optimism and Augustine's pessimism about the passions.

Moral Phenomenology in Hume and Hutcheson

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The study of moral phenomenology is the study of what it is like to experience morality. An adequate moral theory must accommodate or account for our moral phenomenology. It has thus been common for philosophers to argue that their moral theories are superior to others because their theories accommodate or account for our moral phenomenology better than other theories.

Phenomenological arguments are particularly clear and conspicuous in the work of Francis Hutcheson. Hutcheson argues that his moral sense theory is superior to its egoist and rationalist rivals because his theory is true to our moral phenomenology while egoism and rationalism are not.

David Hume makes phenomenological arguments against egoism and rationalism that are strikingly similar to Hutcheson's. But while Hutcheson suggests that our moral phenomenology is fairly simple and uniform, the experience of morality that Hume describes is much more complicated and varied. In the end, Hume's subtler account of our experience of morality undermines Hutcheson's phenomenological arguments against egoism and rationalism, even though those arguments are ones that Hume himself presents.

That is not to say that Hume's description of our moral phenomenology subverts his overall case for moral sentimentalism. But it is to say that his case for sentimentalism must rest on arguments that are not primarily phenomenological. But that is as it should be. For our moral phenomenology *is* too complicated and varied to constitute on its own a decisive consideration in favor of one moral theory and against all others. Common though they are in the history of philosophy, phenomenological arguments for one moral theory and against another are almost always nugatory.

The paper has four main sections.

In Section 1, I describe Hutcheson's use of phenomenological claims to attack moral rationalism. Hutcheson argues that moral judgment cannot be based on reason alone because judging that someone is virtuous is an essentially *pleasurable* experience. When we examine our experience of making moral judgments, Hutcheson claims, we will see that that experience inherently involves being positively *affected*. We will see that our moral approvals "more resemble" the experience of "liking" something than the experience of contemplating geometric theorems (Hutcheson's *Moral Sense* [2002] 136).

In section 2, I describe Hutcheson's use of phenomenological claims to attack moral egoism. Hutcheson argues that when we introspect we all come to realize that what it is like to morally approve of something is qualitatively different from what it is like to appreciate or desire a thing because it promotes our own (self) interests (Hutcheson's *Inquiry* [2004] 117). Hutcheson also argues that the distinct phenomenological character of moral approvals reveals that they, like color sensations, are caused by their own unique sense and are not (as Mandeville claimed) the result of politicians manipulating us by the use of "*Statues and Panegyrics*" (Hutcheson's *Inquiry* [2004] 131). Politicians can manipulate what we feel moral approval towards, but (according to Hutcheson) it would be as impossible for them to manipulate us into

experiencing a new kind of moral feeling — a feeling with a distinct phenomenological character — as it would be for them to manipulate a blind person into experiencing color qualia.

In Section 3, I note the presence in Hume’s work of anti-rationalist claims (THN 3.1.2.1-3) that are strikingly similar to the Hutchesonian phenomenological claims I discussed in section 1. I then examine Hume’s distinction between the violent passions and the calm passions (THN 2.3.3.8-10). Moral judgment, according to Hume, is grounded in calm passions. But the phenomenology of calm passions can be indistinguishable from rational thought, and this indistinguishability (I argue) undermines the phenomenological argument against moral rationalism that Hutcheson advances and Hume inherits.

In section 4, I note the presence in Hume’s work of anti-egoist claims (THN 3.1.2.4 and 3.2.2.25) that are strikingly similar to the Hutchesonian phenomenological claims I discussed in section 2. I then explain how Hume’s associative theory of the passions implies that our sentimental responses are much more plastic than Hutcheson’s sense-based view allowed. But the plasticity of our sentimental responses (I argue) opens the door to an egoistic explanation of our moral approvals, which explanation would undermine Hutcheson’s phenomenological arguments against egoists such as Mandeville.

I conclude by explaining how Hume develops arguments for his moral sentimentalism that do not rely on phenomenological claims (such as his various comments on the “general points of view” from which moral judgments are made). I suggest that Hume’s non-phenomenological approach initiates a new empirical turn in the study of human nature.

Locke and Berkeley on Real Knowledge

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In an entry in his *Philosophical Commentaries*, Berkeley lays out a project: “Mem: nicely to discuss Lib 4 ch 4 Locke (PC 549) which he reminds himself on the verso “is of the Reality of Knowledge.” I propose in this paper to carry out on Berkeley’s behalf this project which he never himself undertook, and to examine what Berkeley might have said about Locke’s arguments. . . While many might suppose that there is not much to be learned from such an exercise, since what Berkeley wrote is usually taken to be a criticism of Locke’s theory of real knowledge, I hope to show otherwise. When we focus on the arguments contained in Locke’s chapter 4 of Book 4 with an eye to what Berkeley would specifically have said about them, a rather different relationship emerges between the two. Berkeley can be shown to be as much a student as a critic of Locke.

The Relation Between Anti-Abstractionism and Idealism in Berkeley's Metaphysics

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George Berkeley is justly famous for having denied the existence of abstract ideas and for having embraced the idealist thesis that physical objects and their qualities are mind-dependent. As is well known, Berkeley prefaces his first defense of idealism (in the *Principles*) with an introduction that amounts to one long attack on the doctrine of abstraction. This fact immediately raises the question whether Berkeley uses anti-abstractionism as a premise in his argument for idealism.

A number of Berkeley scholars (most notably, Margaret Atherton, Martha Bolton, Robert Muehlmann, and George Pappas: call them the “Nominalists”) have argued for an affirmative answer to this question. As they see it, the fact that Berkeley *begins* his case for idealism with a criticism of abstractionism strongly suggests that he means to argue from the denial of abstractionism to idealism. Their case for this Nominalist interpretation rests not only on the relative placement of Berkeley's discussion of abstraction and idealism, but also on individual passages (notably sections 5, 11, and 99) of the *Principles*, sections in which Berkeley appears to suggest that the case for idealism depends on the case against abstractionism.

Other scholars have, in different ways, challenged this interpretation. For example, Jonathan Dancy (and others) have pointed out that some of the *Principles* passages cited by Nominalists can be read as supporting a different thesis, namely that *belief* that the doctrine of abstraction is true naturally leads to the *belief* that idealism is false. And Robert McKim has taken issue with some of the details of various Nominalist interpretations of Berkeley's argument for idealism.

The purpose of this paper is to set the record straight on the logical relation between anti-abstractionism and idealism in Berkeley's metaphysics. The gist of my argument is as follows. As is widely known (but insufficiently emphasized), Berkeley distinguishes between two kinds of abstraction in the Introduction to the *Principles*: there is, first, the mental separation (or abstraction) of one particular quality from another, and second, the mental separation (or abstraction) of a general quality from its particular determinations. For example, the idea produced by abstracting the idea of a disk's particular color from the idea of its particular shape is of the first “singling” type, while the idea of human being produced by abstracting from the differences between ideas of different particular human beings is of the second “generalizing” type. So the question of how Berkeley's anti-abstractionism and his idealism are logically related reduces to two separate questions: first, whether Berkeley's argument for idealism depends on his denial of the possibility of “singling” abstraction, and, second, whether the very same argument depends on Berkeley's denial of the possibility of “generalizing” abstraction.

As I argue in the paper, Berkeley's case for idealism does not in any way depend on his denial of the possibility of "generalizing" abstraction. Berkeley's numerous references to "generalizing" abstraction are all in the service of a different claim, namely that belief in the possibility of "generalizing" abstraction has led many of his predecessors and contemporaries into inextricable philosophical difficulties, both in metaphysics and in ethics. As it happens, Berkeley also claims that belief in the possibility of "singling" abstraction has led to the mistaken belief that idealism is false. But, as I argue, the logical relation between Berkeley's idealism and his denial of the possibility of "singling" abstraction is complicated. On the one hand, Berkeley relies on the claim that *certain kinds of qualities* cannot be mentally separated from other kinds of qualities to establish results that play an important role in his argument for the mind-dependence of physical objects and their sensible properties. On the other hand, Berkeley intends the most important of his anti-abstractionist theses, namely the claim that there could be no such thing as an abstract idea of *existence*, to *follow from* his idealism. Importantly, as I argue, the procedure of appealing to the denial of the possibility of certain kinds of "singling" acts of abstraction to establish a thesis (namely, idealism) that is then used to argue against the possibility of "singling" out an abstract idea of existence is non-circular.

The upshot of my argument is that the relation between Berkeley's anti-abstractionism and his idealism is more complicated than Nominalists (and others) take it to be, and that the way Berkeley relies on anti-abstractionism introduces no inconsistency in his idealist metaphysics.