

Anita Avramides OTHER MINDS London and New York: Routledge, pp. xv x 333.

by Andrew Brook

One's relationship to the minds of others is puzzling. You say, "Let's go to the cinema!" I say, "Good idea." Your suggestion, it would seem, has told me a lot about you: that you want to see a film, that you want to go with me, that you decided to express these desires, that by the signs 'Let's', 'go', 'to', 'the', and 'cinema', you intend to say what would normally be expressed in English by the sentence, 'Let's go to the cinema', and so on. On the other hand, what have I actually observed? Merely a string of noises. If, as seems obvious, your desires, intentions, and so on are the *causes* of this string of noises and so something separate from them, there would seem to be no way even to begin to determine that you actually have the desires, intentions and so on that I ascribe to you! This conflict between practice and theory is, to say the least, a problem.

The first three-quarters of Avramides' book is a history of this problem. In the final quarter she derives a view of her own from P.F. Strawson and Donald Davidson and applies it to Thomas Nagel, Galen Strawson, John Searle and (prospectively) Colin McGinn.

The history is marvellous. As well as the usual cast of characters (Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Mill), Avramides examines Augustine, Arnaud, Malebranche, Reid, Schlick and Carnap. Reid is a central figure. Indeed, she shows that the problem of other minds first became a *special* problem with Reid. She also shows, contrary to the accepted view, that Descartes did not use the argument from analogy, the argument (roughly) that I know that others have minds on analogy with what I know of my own mind, and no one else prior to Mill did either. Even Mill also gave another, better argument.

Hume and Kant are barely mentioned but this is justified. Hume, to say the least, did not offer a *solution* to the problem of our knowledge of other minds, not a rational one anyway. And even though knowledge of other minds arguably ought to have been a serious concern for Kant, he actually said almost nothing on the issue.

The last historical chapter is on Wittgenstein. It may be less successful than the others. Avramides represents Wittgenstein as holding that if we remind ourselves of how our linguistic practices actually go, we will (or should) no longer feel the pull of the problem (p. 213). If that really were all it took, a lot of philosophers would turn out to have been tremendous sillies! There is a more interesting reading of Wittgenstein. At one point he says:

My attitude to him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul. [*Philosophical Investigations* Part II, p. 178e].

Here Wittgenstein seems to be urging that others' mental states are not *inferred* from their behaviour. Seeing others as having mental states is *a way of seeing* their behaviour, like seeing a swastika in a four-pane window frame. If so, the problem of other minds does not arise, not the problem we sketched at any rate. To be sure, this view has costs of its own. It is very behaviouristic and probably would leave Wittgenstein with a problem over our awareness and expression of our own mental states. However, the latter at least is a problem facing him in any case and reading him as advancing the view suggested would have its compensations. For one thing, it would bring Wittgenstein close to Avramides' own preferred view. As we will see, Strawson puts phenomena where the mental is manifest in behaviour at the centre of his account and behaviour plays a crucial role in Davidson's account, too.

Throughout the historical chapters, Avramides relates the problem of knowledge of other minds to another issue, namely, how we can have mental state concepts at all. Most of the time, I know of my own mental states by having them and of others' mental states by observing their behaviour. (If Wittgenstein is right, inferring need not go with this observing.) And the problem, as P.F. Strawson once put it, is this: how can we ascribe the very same kinds of state to ourselves, not on the basis of observation, that we ascribe to others on the basis of observation? This is the problem with which Avramides launches her own account. Though a problem about concepts, it can lead to two problems of knowledge – stress one's own case and our ability to apply these concepts to others looks mysterious. Stress the application to others and our awareness of the felt qualities of our own mental states becomes mysterious (a problem, as was just suggested, for Wittgenstein).

To show how this asymmetry of application is compatible with unity of concept and with knowledge of others' mental states, Avramides adopts a key idea of Strawson's and a key idea of Davidson's. The idea of Strawson's is that actions (behaviour "that indicates ... the presence of a mind" [p. 267]) can do the job for us. Even though we are aware of actions on an asymmetrical basis, too, each kind of action has a characteristic pattern of physical movement available in the same way to everyone. The idea of Davidson's is that ascription to others requires a three-point 'triangulation' of knowledge of self, knowledge of others, and knowledge of the material world.

There are standard problems with both moves, only some of which Avramides discusses. About Strawson, even if actions help with the unified concept problem, it is not clear how they help with the problem of knowledge of other minds. For any action ascription, a less committing description in terms of physical movement is always available and it is not clear how Strawson's account shows the application of the more committing action description to be justified. About Davidson, in addition to a worry articulated by Barry Stroud that triangulated beliefs would do just as well as triangulated knowledge, a worry that Avramides discusses, there is a worry she does not discuss. The 'knowledge' of other minds invoked by Davidson is just an interpretation (a 'radical' interpretation) of others' behaviour. To yield knowledge of others' *minds*, it must be accompanied by a behaviourist theory of mind. Yet Avramides does not view behaviourism with favour. There is an additional problem – Avramides says little about how the two ideas mesh.

The last two chapters take up the opposing views of Nagel, Galen Strawson and Searle, somewhat indecisively. A final overview of her own position might have helped to resolve this problem but Avramides does not provide one.

On balance, the history may be more convincing than the positive theory but this is the most thorough book on the problem of our knowledge of other minds yet written.