THE CONDITIONS OF THOUGHT

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What are the conditions necessary for the existence of thought, and so in particular for the existence of people with thoughts? I believe there could not be thoughts in one mind if there were no other thoughtful creatures with which the first mind shared a natural world. My remarks therefore match the title of this session: Human Beings: Nature, Mind and Community.

By a thought I mean a mental state with a specifiable content. Examples are: the belief that this is a piece of paper; the intention to speak slowly and clearly; the doubt whether it will be sunny tomorrow. It is natural to suppose that thoughts like these depend on nothing outside the mind, that they might be just as they are and yet the world be very different. It is natural to think this because it seems obvious that any one thought about the nature of the world may be mistaken, and from this it appears to follow that all such thoughts could be mistaken. The only thoughts that escape such preliminary and primitive skepticism are those about our own thoughts; these are privileged because the source of doubt — the possibility that something outside the mind may fail to exist — has been removed.

Something like this line of reasoning explains, as we all know, why so much Western philosophy has felt constrained to start from a solipsistic, or first person, point of view. It also helps explain the fact, which otherwise might be mysterious, that knowledge of other minds has seemed a problem in addition to the problem of empirical knowledge. For if the contents of a mind are logically independent of anything else, this creates two distinguishable problems:

1. This paper was originally written for, and delivered at, the plenary session on Human Beings: Nature, Mind and Community at the World Congress of Philosophy, Brighton, August 23rd, 1988.

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how the mind can know what is separate from it, and how what is separate from it can know it. If you can’t see out, neither can anyone else (if there is anyone else) see in.

Perhaps under the influence of Wittgenstein, a number of philosophers have thought they saw how to respond to the second problem, the problem of one person’s knowledge of another person’s mind. The solution, in broad outline, went like this. We must admit that there is a difference in how we know what is in our own mind and how we know what is in someone else’s mind; in the former case we do not usually need or employ evidence, whereas in the latter case we must observe behavior, including speech behavior. But this in itself poses no problem. If we understand what mental states are like, then we know that they embrace this anomaly: unlike almost all other kinds of knowledge, knowledge of mental states has the feature that it is correctly based on the observation of behavior when the states are not our own, and not based (normally) on observation or evidence when the states are our own.

As a description of how we employ mental concepts and words, this is (in my opinion) correct. But what these philosophers failed to notice was that a description of our practice is not a solution to the original problem, but a redescription of what creates the problem. Our practice was never in doubt; the doubt concerned its legitimacy, and its legitimacy is open to two questions. The first is that it is hard to see, failing an explanation, why knowledge that is not based on evidence should be more certain than knowledge that is based on evidence. The second is that if what seems a single concept or predicate is correctly applied using two very different sorts of criteria (or in one case using no criteria at all), then we have no reason to suppose there is a single concept. Apparently we should conclude that the predicate is ambiguous, that there are two concepts. This is, after all, the same old problem over again: why should one person believe someone else has mental states like his own? Or to put the problem the other way around, why should I think I have mental states like those I detect in others?

Let us put aside these problems for a moment, especially since I shall not be able to give an adequate treatment of them in this talk. Having, for the moment, accepted what we may call the observer,