Scepticism About Other Minds: Propositional and Objectual

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Abstract

In this paper, I distinguish between two kinds of knowledge of other minds: a propositional kind, whereby one may say, for example, that “We can see that he is in pain,” and an objectual (object-related) kind which seems to be presupposed by knowledge claims about, for example, his present feeling of pain. I will suggest that two sceptical problems arise in connection with these two kinds of knowledge, respectively. The burden of my argument will be to show that while scepticism about propositional knowledge may be amenable to a satisfactory solution, the only route to take with scepticism about objectual knowledge is dissolution.

I. Introduction

In this paper, I seek to distinguish between two kinds of knowledge of other minds: a propositional kind, which allows one to say, for example, that “We can see that he is in pain” and that “I know that she is thinking about leaving the meeting,” and an objectual (object-related) kind, which seems to be presupposed by our knowledge claims about, for example, his present feeling of pain, or her desire to leave the meeting. Corresponding to this distinction between propositional and objectual knowledge of other minds, two kinds of scepticism can be identified, both falling within the scope of what is often referred to as “the epistemological problem of other minds.”

The definitive characteristic of propositional knowledge of other minds is, of course, the fact that the content of the knowledge in question can be expressed by means of propositions. In the case of objectual knowledge, what another person is supposed to “know,” “see,” or “be acquainted with,” is an object of sorts (the pain itself, for example), rather than a proposition.
The fact that philosophers differ on what would constitute an adequate answer to scepticism about other minds, suggests that there may be more than one kind of sceptical problem involved. Some philosophers seem to think that the problem is solved once we establish that one can perceive, or otherwise know, for example, *that Smith is in pain*, which is a type of propositional knowledge. Others may think that this fails to solve the problem, because it does not address sceptical concerns that can arise in connection with the fact that the subject of inner states seems to be acquainted with his or her inner states (viewed as objects of a certain kind) in a way that will always fall outside the scope of what anyone else can know.

In Section 2, I discuss the problem of scepticism about propositional knowledge, with special reference to the views advocated by McDowell and Dretske and the sceptical responses they have provoked. Since knowledge of physical objects (the external world) and knowledge of other minds have been questioned along similar lines, we shall at some point find it useful to discuss the problem of scepticism in broader terms. Our conclusion will be that propositional knowledge of other minds is possible, no less than knowledge of “other bodies” and ordinary physical objects.

In Section 3, we turn to the problem of scepticism about objectual knowledge of other minds. Here we shall make use of an extended version of the classical distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, to understand the knowledge expectations that underlie this kind of scepticism. I will argue that scepticism about objectual knowledge of other minds ought to be rejected because the very idea of objectual knowledge of others minds is not a coherent idea. Finally, in Section 4, I will offer some concluding remarks.

II. Scepticism about Propositional Knowledge

Many philosophers are of the view that the psychological states of others are epistemologically accessible to us in a direct, unmediated, inference-free fashion. According to these philosophers, observable behaviour is not a mere sign of what is happening in another person’s mind; it is more like an open window into the subjective life of the other.

Probably the strongest expression of this idea is to be found in the writings of the later Wittgenstein:

Consciousness in another’s face. Look into someone else’s face, and see the consciousness in it, and a particular shade of consciousness. You see on it, in it, joy, indifference, interest, excitement, torpor, and so on. The light in other people’s faces. Do you look into yourself in order to
recognize the fury in his face? It is there as clearly as in your own breast.\(^1\)

More recently, John McDowell has written:

\[\ldots\text{we should not jib at, or interpret away, the common-sense thought that, on those occasions that are paradigmatically suitable for training in the assertoric use of the relevant part of a language, one can literally perceive, in another person’s facial expression or his behaviour, that he is (for instance) in pain, and not just infer that he is in pain from what one perceives.}\(^2\)

Somewhat less forcefully, but still to the same point, Dretske writes:

\begin{quote}
Being minded is, I take it, part of what we mean to attribute to something when we speak of it as a person. If there is no problem about identifying people, there should be no special problem about deciding whether there are other minds or how we come to know this.\(^3\)
\end{quote}

What do we gain knowledge of, according to McDowell and Dretske, when we gain knowledge of what is going on in another person’s mind? In the passage above, McDowell speaks of perceiving \textit{that} someone is in pain, which is clearly a kind of propositional knowledge. Furthermore, in his response to Crispin Wright’s challenge to explain “how we are\ldots on occasion, in direct perceptual touch with others’ mental states and with past states of affairs,”\(^4\) McDowell leaves no doubt that he does not mean to refer to objects which one can “see.” Speaking of our knowledge of past states of affairs, he says that he is \textit{not} committed to the idea of assimilating factive positions (such as “seeing that,” “experiencing that,” and “knowing that”) to perception:

\[\text{I do not commit myself to assimilating } \ldots \text{"factive" positions to perception}. \ldots \text{[W]hy should I accept the crazy idea that we are in direct perceptual touch with past states of affairs} \ldots \text{?} \ldots \text{When one learns something from someone else, the cognitive transaction is of course not a sort of perception of the state of affairs one is told about.}\(^5\)

Dretske is even more explicit about the propositional, rather than objec-
tual, character of what we get to perceive when we have knowledge of other minds:

\begin{quote}
Seeing that a person is afraid, however, is something that we can do without supposing that the fear itself is visible. When we say that a person “blew up,” could no longer conceal his anger, we do not mean
\end{quote}

1. Wittgenstein (1967: §220). Cf. Wittgenstein (1980a: §927).
2. McDowell (1998a: 305).
3. Dretske (1973: 34).
4. Wright (1985: 443f)
5. McDowell (1995: 887).
that everyone could suddenly see his anger. What we mean is that everyone could now see that he was angry, that he was angry became evident. What is evident (can be seen), however, is a fact (that he is angry), not a thing (his anger).6

Let us call the type of knowledge which philosophers such as McDowell and Dretske seem to acknowledge here, “propositional knowledge of other minds.” This type of knowledge has been subject to sceptical doubts, which McDowell expresses in this manner:

...even on the occasions that seem most favourable for a claim to be able to see that someone else is in some “inner” state, the reach of one’s experience falls short of that circumstance itself not just in the sense that the person’s being in the “inner” state is not itself embraced within the scope of one’s consciousness, but in the sense that what is available to one’s experience is something compatible with the person’s not being in the “inner” state at all.7

This concern can be clarified by means of an example. Suppose I tell a joke which evokes laughter from everybody present, especially Smith, who laughs the loudest. Catching a glimpse of a slight irregularity in the configuration of his facial expression, and hearing his louder-than-usual laughter, I begin to entertain doubts as to whether he really found my joke amusing. Observing what I have observed, and hearing what I have heard, I cannot help thinking that the “reach of my experience” did fall short of the fact, whatever it was. Had it not, the question in my mind about whether Smith found my joke amusing would have been settled on the spot.

Of course, deception and pretence are familiar phenomena, not only in the context of perceiving material objects and their states, but also in the context of “perceiving” (to use McDowell’s own term) the psychological states of psychological agents (who are denizens of the same world as material objects such as rail-road tracks, half-submerged sticks, and barns). We do have behavioural (and other) criteria for judging when someone is in pain, sad, or amused, but it does not seem that the satisfaction of these criteria guarantees that the reach of our experience will not fall short of the fact.

According to McDowell, however, we are not compelled to acknowledge the failure (and thus “defeasibility”) of criteria in such cases. The conclusion that the agent/actor who successfully deceives us has managed to bring it about that the criteria have actually been defeated, is avoidable. According to McDowell,

6. Dretske (1973: 36).
7. McDowell (1998b: 371)
[There] is a possible alternative; in pretending, one causes it to appear that criteria for something “internal” are satisfied (that is, one causes it to appear that someone else could know, by what one says and does, that one is in, say, some “inner” state); but the criteria are not really satisfied (that is, the knowledge is not really available). 8

McDowell does not mean this to silence the sceptic forever. For shortly afterwards we hear the sceptic saying, in the words of McDowell himself, that

The distinction between your cases of actual satisfaction of criteria (so called) and your cases of only apparent satisfaction of criteria (so called) is not a distinction we can draw independently of the correctness or otherwise of the problematic claims themselves.... So, it is not a distinction by which we could guide ourselves in the practice of making or withholding such claims. 9

A more positive rejoinder to the sceptic would have been to say that the relation between behavioural criteria and inner states is a two-way street; that we sometimes have no way of understanding external behaviour itself except in light of prior knowledge of inner states. We can happily agree with the critic that real tears differ from crocodile tears in that only the former express or manifest the feeling of sadness (which takes us right back to the notion of inner states). At the same time, we can, with equal ease, insist that being in a state of sadness is not always an epistemological “hidden” which we have to wait on external behaviour to reveal. On the contrary, our knowledge of inner states is sometimes used to explain, predict or otherwise understand what a person will be doing in the future, or what she did in the past (external behaviour). Dretske offers some examples here – from a person’s evident joy at reading a letter, we may infer that a loved one is on the way; from a person’s evident knowledge about a city, we can infer that he lived there once, and so on. 10

Such examples, however, are inconclusive. The “present joy” which we use to predict (or explain) a future course of behaviour is supposed to be evident, but evident through what, if not the behavioural criteria of joy? Similarly, a person’s knowledge which we use to surmise something about what the person did in the past (e.g. that he lived in a city), will, again, be available to us only through his behaviour (e.g. his being able to answer great many questions about the city).

Shall we then say, as Wittgenstein did, that “The only way of recognizing [pain] is by externals, and the uncertainty is constitutional.”? 11

8. McDowell (1998b:380).
9. McDowell (1998b: 381)
10. Dretske (1973:43)
11. Wittgenstein (1980b: §657)
Wittgenstein goes on to say that this “uncertainty is not a shortcoming.” All of this, in fact, may be taken to be part of McDowell’s doctrine of the fallibility of our knowledge of the external world (and by implication, the psychological states of the agents who are part of it). According to McDowell,

> We need not pretend to have an argument that would prove that we are not, say, at the mercy of Descartes’s demon. . . . There is no need to establish . . . that in any particular case of perceptual experience we actually are in the favourable epistemic position that scepticism suggests we could never be in. 12

One may accept this, yet still wonder whether a way can be found to prevent the passage from fallibility to scepticism. We can all agree that in the deceptive situation we are presented with appearances, mere appearances that “fall short of the fact.” However, since the non-deceptive situations are – according to some philosophers – “phenomenally indistinguishable” from the deceptive ones, we may conclude that what is presented in the non-deceptive epistemic situation cannot be any different from what is presented in the deceptive one. At this point, McDowell invokes a disjunctive conception of experience to resist the sceptical move:

> But suppose we say —not at all unnaturally— that an appearance that such-and-such is the case can be either a mere appearance, or the fact that such-and-such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone. As before, the object of experience in the deceptive cases is a mere appearance. But we are not to accept that in the non-deceptive cases too the object of experience is a mere appearance, and hence something that falls short of the fact itself. 13

Plausible as the disjunctive conception of experience may be on other grounds, it does not constitute an answer to scepticism, according to philosophers such as Crispin Wright. For even if we grant that experience must be conceived as having “objective purport,” 14 and that what is presented in the non-deceptive case is the fact itself and not some mere appearance, a question may still be raised as to whether the non-deceptive cases are common enough, or if they ever occur:

> . . . It is obvious from the start that merely canvassing possibilities of direct cognitive acquaintance is unlikely to result in the placing of any very powerful philosophical levers. The nagging voice of intellectual conscience will rejoin: “Well, yes, but even if that —a mode of direct acquaintance—is how we have to conceive of our experience, in the

12. McDowell (2008: 379).
13. McDowell (1998a: 386f).
14. McDowell (2008, 382)
best case, what reason is there to take it that the best case is common, or even that it ever occurs at all?"  

Wright proceeds to offer a general argument whose purpose is to sustain scepticism. The argument does not specifically address the question of our knowledge of inner states, but it is fairly straightforward to adapt it to our present purposes as follows: 

(1) You do not have warrant for thinking that you are not being deceived at this moment.
(2) If you are truly warranted now in thinking that she is amused, then you have warrant for thinking that you are not being deceived at this moment.
(3) Assume (for reductio) that you are truly warranted now in thinking that she is amused.
(4) Therefore, you have warrant for thinking that you are not being deceived at this moment. (This contradicts Premise 1, thus negating the assumption in 3). We conclude:
(5) You are not truly warranted now in thinking that she is amused.

Now, everyone can apply a version of this type of argument at will to any possible claim to knowledge of someone else’s inner states, and draw a negative conclusion such as 5. Is this not enough to sink us in a sea of doubt? Even if we accept the idea that it is impossible for us to be deceived on all occasions (deception, it could be argued, makes no sense outside the semantic contrast of “deceptive/veridical”), what good is this doing you or me at this moment? Couldn’t our present situation be similar to the one-in-a-million lottery? There is bound to be a winner, or winners, but no single one of us has sufficient warrant for the belief that he or she is one. To avoid scepticism, we must therefore find a way to resist Premise 1.

In order to highlight the plausibility of Premise 1, sceptics often use one of several well-known sceptical scenarios (for example, Descartes’s evil demon, the brain in a vat, or the scenario of the “lucid dream” which Wright actually uses). Such scenarios are intended to make vivid the idea that the non-deceptive experiences are phenomenally indistinguishable from the deceptive ones. The scenarios seem to be perfectly intelligible and intuitive; hardly any philosophy student will fail to succumb to them at some point or other in their career.

15. Wright (2008:401)
16. For Wright’s actual argument, see Wright (2008: 402-404). For Wright’s “P” read “She is amused”, and for his “D” read “You are being deceived.”
So, the question must be raised: Must we accept Premise 1? According to some critics of scepticism, the indistinguishability (or indiscriminability) which is supposed to hold between deceptive and non-deceptive experiences is more complex than the sceptic takes it to be. For our inability to distinguish between experiences of type X and experiences of type Y may depend on the epistemic situation we are in. To be more precise, our inability to tell, in some particular situation or other, whether we are deceived or not, may itself be a consequence of our being in an unfavourable epistemic situation.

The point was illustrated by Bernard Williams some 40 years ago, using the example of anoxia (low oxygen levels in the body, including the brain), a condition which high altitude pilots experience sometimes. One symptom of this condition is supposed to be over-confidence, which leads such pilots to ignore symptoms such as blue finger-nails (and others). Let being anoxic serve as an example of being in the epistemically bad situation. According to Williams,

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\ldots \text{[I]t might well be that A could not tell that he was anoxic when he was; but it would surely be paradoxical to suggest that therefore A could not tell that he was not anoxic when he was not (for instance, A is you, now).} \tag{17} \] (Emphasis added.)

Other, more drastic examples can be given. If you are dead, you cannot tell if you are dead or alive, but this does not mean that if you are alive, then you cannot tell if you are dead or alive. Similarly, one who is dreaming cannot (typically) tell if she dreaming or not, but need we say that one who is awake cannot tell if she is awake or not?

In a similar fashion, Timothy Williamson has recently suggested that distinguishability and indistinguishability are relative to one’s epistemic situation: one who is in a deceptive epistemic situation may not be able to tell if he is in it or not. According to Williamson, this has the effect of turning the tables on the sceptic’s argument:

Since making the discrimination [between being deceived or not] is a matter of knowing that one’s present situation is not the bad one, \ldots the claim that one cannot make it [cf. Premise 1 in the argument above] is tantamount to the sceptic’s conclusion. The claim is not available to the sceptic as a premise.\tag{18}

To illustrate: assume (for the sake of argument) that I am now in the non-deceptive epistemic situation. This means, among other things, that my senses are working properly, revealing to me the world pretty much as it is in fact. I look in the mirror and I see myself typing. Had I been a

17. Williams (1978: 299).
18. Williamson (1995: 537).
brain a vat, surely the scene before me would have been vastly different (otherwise my senses would be deceiving me, which they are not, by assumption of being in the non-deceptive epistemic situation). Thus, assuming that I am not a brain in a vat, I am able to distinguish between being a normally embodied person and being a brain in a vat.

The sceptical argument proposed by Wright begins with what ought to be a controversial premise – that I am unable to distinguish between being deceived or not. But we do not have to accept the order of the argument proposed by the sceptic. According to McDowell,

> We can invert the order in which scepticism insists we should proceed, and say—as common sense would, if it undertook to consider the sceptical scenarios at all—that our knowledge that those supposed possibilities do not obtain is sustained by the fact that we know a great deal about our environment, which would not be the case if we were not perceptually in touch with the world in just about the way we ordinarily suppose we are.¹⁹

In response to McDowell’s proposal, one may say: of course, we can invert the order of the argument and follow common-sense as suggested. But would this not be an assumption on our part? What the sceptic, lacking good argument, merely asserts, we can, equally lacking good argument, merely deny. In the end, it looks very much like a “draw” between us and the sceptic, a draw of the kind which Prichard illustrated in connection with the Moorean response to scepticism.²⁰

However, we should not construe McDowell’s invitation to invert the sceptical order of procedure as an argument in favour of common-sense. Rather, it should be taken as a reminder of the availability of the common-sense position. The actual arguments provided by philosophers like McDowell, Williamson, and others consist of attempts to “deconstruct” the sceptical arguments and to question the assumptions which sceptics employ in order to destabilize the common-sense position.

Nor should we think that one would be justified in declaring a “draw” between scepticism and the common-sense position, thereby acknowledging that the burden of proof rests equally on both. It is true that we do sometimes claim to know this or that about the world, and it is very often fair that we should be challenged to justify our claim to know. A conversation starts at this point, but if common-sense is challenged at a certain stage in the conversation to prove that Descartes’s demon is not up and about in our neighbourhood, we should realize that something has gone wrong. Not only is the challenge (probably) impossible to meet, but it seems unfair in any case. For how can

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¹⁹. McDowell (2008: 379).
²⁰. Pritchard (2007: 71).
someone who is not allowed to assume that he is *not* being globally deceived be expected to produce arguments, much less good arguments, for or against anything? He is not allowed to rely on his senses. Perhaps he cannot rely on his reason, either. For when we dream, we often entertain contradictions with great complacency.\(^{21}\) The same applies to the sceptic who stands before the common-sense fellow, ready to take the latter’s arguments apart. How can he be certain about the cogency of his counter-arguments? Given the peculiar character of this situation and the challenge mounted by the sceptic, it seems that the best thing which the common-sense fellow can do is to show where matters went wrong in the conversation and stop right there. In so doing, he would be in essential agreement with what Barry Stroud has said: “...the worst thing to do with the traditional question about our knowledge of the world is to try to answer it.”\(^{22}\)

We can thus refuse to engage with the sceptical challenge and continue to uphold the common-sense position which takes the existence of external reality for granted. Nothing the sceptic has said shows that we are not entitled to think that propositional knowledge of other minds stands on a footing which is at least as firm as that of our knowledge of external material objects and their states. This conclusion, if accepted, would be in line with Dretske’s belief that “there is no special problem of other minds – no problem, at least, that isn’t already present in our (putative) knowledge that there are other bodies.”\(^{23}\)

III. Scepticism about Objectual Knowledge of Other Minds

There is one more issue that we have yet to raise with the sceptic: the issue of what it would take to put scepticism about the existence and states of other minds to rest. The matter is relevant to propositional knowledge, but it is best discussed in relation to what we have called “objectual knowledge of other minds.” The suspicion is that the reason why the sceptic may continue to find accounts of propositional knowledge of other minds unsatisfactory is an implicit assumption that inner states are objects which require, or at least admit of, another type of knowledge – objectual, rather than propositional.

To lay out the grounds for scepticism about objectual knowledge, let us assume, for the sake of argument, that we have propositional\(^{21}\) Imagine a dream where you “firmly believe” that you have given away all the apples you had, but you still had one apple left.\(^{22}\) Stroud (2000: 56).\(^{23}\) Dretske (1973: 36).
knowledge of other minds. Let us also assume that the facts of pretence and other unfavourable epistemic conditions prove, at most, that our knowledge is fallible, and provide no grounds for universal scepticism.

Still, the account presented thus far may seem to leave something out. We can see what and why by comparing the experience of seeing that this apple is red and the experience of seeing that this person is in pain. If you see that the apple is red, there is a fact out there in the world, the fact that the apple is red. The reach of your experience does not “fall short of the fact,” meaning that in your experience, the apple reveals itself as the red object which it is: the colour it seems to have is the colour it really has. Nothing is held back from you as far as colour is concerned. Of course, the apple does not tell you much of anything about its surface microscopic properties, but this is a different matter, which you do not need to know about in order to see and judge correctly that the apple is red. Here we seem to have a small, self-contained story involving you, the apple, and the apple’s being red. Everything, as it were, is on the table.

Now compare this to the situation where you see that someone is in pain. Again, we allow ourselves to think that there is a fact out there in the world, the fact that so-and-so is in pain. But now we face a question about the reach of your experience. Is there a sense in which something is being held back from you, even as you observe the suffering individual? Not so, according to Wittgenstein:

You look at a face and say “I wonder, what’s going on behind that face?” But you don’t have to think that way. And if someone talks to me quite obviously holding nothing back then I am not even tempted to think that way.24

Perhaps then, there is a sense in which the person is not holding anything back from us, but can we not think of another sense in which something is being held back from us, willy-nilly, despite the person’s sincere, truthful expression of pain? You can imagine that you are in pain. You observe yourself in the mirror and get to see how the pain is “revealed” in the usual ways. This can occur without staging, if you happen to hurt yourself in a room full of mirrors. But over and above the truthful manifestations of pain, there is this awful, unbearable feeling of which you are acutely aware. This is what seems to be absent from the picture that an

24. Wittgenstein (1982: §978). This passage makes it clear that knowledge of other minds is not just a matter of observing expressive behavior, such as groaning or laughing. Under the right circumstances, verbal behavior and speech acts such as avowing, averring, questioning, and denying, etc. may be occasions of direct access to the mental states of others (even to past states of affairs, as suggested by McDowell. See Footnote 6 above).
observer may draw of your being in pain. Wittgenstein comes to mind here again:

—“But I do have a real feeling of joy!” —Yes, when you are glad you really are glad. And of course, joy is not joyful behaviour, nor yet a feeling round the corners of the mouth and the eyes.²⁵

In yet another place, Wittgenstein expresses the point more forcefully by having his interlocutor say:

... there is a Something there all the same, which accompanies my cry of pain! And it is on account of this that I utter it. And this Something is what is important and frightful.²⁶

The feeling of joy which the joyful person is aware of, may be manifested in many different ways, one might say, but it seems wrong to identify it with its manifestations. We do not even have to cite the possibility of unexpressed joy to prove the separate being of the “Something” of which Wittgenstein’s interlocutor speaks. Even if human beings never learned to conceal their feelings, it would not be right to identify the feeling with its manifestations.

To talk about inner states in this manner is to view them as objects, albeit objects of a special kind. We seem to arrive at this model naturally by considering simple acts of introspection. The joyful person, who is conscious of all sorts of things in her environment, often turns her attention “inward” and becomes aware of feelings, sensations, and thoughts of all kinds: her present feeling of joy, a feeling of thirst, an urge to leave this meeting, the peculiar way she is seeing this half-submerged stick, the striking realisation that the speaker has just contradicted himself, etc. All of these seem to be objects of awareness. One finds it natural to talk about them using common nouns and referring phrases such as “this headache which I have been feeling for the last hour,” “this after-taste which the drink has left in my mouth,” and so on. Such examples are often presented as examples of “self-knowledge” that falls within the reach of the subject of experiences in a privileged sort of way, one of which others cannot partake.²⁷

One’s relation to these objects seems to be one of direct acquaintance. One does not need to make observations in order to become aware of one’s urge to leave the meeting. The urge impinges on one’s

²⁵. Wittgenstein (1967: §487).
²⁶. Wittgenstein (1963: §296).
²⁷. See Gertler (2015) for a discussion of theories of self-knowledge. In addition to providing the subject with privileged access to his own experiences, self-knowledge is generally supposed to be non-observational, self-intimating, and authoritative. For a discussion of these attributes, see Wright (1998).
consciousness and announces itself “in person,” as it were. “In order to be able to say that I have toothache,” says Wittgenstein, “I don’t observe my behaviour, say in the mirror.” 28 I stand to the toothache in much the same way that I stand to the tree over there. In each case a direct appearance is being made, and there is no trace of proxies or representations to be found.

Let us call this kind of knowledge which we have of our inner states “objectual knowledge.” The sceptic may grant that we are sometimes in a position to have propositional knowledge about the inner states of other people, but this knowledge lacks the “immediacy” of objectual knowledge. It is not “knowledge by acquaintance,” to use the classical Russellian term. Rather, it is more like knowledge by description, the sceptic may want to say, using the other classical Russellian term. We neither get to see nor to feel the pain of the other, but we definitely get to know a lot about it. For example, were we to be present at the scene, we would know what caused the pain, and where the subject felt it. Looking at the facial contortions, and going by the loudness of the screaming, we would know that the pain is intense. In the meantime, the pain is out there, being experienced by the subject. We know about it but we don’t know it. If we are epistemically unlucky, there may be multiple pains that the sufferer is indiscriminately expressing by his screaming and writhing. Or there may be no pain at all, if it is all a big act. These are all marks of knowledge by description, which is exemplified more clearly in the case of material objects, when we, lacking perceptual contact with a certain material object, end up forming definite descriptions of it based on traces, effects, and explanations formulated by reference to it.

A particularly vivid example of the difference between being acquainted with a certain object and knowing about it by description can be found in this passage by J. L. Austin, describing someone on the trail of a pig:

The situation in which I would properly be said to have evidence for the statement that some animal is a pig is that, for example, in which the beast itself is not actually on view, but I can see plenty of pig-like marks on the ground outside its retreat. If I find a few buckets of pig-food, that’s a bit more evidence, and the noises and the smell may provide better evidence still. But if the animal then emerges and stands there plainly in view, there is no longer any question of collecting evidence; its coming into view doesn’t provide me with more evidence that it’s a pig, I can now just see that it is, the question is settled. 29

28. Wittgenstein (1968: 319). Cf. Wittgenstein (1980b: §177).
29. Austin (1962: 115).
It is not clear whether Austin would allow that we have knowledge of the pig while we are still on its trail, but (assuming that there is a pig to know about), nothing stands in the way of our taking it that we acquire more and more knowledge by description of the animal as we go along collecting evidence. Still, as in the case of pain, it may be that there is more than one pig, or the whole thing may be a big hoax. Only when we become perceptually acquainted with the pig can we say that “the question is settled.”

One thing to note here is our willingness to rate these two types of knowledge in terms of superiority and inferiority. According to Russell, knowledge by acquaintance is what provides us with direct cognitive contact with objects: “I am acquainted with an object when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, i.e. when I am directly aware of the object itself.”

For Russell, not all objects pass the test of acquaintance. Sense-data, some universals, and possibly the self, do, “but not . . . physical objects or other minds.” Of these latter we may have knowledge by description. More recently, in his criticism of causal theories of reference, Jaegwon Kim has suggested that we should think of perception as something that places us in “direct cognitive touch” with perceived objects. “[W]e can baptize [‘name’] all and only those things with which we are acquainted.” When I see the apple, I become acquainted with the apple itself, rather than with whatever it is that is causing me to have impressions of a red-looking spherical object, which could be anything but an apple, for all I know.

Be that as it may, this is what the sceptic might think is missing in the propositional account of knowledge of other minds: there is something (or rather, “some thing”) the subject is acquainted with, which we are not, despite our knowing that the subject is in a certain inner state. Our lack of acquaintance leaves us prey to uncertainty, arguably the mother of scepticism. I do not really know that there is a feeling of pain out there – for all I know (in the sense of acquaintance) there may or may not be pain. This is a second kind of scepticism, one that seems to be engendered by lack of acquaintance. Let us call it scepticism about objectual knowledge of other minds.

This is what we want to suggest now: the sceptic about other minds is after a certain kind of knowledge of inner states, one which is available to one who is in the inner state itself. A. J. Ayer once claimed, “I . . . know my own experiences . . . by actually having them.”

30. Russell (1910-11: 108).
31. Russell (1910-11: 127).
32. Kim (1977: 617).
33. Ayer (1953: 6).
seems to have gone one step further than Ayer by suggesting that knowing adds nothing to having: “It can’t be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I know I’m in pain. What is it supposed to mean – except perhaps that I am in pain?”

Having set aside propositional knowledge as being merely descriptive, the only thing that would fit the bill for the sceptic is a kind of acquaintance whose epistemic credentials are comparable to those of our perceptual acquaintance with the tree over there. How are we to understand this expectation, to gain knowledge of the inner states of other people by experiencing them? What the sceptic seems to require, in the words of Alec Hyslop, is the idea that “[The mental state of the other] would have to be experienced by me as someone else’s mental state.” This seems to be an impossible expectation. The mental state has to be experienced as the mental state of the other, otherwise one could not be said to be acquainted with the other person’s inner state. Yet, at the same time, if any mental state whatever were to be experienced by me, it is hard to imagine what would prevent me from viewing it as mine. If, per impossibile, in the process of experiencing another person’s pain I myself start to feel pain, to scream, writhe, ask for help, etc., then what is to prevent me from thinking that it is all my feeling of pain? On the other hand, if I were to become “acquainted” with his condition without experiencing pain myself, I may conclude that he was not really in pain, or that I did not succeed in becoming acquainted with his pain, after all. Along the same lines, what reason would you have for thinking (on some particular occasion or other), that you are in a state of being acquainted with her pain rather than mine, if she and I were having the same pain, either independently, or because (unlucky for her) she was in a state of being “acquainted” with my pain?

There is another kind of difficulty. Imagine that my pain, again, per impossibile, were to be experienced by an indefinite number of people: how will my pain, which we are supposed to conceive of as a particular object of sorts, manage to hang on to its particularity, instead of becoming a universal which is exemplified by many? The situation we are describing is one where we are all experiencing pain: I, because I cut myself; you and the others, because you are “acquainted” with my pain. How is this supposed to differ from the situation where each one of us was experiencing his or her own pain in the regular way (that is, independently of each other)? Each one of us would be exemplifying the property of, say, feeling a sharp pain in the neck (which is what I happen to be feeling now). In this situation, nothing stands in the way of thinking

34. Wittgenstein (1963:§ 246)
35. Hyslop (2014).
that the expression “my pain” has shifted its meaning. In one scenario, it stands for a particular object, my pain, the pain which is mine alone, and in the other it stands for a kind of thing, the kind of pain which I happen to be feeling now, along with many other people. This is somewhat analogous to what happens when the phrase “the colour of my car” is interpreted as referring to a trope, an abstract particular which belongs only to my car, or, alternatively, as referring to the universal red, which happens to be the colour of my car, a colour which many other cars can “have” as well.

Thus, it is clear that the idea of being acquainted with the inner states of others is not intelligible. Still, it may be thought that this need not cast doubt on the intelligibility of the idea that I (for example) have knowledge of my own inner states by acquaintance, whereas others have knowledge of my inner states by description. Upon closer examination, however, it turns out that the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description collapses in the case of inner states.

To begin with the case of the subject being acquainted with his or her inner states: the distinction seems to make little or no sense for the following reason. Knowledge by acquaintance has meaning only in the context of a semantic contrast between acquaintance and description. It is meaningful only to the extent that it would be possible to speak of the subject having knowledge of his inner states by description. Carnap appears to have entertained this idea, saying that “[t]he protocol sentences . . . which rationally support [the sentence ‘I am now excited’], have . . . some such form as ‘I feel my hands trembling,’ ‘I see my hands trembling,’ ‘I hear my voice quavering,’ etc.” 36 Wittgenstein, however, was decisive in his rejection of this idea: “In order to be able to say that I have a toothache I don’t observe my behaviour, say in the mirror.” 37 In another place we find him saying:

My own behaviour is sometimes—but rarely—the object of my own observation. . . . Even if an actor observes his own expressions in a glass. . . . this is done so as to direct his action accordingly. 38

I cannot, therefore, draw a distinction between knowing my inner states by acquaintance and knowing them by description, because the second part of the distinction makes little or no sense in my own case.

Consider, in the second place, how the distinction fares in the case of outside observers. Such observers are said to have knowledge by

36. Carnap (1959: 191).
37. Wittgenstein (1968: 319).
38. Wittgenstein (1967: §591).
description of Smith’s inner condition of pain. As in the first case, this invites the question: Do they know Smith’s pain by description, as opposed to being acquainted with it? What meaning can be attached to this suggestion? If being acquainted with the pain is the same as having it (as Wittgenstein might say), then expecting them to become acquainted with Smith’s pain is the same as expecting them to have his pain. But this is not an intelligible idea, as we have just seen. Hence for them, too, the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description collapses, this time because there is no sense to be made of the first part of the distinction.

We must thus conclude that the distinction between two modes of knowledge of inner states collapses, not just in the case of the subject, but also in the case of the others who want to attribute inner conditions to the subject. We simply have to relinquish the idea of psychic life as a matter of inner objects parading on an internal theatre before an audience that consists of a solitary observer/knower. In other words, scepticism about objectual knowledge of other minds has to be rejected because the very idea of objectual knowledge of other minds is incoherent.

IV. Concluding Remarks

The seductive power of scepticism does not primarily depend on the fact that we are often deceived about our knowledge of other minds, or the fact that we can be in unfavourable epistemic situations without knowing it. Such possibilities can befall us in the course of acquiring knowledge about physical objects, such as rail-road tracks, half-submerged sticks, and barn façades. For the sceptic about other minds, however, the problem appears to be much more serious. For in the case of physical objects the distinction between acquaintance and description is available to all of us on an equal footing, without any restriction or exclusion. Following the trail of Austin’s pig, we can all gather evidence, and we can all hope to encounter the pig at the end of trail and declare that “the question is settled.” In the case of other minds, however, we cannot all hope to encounter Smith’s splitting headache and declare that the question is settled. Only Smith can have this encounter, because he is “acquainted” with his inner states, whereas we are not.

The premise which seems to underlie this line of thought about knowledge of other minds can be expressed in many ways, all converging on the same point. Only I am acquainted with my inner states. Only the subject has first-personal access to his subjective life. Others have
only third-personal access to my inner states. Other people cannot know my state of mind from “the inside.” Other people can know only from “the outside” how she feels. Based on Ayer’s idea that “I... know my own experiences ... by actually having them,” one may formulate yet another way of expressing the same meaning: she knows her inner states by being in them, whereas I know her inner states by observing her behaviour. All such locutions ultimately depend on thinking of subjective life in terms of a special relation of acquaintance which holds between a subject and his or her inner states conceived of as objects.

We must learn to live without this picture. In doing so, we need not deny familiar and widely accepted facts, such as the fact that one’s statements about one’s inner states carry more weight than similar statements made by other people, and the fact that one is not required to provide observational evidence to support his or her avowal of being in some inner state or other. Nothing in these facts considered by themselves invites scepticism about knowledge of other minds. It may or may not be the case that we have to offer a theory of “self-knowledge” to explain such facts. This appears to be a moot point, but there is no reason to think that such a theory will necessarily lead to scepticism of the kind we have been arguing against in this paper.

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39. Ayer (1953: 6).
40. For a discussion of this question, see Wright (1998) and McDowell (1998c).
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