

# 15 *A Warrant for Belief in Other Minds\**

What warrants do we have for believing that there are other minds? We believe with great confidence that there are other beings that think and/or that are conscious. We are as confident that there are other minds as that there are physical objects. At least, I am. But as in the case of knowledge of the existence of physical objects, the nature of the justifications or entitlements for our knowledge of other minds has sometimes seemed difficult to articulate, particularly in the face of sceptical doubts. I will not try to answer scepticism here. I want to reflect on the nature of one type of warrant for belief in other minds, laying aside its relevance to scepticism. I think that my reflections *are* relevant to scepticism, but not by being directly convertible into an anti-sceptical argument. I will discuss a type of warrant that I think we have.

Mill, followed by Russell, gave an early statement of an argument from analogy: We know in each of our own cases that we have thoughts. We can observe that these thoughts produce behavior of certain sorts in us. We observe similar behavior in others. We infer by analogy that similar behavior has a similar cause.<sup>1</sup>

\* [Added 2011:] A parent of this essay was given at New York University in April, 1997; at Harvard University, October, 1998; and at Florida State University, February, 1999. I benefited from comments from the audiences on those occasions, and from a conversation with Amelie Rorty in the Fall of 1998. Parts of this essay overlap 'Reason and the First Person', reprinted in this volume. I never submitted the present essay for publication. I have edited the essay lightly, except for one significant substantive change. I altered step (1) in accord with my giving up the view that our entitlement to comprehension of another's utterances on particular occasions can be apriori. See 'Postscript: Content Preservation', section III, this volume.

<sup>1</sup> J. S. Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy and of the Principal Philosophical Questions Discussed in His Writings*, 6th edn. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1889), 243–244; and Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1948), 482–486. For more recent developments of the approach, see Stuart Hampshire, 'Feeling and Expression', in his *Freedom of Mind and Other Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 143–159; and Christopher S. Hill, 'On Getting to Know Others', *Philosophical Topics* 13 (1985), 257–266. More recently yet, several philosophers have used the notion of simulation to yield variants on the argument from analogy. I think that these latter may avoid the charge of hyper-intellectualization that I present below against the classical arguments from analogy. I think that improvements on Mill and Russell may contribute to understanding one warrant that we have in knowing that there are other minds.

The issues over arguments from analogy are complex. I am not persuaded by some of the traditional criticisms. However, the mode of knowledge championed by these arguments does not do very well with minds, bodies, or behaviors quite different from our own. It seems to me that we can know that non-human animals, perhaps even Martians, have minds. Furthermore, insofar as the *classical* arguments from analogy are presented as our only way of knowing that there are other minds, the view tends to hyper-intellectualization. The classical arguments from analogy place each person's observation of his own behavior, and reflection on how his or her own mental states cause it, in too prominent a place to account for the primitiveness and solidity of our knowledge of other minds. Inference from self-observation and inference from self-knowledge are rather sophisticated abilities. I believe that our initial and fundamental warrants for belief in other minds are more primitive and less complex.

Strawson claims that the idea that mental predicates apply only to oneself is incoherent. He holds that since (as he assumes) all predicates must be significantly applicable to a range of individuals, one must be prepared to ascribe mentalistic predicates on appropriate occasions to other individuals. The condition of being so prepared is that one operate with a conception of an individual to which both mental and physical predicates are applicable. One must be able to identify subjects of mental predicates by identifying them as subjects of physical predicates. Strawson holds that one must ascribe mental predicates to others on the strength of observation of their physically identifiable behavior, where the behavioral criteria one goes on are "logically adequate" for the ascription of mental predicates.<sup>2</sup>

I doubt several parts of his argument. I doubt that it is impossible to have concepts like pain or belief unless one can apply such concepts on the basis of behavioral observation. We *do* apply these concepts in these ways. But I think that Strawson fails to show that it would be impossible to have such concepts and not be able to relate them to behavioral manifestations. It seems obvious that one could have the concept of pain simply by conceptualizing, and fitting into a framework of propositional inference, one's experiences of pain. The concept of belief is more difficult. However, I see no essential need to recognize expressions of belief in others in order to have the concept of belief. Reflection on one's own committal attitudes seems *prima facie* enough. Although in human development reflection develops in concert with observation of others, Strawson does not show that it is conceptually impossible to develop such reflection independently. Moreover, I think that Strawson is clearly wrong to hold that we have 'logically adequate' behavioral criteria for the existence of other minds. And he gives no convincing reason to think that the third-person application of mentalistic

<sup>2</sup> P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (1959) (London: Routledge, 2002), chapter 3. Strawson thinks that scepticism about other minds presupposes but silently and incoherently repudiates the conceptual scheme that entails the existence of other minds—given that behavioral criteria are observed to be fulfilled.

concepts must entail application to more than one individual. Finally, as is well-known from Stroud's criticism, his account does not explain why our standard modes of third-person attribution are warranted.<sup>3</sup>

Descartes' explanation of our warrant for believing that there are other minds seems to have been a form of inference to the best explanation. On his view, nothing but thoughts could explain an observed activity that is as complex as human behavior, particularly linguistic behavior. This is the upshot and method of explanation in cognitive psychology—without the exaggerated claim that resides in 'nothing'. Descartes' explanatory approach has the advantage over classical versions of the argument from analogy of being extendable in natural ways to animals, to the insane, and to aliens whose bodies and behavior might be substantially different from ours. Partly because of this extendability, it seems to me at least a part of a general account of how we know other minds.

For all that, if it were the only answer, I think that it would suggest too theoretical a basis for our knowledge of other minds. It seems doubtful that our knowledge of other minds rests entirely on a complex, even if entrenched and tacitly inferred, explanatory theory—any more than knowledge of physical objects does. Knowing other minds seems epistemically more direct and straightforward than such an account can allow.

I believe that one insufficiently developed approach centers on innate perceptual or close-to-perceptual ways that we have of perceiving other individuals as being in pain, or as having certain emotions. I think that such knowledge derives from either a perceptual or an intermodal, perceptually based, pre-propositional capacity. It is a misleading metaphor to say that we see another's pain, much less feel it. But we can see certain bodily or facial configurations as expressing pain. And similarly, for other feelings and emotions.

There is much more to be said about all the foregoing approaches. I will, however, take a different approach. In tackling our problem, it would be well to step back a bit. What is our primary source of knowledge of other minds? It is our understanding through the spoken and written word. Among our early exposures to other minds is our hearing the instructive, encouraging, or admonitory talk of adults. All of the most famous traditional philosophical views are striking in placing little weight on this central fact. They all fail to center on what is clearly a fountain of knowledge of other minds—understanding communication.

No doubt, Mill, Russell, Strawson, and Descartes would claim that they intended to include linguistic activity in the behavior that they cite. But none of them explicitly features linguistic communication as a central case. Descartes does highlight the complexity of language use. But his account features *explaining* linguistic behavior, rather than *understanding* speech. It is as if only when we rise to the level of taking others' activities as objects of explanation are we in a position to know other minds. But in the normal course of things, understanding

<sup>3</sup> Barry Stroud, 'Transcendental Arguments', *The Journal of Philosophy* 95 (1968), 241–256.

speech appears to be more basic than explaining it. The translation theory of Quine and the interpretation theory of Davidson are applications of the best-explanation approach that does concentrate on speech.<sup>4</sup> But they, too, take interpreting and explaining speech to be central. I believe that comprehension is fundamental.

I suggested that Descartes' view, taken as a full account of our knowledge of other minds, is redolent of hyper-intellectualization. Perhaps one can defend Descartes' view from this criticism by invoking the implicitness of our early theorizing. We get onto meaning by utilizing some tacit theory about the sounds and behavior that we perceive. This view may be correct. But it seems to me more likely that the formation of semantic competency is a lower-level process than that of theory formation. I conjecture that explanation and interpretation are not basic, even at some unconscious level. Explanation and interpretation by the whole person, as opposed to computations by sub-systems, seems certainly to be a later development than comprehension of speech. At the very least, Descartes' view glosses over the centrality of *understanding*—more specifically, of *comprehension*—in our knowledge of others. Most of our explanation of others' behavior presupposes comprehension of what they say. We resort to interpretation and explanation primarily when comprehension fails.

Descartes, Quine, Davidson, Mill, Russell, and Strawson share a picture of our knowledge of other minds. For them, knowledge of other minds is epistemically grounded in observation of behavior. Most of these views also agree in drawing a certain contrast between knowledge of other minds and certain paradigmatic sorts of self-knowledge. Such types of self-knowledge are taken, correctly I think, to be immediate and not to depend on ordinary perception. Mill appealed to inner observation. Descartes and Strawson, more plausibly, held that central sorts of self-knowledge are non-observational. Descartes maintained that they are underwritten by an intellectual warrant deriving from understanding our own thinking.

I believe that, in important respects, a strand of self-knowledge and a strand of knowledge of other minds are more similar than these views suppose. I will present an argument that outlines a warrant for belief in other minds that rests on linguistic comprehension. Much of the argument's interest derives from its eliciting the fact that certain relevant questions about epistemic warrant are very subtle and difficult.

The relevant warrant is defeasible and, at psychological levels that are available to introspection, non-inferential. Although the warrant is strictly speaking empirical, it is not otherwise dramatically different from knowledge of our own mental states. The main difference lies in mastery of the relation between

<sup>4</sup> W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), chapter 2; Donald Davidson, 'Radical Interpretation' (1973) in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and my 'Comprehension and Interpretation' in L. Hahn (ed.) *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Chicago: Open Court Publishers, 1999). The contrast between comprehension and interpretation/explanation that figures in what follows has its roots in this latter article.

first- and third-person points of view, and in an intellectually warranted awareness of the source of rational agency.

*Comprehension* is a type of epistemically immediate, unreasoned, non-inferential understanding. Although comprehension inevitably involves complex perceptual and cognitive processing, it is not—at the level of conscious, or even individual-level, psychology—inferential. I use the term ‘comprehension’ to cover both comprehension of meaning or thought content (and associated mode or force) and comprehension of words as expressing such meaning or content (and mode). The latter usage will be primary in the main line of my argument.

There is first-person and third-person comprehension. *First-person comprehension* is comprehension of a thought that carries a presumption that the thought is one’s own. It is the minimal understanding involved in the ability to think one’s own thoughts. The ability to think thoughts—competence understanding—does not count as comprehension unless it is accompanied by third-person comprehension. Third-person comprehension is understanding that operates with no presumption that the words or thoughts are one’s own. Third-person comprehension does *not* entail the existence of another thinker. It allows the possibility of brute error in assignment of meaning or content and in determining whether the source of the content is oneself or another. One can make mistakes about these matters while performing at one’s epistemic best. Correct third-person comprehension involves (a) correctly assigning a thought content of one’s own thinking to an expression or expressive event that causes that thinking and (b) correctly assigning a force or mode (which need not be one’s own attitude to the content) to that same expression or expressive event.

A normal case of third-person comprehension would be immediate unreasoned understanding of what is expressed by another person—mode and content. The other asserts, ‘All healthy adult blue whales eat more than one hundred pounds of foodstuff a day’, and one understands immediately.

Third-person comprehension is, I think, essential to understanding language. Understanding language requires having an ability to understand a content or meaning that one might be mistaken about. That ability is additional to an ability to think with and express a meaning or content (first-person comprehension). Any understanding of language requires both types of comprehension. For example, one must be able to hear or read one’s words regardless of who produces them, and still understand them. For representational content expressed in language is necessarily shareable, since it is fixed through objective relations to the individual’s environment. It is thinkable through conceptualizing patterns associated with those relations. Any genuine linguistic understanding requires a competence to comprehend that content (and its mode) as something objective, independently of one’s immediately thinking or meaning it.

Thinking thoughts does not itself entail comprehending them—in the sense of having a capacity for a third-person perspective on them. Animals think thoughts, but do not comprehend them. They have minimal competence understanding, but not comprehension. Regarding one’s thoughts from a third-person point of view

requires an ability to evaluate them from a point of view that abstracts from one's own commitment to the representational content.

Comprehension requires a competence not only to think one's thoughts, but to abstract from one's own commitments (or attitudes) toward the representational content that one nevertheless occurrently thinks. Thus third-person understanding presupposes a minimal competence to think the thoughts (and to have one's own attitudes toward them). But the latter competence does not count as comprehension unless it is coupled with a competence for third-person understanding.

I have explicated third-person comprehension so as not to entail that it is necessarily comprehension of the others' utterances or thoughts. I assume only that it could possibly include comprehension of intentional acts of others.

Now, for some background about what I mean by 'empirical'. I use the term as a contrary for 'apriori'. Apriori warrants derive from reason or understanding, or the nature of a capacity that functions to contribute to reason or understanding. I take apriority to be a feature primarily of warrant—justification or entitlement. Justifications are reasons in the repertoire of the justified individuals. The reasons may be self-sufficient (as in self-evident premises), or they may be antecedent steps in inferences. Entitlements are warrants that are not reasons. An entitlement always has its warranting force whether or not the individual with the entitlement has the capacity to think it. So for example, a very young child can be entitled to its perceptual beliefs, even though it may not yet have the meta-representational concepts needed to explain why. The individual is entitled to the belief even though nothing in his or her psychology suffices to provide a justification—a propositional reason for the belief. Epistemic norms for epistemic goodness or badness of the individual's cognitive processes and activity remain applicable.

I believe that entitlements always make reference to the way an individual's cognitive (or practical) psychological competencies operate. So they are partly internal. They are never merely statements that the individual's beliefs are produced by just any old process that is reliable in producing true beliefs.<sup>5</sup> They are certain norms governing operation of the individual's internal states. For example, the norms may make reference to the belief's dependence on a reliably veridical type of perceptual representation. But the individual need not be able to explain why the perceptual belief is warranted. To have a warranted perceptual belief, an individual need not even have the concepts to think (entertain) such an explanation. Individuals are entitled to their perceptual beliefs, and they are entitled to rely on their memory, their deductive and inductive reasoning, and their comprehension, even though they may not be able to explain—or even understand—why.

<sup>5</sup> I do think that any warrant must apply to a competence that is reliable in producing veridical cognitive states in certain relevant normal circumstances—the circumstances by reference to which the nature of the competence is explained. See my 'Perceptual Entitlement', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67 (2003), 503–548.

A justification or entitlement is apriori, or non-empirical, if its justificational force is neither constituted nor enhanced by reliance on specific sense perceptions or sensory registrations. In deciding whether a belief is non-empirically warranted, it does not suffice to determine whether it is empirically warranted. A belief can have empirical as well as apriori warrant. The apriority or non-empiricality of a warrant does not entail that it is self-evident, infallible, unrevisable, or even unrevisable by *empirical* considerations. One can be apriori defeasibly warranted in believing something that is false. Sense perceptions or perceptual beliefs can be psychologically necessary for an acquisition or even a justification of a belief, without contributing to the force of the warrant, hence without preventing it from being apriori. Our beliefs in simple logical truths, which are surely warranted apriori, may require having had sense experiences of particular types of configurations of symbols, or of physical objects. The role of sense experience in the psychology and acquisition of belief must be distinguished from its role in contributing to the belief's warrant.

A central feature of this conception of non-empiricality is that it does not apply merely to warrants for believing eternal propositions. We can be apriori warranted in believing in the existence of certain thought *occurrences*.<sup>6</sup> Our warrant for knowledge of instances of *cogito* (I am thinking) is normally apriori. The warrant's epistemic force resides in understanding the temporally occurrent thought. Understanding the occurrence suffices to warrant (justify) one in believing it. Sense perception is not a constitutive part of the understanding or an element in the warrant for believing an instance of *cogito*. The understanding suffices for the belief's being warranted.<sup>7</sup> So a judgment that a given thought is occurring is not *ipso facto* empirical.

I will now state the main lines of an argument that we have a barely empirical warrant for believing in other minds—a warrant that centers on comprehension of utterances. The point of the argument is to elicit the structure of what I take to be one fundamental entitlement that we have for our belief in other minds. Here is the argument.

(1) An individual is *prima facie* entitled, in some particular instances, to rely on seeming, third-person comprehension of apparent active instantiations of propositional representational content, as being *genuine* comprehension of genuine, active instantiations of propositional representational content.

The entitlement to rely on particular exercises of a capacity for comprehension is empirical. I think it barely empirical. I will explain this point shortly.

<sup>6</sup> [Added in 2011:] See my 'Frege on Apriority' in C. Peacocke and P. Boghossian (eds.), *New Essays on the A Priori* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); reprinted in my *Truth, Thought, Reason: Essays on Frege* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> I believe that we are entitled to accept many other self-attributions of present mental states and events, even those whose truth is not evident from understanding their content. In these cases, entitlement can also derive from our understanding. See my 'Individualism and Self-Knowledge', *The Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988), 649–663; and 'Our Entitlement to Self-Knowledge', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 96 (1996), 91–116.

A presupposition of this step is that the individual *has* a linguistic competence for third-person comprehension. I presuppose that this competence is reliable in circumstances in which its nature was formed. (See note 5.) The individual need not assume this presupposition, or be able to understand it, in order to have the warrant stated in (1). It is enough that the individual in fact have the competence.

(2) An individual is *prima facie* entitled to presume that genuine active instantiations of propositional representational content must have a rational source—must be the acts of a mind or mental agent.

(3) So, both in general and in some particular instances, an individual is *prima facie* entitled to rely on seeming third-person comprehension of apparent instantiations of propositional representational content as being genuine comprehension of the acts of a rational source—a mind or mental agent.

(4) An individual is *prima facie* entitled, both in general and in some particular instances (including some of the same ones that are covered by (1)) to a belief as to whether the source of such acts that one seemingly comprehends is oneself or another.

A presupposition of this step is that the individual has the first- and third-person concepts necessary to have such beliefs.

(5) So in particular instances in which an individual seemingly comprehends apparent active instantiations of propositional representational content, the individual can be *prima facie* entitled to a belief that the relevant rational source is another mind, a different rational agent.

The cases in which an individual has the entitlement are cases in which the individual exercises seeming third-person comprehension of an instantiation of an active mode of propositional representational content, and where the individual takes the activity not to be the individual's own.

Whereas I believe that the entitlement articulated in step (1) is empirical—but only barely empirical—I think that the entitlements articulated in steps (2) and (4) are strictly *a priori*. So the whole entitlement to believe in the existence of other minds, which is articulated by the argument, is barely empirical. I think that reflection on the entitlements articulated by steps (1), (2), and (4) is philosophically worthwhile—as is reflection on the entitlement articulated by the whole argument.

Before defending the steps, I want to begin by explicating (1):

(1) An individual is *prima facie* entitled, both in general and in some particular instances, to rely on seeming, third-person comprehension of apparent active instantiations of propositional representational content. An individual is *prima facie* entitled to rely on such seeming comprehension as being *genuine veridical* comprehension of genuine, active instantiations of propositional representational content.

The entitlement that I believe we have to rely on comprehension—both in general and in given particular cases—is a very abstract default entitlement. It



holds only *prima facie*, or *pro tanto*. It can be overridden by reasons that show that one's seeming comprehension is *merely* seeming. One's seeming comprehension can be, and often is, shown by empirical means not to be genuine comprehension. For example, one might be given empirical reason to think that one has hallucinated an utterance, or that someone was not using words in familiar senses. So one's entitlement to rely on seeming comprehension is vulnerable to overriding empirical reasons. In themselves, these points do not bear on whether the default *prima facie* entitlement to rely on one's seeming comprehension, in particular cases, is empirical.<sup>8</sup> That issue hinges on the nature of the positive force of the warrant, not on the nature of possible threats to it.

In saying that the warrant resides in *seeming* comprehension, I mean only to indicate that in given cases, it is left open, as a matter of fact, whether or not exercise of the competence is veridical. One can exercise the competence, take an event as having certain content and force, and be mistaken. Such exercises, as well as exercises of the competence that assign the right mode and content, count as seeming comprehension. I do *not* assume that seeming comprehension involves a belief *about* comprehension, or is of the form: that seems intelligible. Similarly, I do not assume that the reliance on exercises of seeming comprehension as veridical comprehension involves a meta-representational belief about veridicality or about comprehension. The point is that the individual is epistemically entitled to the comprehension in the same way that an individual might be epistemically entitled to a perceptual belief. Such entitlements do not require having cognitive states that make reference to psychological, semantical, or epistemological matters.

It is crucial to the development of the argument that (1) claims that our entitlement applies to reliance on seeming comprehension not only of tokened or expressed intentional content, but of tokened or expressed activities. The comprehension includes understanding mode or force of certain public acts. Thus utterances are assertive, imperative, interrogative, and so on. Comprehending representational content is impossible without normally comprehending at least basic modes or forces associated with the content of an utterance.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See my 'Content Preservation', *The Philosophical Review* 102 (1993), 457–488; and 'Interlocution, Perception, and Memory', *Philosophical Studies* 86 (1997), 21–47. These papers discuss the *prima facie* nature of a similar entitlement, spelled out in what I call the Acceptance Principle. This principle entitles recipients to accept what they are told. The present claim is weaker: it entitles recipients of interlocution to rely on their understanding what is said.

<sup>9</sup> See 'Content Preservation'. I think that the most basic linguistic mode is presentation-as-true. Assertion is a central species of presentation-as-true. I credit Quine with centering on assertion as basic, and approximating the present view. See his use of the principle of charity in *Word and Object*, chapter 2. To begin to translate a language one must be able to discern presentations-as-true. The point applies not only when translation is at issue, but also in the lower-level cases of ordinary comprehension in communication. Whatever entitlement attaches to understanding of content must attach to comprehension of some basic modes of activity associated with the content. So what is comprehended includes the representational content's being presented as true, in some cases.

Since I am not discussing scepticism, I will just assume that we are dealing with individuals who are competent in comprehending the meaning, or content, and mode of utterances in normal circumstances. Comprehenders can seemingly comprehend only because they do in fact sometimes comprehend when they exercise their competence. I will assume that relevant comprehenders reliably comprehend in normal circumstances. (See note 5.) Seeming comprehension provides a defeasible epistemic entitlement to presume genuine understanding. Clearly the entitlement can gain force as conversation or reading goes smoothly on. Such cumulative warrant internal to the understanding is worth remembering when one considers the strength of one's default, unthreatened entitlement.

The minimal default warrant that I cite in (1) can co-exist with many supplementary or independent warrants for relying on comprehension. If one has moderate sophistication about language, one knows that words are being uttered, that representational content is expressed through sounds and shapes. One knows that a person with a certain look is making the sounds. One often has memories of the same person saying similar things that might contribute to our warrant for relying on current comprehension. We have empirical warrant for trusting our understanding of familiar interlocutors. It is uncontroversial that this knowledge is warranted not merely by immediate occurrent comprehension but by further considerations.

What an individual is entitled to according to (1) is not that a content has been expressed in words—not that an utterance has occurred that expresses such and such content—not that a person with a certain look is talking. I am interested in an entitlement just to presuming on the veridicality of a comprehension of a certain representational content as being instantiated with a certain mode or force.

The claim in step (1) is closely associated with the stronger Acceptance Principle, articulated in 'Content Preservation'. The Acceptance Principle underwrites entitlement not merely to comprehension, but to acceptance of what one is told, other things equal. This entitlement is possible only because the individual has an entitlement to rely on comprehension of utterances as veridical—as getting the content of the utterance right.

For purposes of the present argument, one can take the entitlement cited in (1) to be less committal in both respects. It is not an entitlement to believe what is uttered, but to a certain comprehension. And although I think that we do have an entitlement to rely on seeming comprehension of the specific representational content and mode (such as assertion) of what is uttered, the argument works equally well with an entitlement to much less rich aspect of seeming comprehension. The minimum entitlement required by the argument is merely an entitlement to rely on the veridicality of a comprehension of an event as an active propositional event. Thus one need not get right the specific representational content of the utterance, as long as one gets right its propositionality. Similarly, one need not get right the specific mode or force—whether it be a warning, an imperative, a question, an assertion, or what not—as long as one gets right that its

mode is active. What the individual has to be warranted in is merely reliance on a comprehension of an event as tokening or expressing propositional agency.

So much for explication of (1). I turn to considerations that favor it. An epistemic norm is a standard for exercising a competence in a way that contributes to good routes to veridicality—here, ultimately, true belief. I will reflect on individuation of third-person comprehension competence. I think that reflecting on the function of third-person comprehension is a start toward understanding the nature of the competence. The function of third-person comprehension is to yield understanding of instantiations of representational content.

An exercise of comprehension competence is warranted if it is a non-pathological exercise and the competence is reliable. Since, in accord with my methodology of ignoring scepticism, I am assuming that the competence is reliably veridical in the circumstances by reference to which its nature is explained, it is relatively trivial that exercises of the competence are warranted. Similarly, in accord with the methodology, I am assuming that there are no hard issues about whether we are in abnormal circumstances. So it is relatively trivial that the relevant exercises of comprehension can lead to knowledge. The point of the argument is not to convince the sceptic, but to outline the nature of a warrant and route to knowledge that we in fact have.

The interesting issues about (1) lie in the nature of the relevant warrant. I think it strongly plausible that the warrant that attaches to exercises of comprehension of an event as an instance or expression of propositional agency is an entitlement, not a justification. Good comprehension is certainly not veridical by virtue of self-evidence. At the level of conscious, individual psychology, comprehension is not inferential. It seems epistemically and consciously immediate. Although it could in principle derive from propositional inference that is not available to the individual, but is modular, what we know about comprehension indicates that it is brought about by perceptual processing, not what would ordinarily be counted reason-transmitting propositional inference. Even though propositional elements enter into the processing (certainly as products, possibly earlier), there is no reason to think of these elements as providing reasons for—explanations of the acceptability of—any further propositions. To count as a justification, a warrant must be grounded in use of reasons.

I mentioned earlier that I thought that the warrant articulated by (1) is empirical, but barely empirical. It is empirical because comprehension must rely on the specifics of sense perception. Comprehension of specific content and mode is by way of a capacity to discriminate certain events perceptually and to systematically associate certain types of perception with comprehension of certain contents and modes. That is what the competence consists in. Even the mere comprehension of an event as tokening or expressing some active propositional event or other (regardless of the event's specific content and mode) consists in systematically transitioning from certain types of perception to comprehension as of active propositionality. Inasmuch as this type of comprehension has a constitutive perceptual component, epistemic warrant for relying on the

comprehension depends on meeting standards for the well-functioning and reliability of the perception, and for transitioning from the perception to the comprehension. So the warrant is empirical.<sup>10</sup>

So the warrant is empirical. Why is it barely empirical? The type of perception involved in language perception is cognitively top-heavy. The perceptual representation is triggered by sensory input. But perceptual attributives are molded not so much by physical patterns that are sensed, as by coordination between minds. The role of intellection is disproportionately large in the account of the warrant for the exercise of the comprehension competence.

Language perception is a very special type of perception. The perceptual attributives that figure in ordinary perception—for example, visual perception of shapes, colors, motions, locations, types of body—are stamped into the perceptual systems of animals through patterned, pre-perceptual, sensory interaction with instances of those physical attributes.<sup>11</sup> These are attributes described by the natural sciences. Propositional structures, whether syntactical or semantical, are not structures in the ordinary physical environment, as described by the natural sciences. Predication, subject–verb agreement, propositional structure are not kinds described in the physical sciences. They cannot be stamped into an individual through pre-perceptual sensory interaction with them. Physical instantiations or expressions of these kinds must be *comprehended* if the individual is to even have perceptual attributives for them. The physical particulars that we perceive and their physical characteristics, however, played little role in molding the perceptual attributives used in language perception. Cognitive capacities largely molded the nature of the perceptual attributives.

In meeting standards for good routes to veridical comprehension, one must rely on perception. Perceiving well is a constitutive part of comprehending another's utterance, as I have acknowledged. But since the perception itself is constituted primarily by a cognitive super-structure, perception seems to play the role of triggering the recipient's use of this cognitive super-structure and enabling it to align with the cognitive super-structure of the interlocutor. The empirical element in language perception functions primarily as a connector between two cognitive systems and systems of understanding. It is only secondarily a source of information about the perceivable world.

I believe that all the remaining steps in the argument—steps that explain the structure of the warrant to believe in the existence of other minds—are strictly *a priori*. Let me turn to (2):

<sup>10</sup> [Added in 2011:] These points revise views expressed in 'Content Preservation'; 'Interlocution, Perception, and Memory'; and 'Reason and the First Person', in Crispin Wright, Barry C. Smith, and Cynthia Macdonald (eds.), *Knowing Our Own Minds: Essays Self-Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), reprinted in this volume. See 'Postscript: "Content Preservation"', this volume, section III.

<sup>11</sup> [Added in 2011:] The anti-individualism about perception that is expressed here is developed in some depth in *Origins of Objectivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

(2) An individual is entitled to presume that genuine active instantiations of propositional representational content must have a rational source—must be the acts of a mind or mental agent.

I use the word ‘presume’ just to signal that the individual need not think, or be able to think, this connection. The presumption is supportable by apriori reflection. It constitutes a rationally supportable connection that individuals are entitled to rely on, even if they do not understand the connection. Expression of propositional representational content necessarily presupposes some source in a system of cognitive and practical interactions with the world (including belief and intention)—a system that involves the use of reasons under rational norms.

The propositional *expression* of content bears a particularly marked relation to a higher sort of practical and cognitive intentional *agency* than can be assumed in non-linguistic higher animals, which I also freely assume to have propositional attitudes. In any case, a rational source of the expression of propositional representational content must make use of reasons in the formation of beliefs and intentions.<sup>12</sup>

In discussing an argument for knowledge of other minds by Price, Malcolm in effect challenges the idea that there is an apriori connection between seeming propositional intelligibility and there being a rational source.<sup>13</sup> Malcolm claims that no amount of intelligible sounds coming from a tree or bush, or even a computer, would provide evidence that the sounds were understood by the tree or bush. So he concludes that *prima facie* intelligible sounds provide no ground at all, in themselves, to think that they come from a rational source.

Malcolm’s claims rest on two points. The first has to do with the necessity of empirical application for understanding. He claims that unless one perceives the initiator of the sounds as applying them to things that they are plausibly true of, one has no ground for attributing understanding to the initiator. He extends this point, plausibly, to utterances of sounds that seem to express purely mathematical content: ‘... suppose that there was a remarkable “calculating boy” who could give right answers to arithmetical problems but could not apply numerals to

<sup>12</sup> For work that stresses relations between having language and using reasons, see H. P. Grice, *Studies in the Ways of Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*; and ‘Content Preservation’.

<sup>13</sup> H. H. Price, ‘Our Evidence for the Existence of Other Minds’, *Philosophy* 13 (1955), 425–456; Norman Malcolm, ‘Knowledge of Other Minds’, *The Journal of Philosophy* 55 (1958), 969–978. Both are reprinted in David M. Rosenthal (ed.), *The Nature of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Price’s argument combines Cartesian inference-to-the-best-explanation and analogical arguments. Price’s argument is unique, to my knowledge, in placing central emphasis on language. I developed my views in ignorance of Price’s paper. But I have come to admire it as a stimulating and broadly congenial anticipation of the line of this paper. Price advocates an old-fashioned empiricism about comprehension. He thinks that we build up evidence by reckoning likelihoods or best explanations on the basis of experience. The structure of the warrant that I am laying out is somewhat different. I think it supplements and indeed underlies the warrants that Price focuses on.

reality in empirical propositions. . . . I believe that everyone would be reluctant to say that he understood the mathematical signs and truths that he produced.’<sup>14</sup>

I agree that understanding and even representationality itself presupposes *de re* applications.<sup>15</sup> I agree that if one had reason to think than an initiator of seemingly intelligible sounds could not carry out such applications, one would have reason to think that the initiator did not understand. But it does not, even remotely, follow that perceiving applications of the instances is necessary for one to be warranted in attributing understanding. It seems to me obvious that if we hear intelligible sounds, we are rationally entitled in the absence of countervailing considerations to presume that they have a rational source. It is not rational to remain neutral about whether they have a rational source until and unless we can check to determine independently that there is understanding backing the apparently intelligible sounds. Malcolm’s points show only that our entitlement to rely on our seeming understanding is *prima facie*, not that it does not exist.

I need not depend for my warrant on the presumption that the initiator of the sounds is itself the rational source. One may be hearing a recording or the outputs of a computer, neither of which would be rational or would have any understanding. The entitlement is to presume that there is an ultimate source of seemingly intelligible content that is rational. Here I can leave open how to think about chains of transmission. When we regard a table computer as unable to initiate rational activity, we still presume *prima facie* that the computer manipulates material whose intelligibility derives from a rational source, perhaps the programmer or the last person to use the computer. In the case of the bush, perhaps we suspend belief about whether the bush is an initiator or even a transmitter of rational activity. If we heard seemingly intelligible sounds apparently coming from a bush, we would look into the matter further. But the initial presumption that there is a rational source is warranted and robust. Nothing in Malcolm’s points shows that we lack the *apriori prima facie* entitlement to move from warranted seeming intelligibility to warranted belief that the occurrences have a rational source.

Malcolm’s second point is that when something lacks a human face or body, it *makes no sense* to say of it that it understands: ‘things which do not have the human form, or anything like it, not merely do not but *cannot* satisfy the criteria for thinking’.<sup>16</sup> I think that this claim is patently mistaken. It is a sign of philosophy really running amok. Although our knowledge of some objects, like bushes, does suffice to show that *they* could not understand, we are not so provincial in our use of mentalistic concepts as to require that only things that have something like human form could understand.

<sup>14</sup> Malcolm, ‘Knowledge of Other Minds’, 974.

<sup>15</sup> See my ‘Belief *De Re*’, *The Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1977), 338–362, section II; reprinted in my *Foundations of Mind: Philosophical Essays Volume II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Malcolm, ‘Knowledge of Other Minds’, 974.

So far, the argument is that in particular cases, seeming comprehension provides warrant for belief in there being a rational source. The argument still must show that one is *prima facie* entitled to take the rational source to be *another* mind.

I turn to (4), the next substantive step.

(4) An individual is *prima facie* entitled, both in general and in some particular instances (including some of the same ones that are covered by (1)) to a belief as to whether the source of such acts that one seemingly comprehends is oneself or another.

Any initiation of an utterance with propositional content is an act. The formation of a predication for a propositional utterance is an intellectual act. So comprehension of an instantiation of propositional content can presume that the source (however far back in a chain of transmission) of the instantiation *acted* in producing it.

To be entitled to presume that the rational source of an event that one comprehends in the third-person way is another agent, one must be entitled to presume that it is not oneself. Knowledge of other minds is distinguished from self-knowledge not by being necessarily inferential or just by being necessarily grounded in perception, but by being in some known contrast with taking a comprehended representational event to be one's own.

I believe that any individual with representational powers has a natural capacity to discriminate its own activity from activity of other individuals. Such a capacity is marked *de se* by an ego-centric index. In individuals capable of comprehending utterances with propositional content, this capacity is associated with a capacity to be moved by reason. In persons, individuals with the first-person concept and a capacity to use a concept of reason, the capacity takes a more complex form. The key feature of the first-person concept, as I have argued elsewhere, is that it marks acknowledgment of the immediate rational relevance of reasons to intellectual practice.<sup>17</sup> In a person, the capacity to distinguish the person's own acts from those of others must be associated with a natural competence to reliably discriminate acts for which one is responsible from acts for which one is not responsible, and to acknowledge responsibility to implement reasons that support or count against such acts.<sup>18</sup> In understanding utterances in interlocution, one exercises this capacity—taking the act not to be one's own and recognizing that one cannot directly sustain it in response to reasons that favor it, or directly alter the act in response to reasons that count against it. To be rational in the employment of first- and third-person points of view, one

<sup>17</sup> See my 'Reason and the First Person', in Smith, Wright, and Macdonald (eds.), *Knowing Our Own Minds*. Substantially the argument given in the present paper is outlined in there, and also in 'Computer Proof, Apriori Knowledge, and Other Minds', *Philosophical Perspectives* 12 (1998), 1–37.

<sup>18</sup> This ability is one aspect of what Kant called 'the unity of apperception'. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B131ff.

must have, and be apriori entitled to, a competence for fallible awareness of whether an act associated with seeming comprehension of an instantiation of propositional content is one's own.

To be a person, or any individual with capacities for reason, one must have and be entitled to rely on a natural capacity to be aware of the agent of comprehended propositional acts. A person must be able to distinguish cases in which he or she is committed under rational norms from cases where one is not. A person must—in a natural, mature, undamaged state—be able to reliably determine the applicability of rational norms—in particular, norms of epistemic or practical critical rationality—to a given comprehended intentional act in a rationally immediate way, on pain of regress. So entitlement to it is apriori. This is to say that one must have some apriori entitled awareness for one's *not* being the agent of relevant comprehended active instantiations or expressions of content, and for one's thereby *not* being rationally committed under rational norms governing the relevant agency.

The conceptual space between understanding and acceptance of comprehended actual assertion is one to which a rational agent must be sensitive—and be entitled to be sensitive—if he or she is to be subject to rational norms governing acceptance. To be subject to such norms, a rational agent must be able to discriminate the sorts of requirements on warrant and defense that apply to autonomously held beliefs from those that apply to beliefs that are gained from interlocution. One must have an entitlement to presume that an interlocutor is not oneself, but another rational agent.

One most naturally thinks of cases in which the rational source whose assertions one comprehends is one's immediate interlocutor. But the warrant that I have outlined does not differentiate between immediate sources that are rational and immediate sources that are non-rational conduits for rational sources. I see that there is a person standing there in front of me, holding forth. But insofar as I am relying only on my comprehension of an utterance, that comprehension is compatible with the possibility that the rational source of the intelligible propositional act bears a more remote causal relation to the event that I comprehend. The entitlement that I am delineating tends to be an entitlement only for the belief that there is a rational source in the chain, not that it is immediately present.

One might hear a recording or read a computer's print-outs, or hear a voice from the sky, whose intelligibility warrants presumption of a rational source. But the source may be further back in a causal chain. Of course, this opens the possibility that the source is not another mind, but one's own. Perhaps I am understanding a computer that I myself programmed. Or perhaps my voice got recorded a while ago, and I do not recognize my phonological characteristics. Then I comprehend my own productions in the third-person way.

Does one need to rule out such possibilities in order to be warranted in presuming that they are not in play? Can one be *prima facie* warranted in presuming that they are not in play without invoking evidence that they are not?



For all the byzantine complexity of such possibilities, I stand by the claim that one is *prima facie* entitled to rely on one's taking a comprehended propositional act not to be one's own. If one loses confidence about the provenance of an act, then one loses one's warrant, since one is not exercising the rational discriminative capacity that the warrant is built upon. One can certainly be mistaken in taking something not to be one's own. But such mistakes, possible or actual, do not in general undermine warrant. And it seems to me that they do not do so here.

What the cases bring out is that the relevant capacity to discern the source of rational agency involves a reliance on memory. One must be entitled to rely on a capacity to be aware not only that the comprehended act is not one's present intentional act. One needs to be entitled to the view that it is not an act that constituted a past representational act. The reliance on memory here is a reliance on memory of past intellectual acts, or on a capacity to recognize an intellectual act as not in one's past. There is nothing essentially empirical about such memory.

Price said that news signals otherness.<sup>19</sup> It does, but news is not essential. What is essential is recognition that an intentional or other representational act is not one's own. Price thought that if an utterance does not express a belief that one does not already hold, and is simply 'intrusive' into one's own thought process, one could not rule out the possibility that the occurrence resulted from one's own unconscious. Also a new utterance that expresses a belief that we are not consciously aware of, or that contradicts our self-construed beliefs, might in principle issue from *unconscious* cognitive dissonance. The warrant and knowledge that we in fact have is never strong enough to infallibly rule out the in-principle possibility that one has been fooled—either in comprehending an utterance or in taking it to come from another. We have defeasible warrant and knowledge in any case.

Price is perhaps right that our taking in *news* through comprehension strengthens our warrant for our belief that the comprehended utterance comes from another. But a lot of the content of what we comprehend is not news. Only the occurrence of the utterance is news. We have a reliable and warranted, even if fallible, capacity to determine whether a propositional act is our own or comes from another.

If one thinks—from a sceptical standpoint or from the standpoint of a quest for philosophical certainty—about the possible ways in which one *could* go wrong about who did what, one can be misled into philosophical hopelessness or solomonic neutrality. But in fact, we are reliable at telling whether a thought is one we have thought before. We are good at growing uncertain in problematic cases. We mostly remember what we have done or have not done, and what acts we are responsible for or not responsible for. Loss of reliability in these respects is a form of craziness. I believe that being rationally entitled to one's views about

<sup>19</sup> Price, 'Our Evidence for the Existence of Other Minds', 431.

what commitments one has made is necessary to being a rational agent—and certainly a self or person.

The title of the essay refers to minds, plural. So far I have argued only for an entitlement to believe in the existence of another mind. Considerations regarding differences in styles, capabilities, and views among different sources can be developed internally, from reasoning about the contents of utterances that one comprehends. Such considerations can justify differentiations among other minds without using more empirical resources than I have already laid out. To be warranted in believing that there is a plurality of other minds, it is not metaphysically necessary to rely on the look or sound of a speaker, beyond simply comprehending what the speaker utters.<sup>20</sup>

My topic has been warrant. What of knowledge of other minds? I assume that the relevant warrant can yield knowledge if and only if the warrant is not overridden and the belief it supports is true and not entangled in Gettier problems. The warrant that I have argued we have can support knowledge if sufficient stretches of new information are comprehended and held together in preservative memory. I leave open whether the stretches must go beyond a single propositional act. However, I doubt it.

Knowledge of the existence of other minds is not knowledge of just one more fact. It is for most people a tacit, framework knowledge. It is rarely articulated. But it can be derived from particular non-inferential instances of comprehension. In this respect, the knowledge is like knowledge of the existence of physical objects, which is a tacit, framework knowledge derivable from particular non-inferential beliefs grounded in ordinary, non-linguistic perception.

The argument that I have given seems to me to yield a new angle on old issues.

<sup>20</sup> For discussion of these issues, see the last sections of 'Computer Proof, Apriori Knowledge, and Other Minds'.