



Chapter 15

# The Self and Other Minds

Can Information Philosophy



## The Self and Other Minds

Celebrating RENÉ DESCARTES, the first modern philosopher, and his famous phrase *Ego cogito, ergo sum*, we call our model for mind the *Ego*. It is implemented with our *experience recorder and reproducer* (ERR).

Our two-stage model for free will we call the *Cogito*. Our model for an objective value, independent of humanity and earthly bioethics, we call *Ergo*. And our model for knowledge we call the *Sum*.

The *Ego* is more or less synonymous with the Self, the Soul, or the Spirit - GILBERT RYLE's "ghost in the machine." We see it as *immaterial* information. An immaterial self with causal power is almost universally denied by modern philosophers as *metaphysical*, along with related problematic ideas such as consciousness and libertarian or indeterministic free will.

Descartes illustrated a mechanical reflex path, from a foot feeling pain from a fire, up a nerve to the pineal gland in the *mind*, and back down to pull away the foot.

It is important to note that Descartes made that gland the



locus of *undetermined* freedom in humans. For him, the *body* was a deterministic mechanical system of tiny fibres causing movements in the brain (the afferent sensations), which then can pull on other fibres to activate the muscles (the efferent nerve impulses). This is the basis of stimulus and response theory in modern physiology (reflexology). It is also the basis behind simple connectionist theories of mind. An appropriate neural network (with all the necessary logical connections) need only connect afferent to efferent signals. No thinking mind is needed for animals. This "reflex arc" model is still common in biology.



Descartes' suggestion that animals are machines included the notion that man too is in part a machine - the human body obeys deterministic causal laws. Although for Descartes man also has a soul or spirit that is exempt from determinism and thus from what is known today as "causal closure," Cartesian dualism was the first step to eliminative materialism.

### Mind Over Matter?

But as all critics of Descartes do, we must ask, how can the mind both cause something physical to happen and yet itself be *acausal*? How is it exempt from causal chains coming up from the body?

Descartes' vision of undetermined freedom for the mind is realized since our *immaterial* thoughts are free, whereas our actions are adequately determined by our will. This combination of ideas is the basis for our *two-stage model* of free will.<sup>1</sup> It is a model of *agent causation*. New causal chains originate as ideas in our minds. Once evaluated and chosen they are adequately determined to lead to willed actions. This is a model for *self-determination*.

The "self" or ego, the psyche or soul, is the self of this self-determination. Self-determination is of course limited by our control over matter and energy, but within those physical constraints our selves can consider ideas, decide to act on one and take full responsibility for our actions.

The Self is often identified with one's "character." This is the basis for saying that our choices and decisions are made by evaluating freely generated *alternative possibilities* in accordance with our reasons, motives, feelings, desires, etc. These are in turn often the consequence of our past experiences, along with inherited (biologically built-in) preferences. And this bundle of motivating factors is essentially what is known as our character. Someone familiar with all of those preferences would be able to predict our actions with some certainty, though not perfectly, when faced with particular options and the circumstances. The self is the agent that is responsible for those actions.

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1 See chapter 4.



The self is also often described as the seat of *consciousness*. Information philosophy defines consciousness as attention to information coming in to the mind and the resulting actions that are responsive to the external stimuli (or bodily proprioceptions). Consciousness thus depends in part on past experiences which are recalled by the experience recorder and reproducer as responses to external stimuli. In this way, what it's like to be a conscious agent depends on the kinds of experiences that the agent can notice.

DAVID HUME's so-called "bundle theory" of the self is quite consistent with the information philosophy view. His fundamental ideas of causality, contiguity, and resemblance as the basis for the association of ideas are essential aspects of the experience recorder and reproducer. He said,

It is plain, that in the course of our thinking, and in the constant revolution of our ideas, our imagination runs easily from one idea to any other that resembles it, and that this quality alone is to the fancy a sufficient bond and association. It is likewise evident that as the senses, in changing their objects, are necessitated to change them regularly, and take them as they lie contiguous to each other, the imagination must by long custom acquire the same method of thinking, and run along the parts of space and time in conceiving its objects.<sup>2</sup>

The frog's eye famously filters out some visual events (moving concave images) while triggering strong reactions to others, like sticking out a tongue to capture moving convex objects. What it's like to be a frog depends then on some experiences that are never recorded and thus not meaningful to the frog. Hume might say such perceptions have no resemblance to anything in the mind of the frog. The frog's self is simply not conscious of any sensations that are filtered out of its perceptions.

### The Problem of Other Minds

The problem of other minds is often posed as just one more problem in epistemology, that is, how can we be certain about the existence of other minds, since we can't be certain about anything in the external world. But it can also be seen as a problem about meaningful communications and agreement about shared concepts in two minds. This makes information philosophy an excellent tool for approaching the problem.



For some philosophers, the problem of other minds is dis-solved by denying the existence of the mind in general - as merely an epiphenomenon with no causal powers. Other philosophers identify the problem with Hume's claim that when he looked inside he saw no self. Our positing the self as the immaterial information about stored past experiences clearly helps here.

Still others admit that they have perceptions and sensations, but how could they possibly know what another person is experiencing. For example, I know when I feel pain, but I don't know what is really happening in another person who looks to be feeling pain.

The standard answer here is that other persons seem in most respect to be similar to ourselves, and so by analogy their experiences must be similar to ours. This analogical inference is weak because of its literal superficiality, because we don't get an inside view of the other mind.

For information philosophy, the problem of knowledge can be solved by identifying partial isomorphisms in external information structures with the pure information in a mind. This suggests the solution of other minds. Looked at this way, the problem of other minds is easier to solve than the general epistemological problem. The general problem must compare different things, the pure information of mental ideas with the information abstracted from concrete external information structures. The problem of other minds compares concepts in minds about similar things.

When, by interpersonal communications, we compare the pure information content in two different minds, we are reaching directly into the other mind in its innermost immaterial nature. To be sure, we have not felt the same sensations nor had identical experiences. We have not "felt the other's pain." But we can plant ideas in the other mind, and then watch those ideas alter the other person's actions in a way totally identical to what that information, that knowledge, has been used for in our own actions.



This establishes the existence, behind the external bodily (material) behaviors of the other person, of the same *immaterial*, metaphysical mind model in the other mind, as the one in our own.

CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE offered us a vision of an open “community of inquirers,” seeking “intersubjective agreement” to find common ground, common ideas, and common information structures that are processing information in similar if not identical ways.

The very first item of intersubjective agreement in that community should be to accept the existence of minds in all the members of the community.

